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Islam and Violence in Greek Society
The Stigmatisation of Muslims, the Extreme Right and Resistance to Reciprocal Radicalisation

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Introduction

The debate on the place and role of violence in religion is as old as religions themselves and distinguishes between two core dimensions of the relationship. The internal dimension concerns the role of violence, physical and symbolic, perpetrated inside the religious field in order to secure and strengthen religious faith (Girard 1991, 2017; Roux 1998), while the external dimension relates to the deployment of violence towards wider society either as a defence mechanism or as a tool for expansion (Lewis 2017; Hagège 2018).

While there is a long tradition of the study of political Islam, Islamism and Salafism (see, for example, Kepel 1992, 2000; Roy 1994; Basbous 2003), it has only been in the course of the last twenty years, that is, after the events of 9/11, that the relationship between Islam, violence and terrorism has become a dominant theme in academic research (Mamdani 2004; Roy 2006; Khosrokhavar 2009; Blanc and Roy 2021) and the public sphere. Following this landmark act of terrorism, a huge volume of publications have sought to understand why some, especially young, Muslims come to embrace violence; violence targeted not only at Western but also Muslim societies. After the expansion of Daesh, the so-called Islamic State (IS), in 2014–15 and the attacks perpetrated in Europe, this issue rose still higher up the agenda of social science research (Kepel 2015; Neumann 2016; Roy 2017). The primacy of the concern over how the West should defend itself against such attacks, moreover, meant that a se-

curity and terrorist studies approach came to dominate the field of study (Neumann and Kleinmann 2013: 361). At the same time, over these two decades, Islam has been portrayed – mainly in politics and the media – as a monolithic, fundamentalist and violent religion that is incompatible with European and Western civilisations and societies (Karim 2000). Such stereotypical and negative images and discourses of Islam in the West were already present (Said 1981; Arjana 2015), but, in the aftermath of 9/11, they dominated the public sphere and gradually became mainstream (Kallis 2013). At the same time, violent attacks against Muslims, their homes and places of worship have been on the rise in most Western societies, contributing to the reproduction of what is referred to as Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred (Esposito and Kalin 2011; Zempi and Awan 2019). It is in these anti-Muslim debates (and actions) that the extreme right has played a central role in inciting a panic about Islam (Morgan and Poynting 2012), mainly through the population replacement conspiracy theory.

When it comes to the Islamic presence in the West, the role of mosques is critical and has been subject to considerable analysis (Cesari 2005; Alievi 2009; Maussen 2009; Astor 2011). The mosque is central to Islam's urban visibility and is the centre of Muslim communal life. It is not only a space for prayer but also a community centre, where pre-existing networks of solidarity come together and where various rituals that mark Islamic family life – marriage, circumcision and death – take place (Cesari 2005: 1017–18). However, mosques have been at the centre of the debates about radicalisation and violence also. Mosques, official and non-official, in the West have been targeted regularly by extreme-right political groups, the media, state authorities and wider society as places where radicalisation and violence are propagated. Although in many cases radical views and messages have indeed been diffused in and through mosques, contributing to violent radicalisation, the perception that all or the majority of mosques constitute a fertile ground for radicalisation is usually an external one, fuelled by the wider stigmatisation of Islam and Muslim communities as inherently violent and dangerous.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it presents and discusses etic[1] perspectives on Islam and violence and how they have shaped negative perceptions of mosques in Greek society. Drawing on findings from fieldwork conducted in an extreme-right milieu characterised by anti-Islam views and attitudes, moreover, the intersection, and potential mutual reinforcement, of etic (media, public, policy) perspectives with those manifest within the extreme-right milieu are demonstrated. Although not in direct contact and communication, the extreme-right milieu is partly
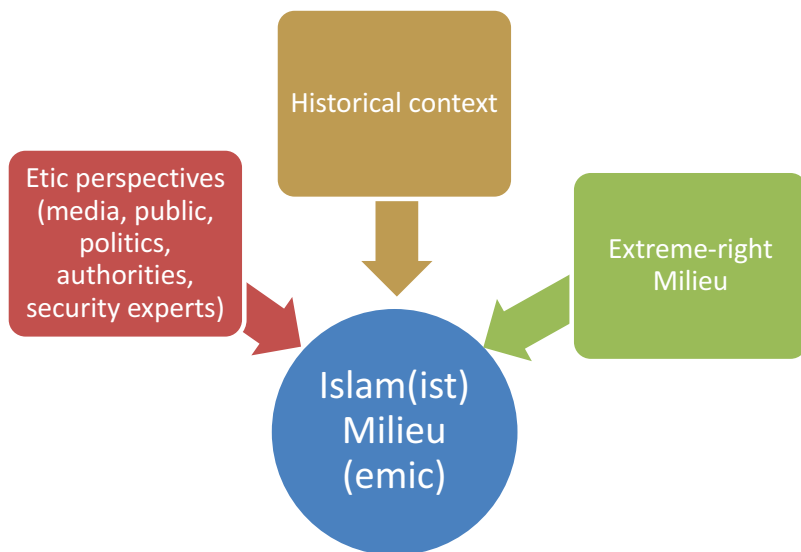
Figure 4.1. The Islam(ist) milieu between history, etic perspectives and the extreme-right milieu. Created by Alexandros Sakellariou.

self-defined by the presence of the Islam(ist)[2] milieu. Tropes that link Islam and violence and portray mosques as a threat play a significant role in identity formation on the individual and the collective level within the milieu. Second, the chapter draws on fieldwork with Muslim communities to examine emic perspectives, specifically the responses from the Islam(ist) milieu studied, to these external perceptions and attitudes, and the role they play in the radicalisation or non-radicalisation process. The relationships between the two milieus, although it should be noted that neither milieu is homogeneous, and with wider society are depicted in Figure 4.1.

The empirical material drawn on in this chapter emanates from the DARE project (see Introduction, this volume) and is based on the ethnographic study of two very different milieus in the Athens region: an Islam(ist) milieu associated with non-official mosques (Sakellariou 2021b); and an extreme-right milieu (Lagos et al. 2021). Both studies involved participant observation and semi-structured interviews and the analysis of related materials (e.g. videos, audios, leaflets, online texts) collected as part of the field research. While the focus of this contribution is on the non-official mosque milieu, insights from the extreme-right milieu help understand and explain the responses of young Muslims.

This contribution starts by setting the perceptions of Islam and Muslims in historical and contemporary societal context, delineating discourses found in politics, media, security and public domains. It focuses on the representation of the relationship between Islam and violence, the portrayal of Muslims as a threat and of mosques as sites of radicalisation. It then considers the role of the extreme right in these debates and perceptions, paying attention to the intersection of tropes from within this milieu and wider public/policy/academic debates. The chapter, finally, considers how this discourse impacts on Muslim respondents, including their experience of stigmatisation and physical attack and their responses to them. It explores understandings within this milieu of the relationship between Islam and violence and the role of mosques in facilitating, or preventing, radicalisation.

Islam and Muslims in Context

In Greece, debates on Islam are deeply rooted in, and strongly intertwined with, the experience of the Ottoman occupation (1453–1821) and the revolution against it in 1821, which are crucial for the construction of the collective national identity. Subsequent conflicts between Greece and Turkey, such as the Greek-Turkish war of 1897, the 'Asia Minor Catastrophe' of 1922 and the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, have further bolstered the national(ist) narrative against Turkey and Islam (Katsikas 2021), both of which remain perceived by the majority of the Greek population as fundamentally hostile forces. Thus, contemporary perceptions of Islam and Muslims must be examined in relation to the broader historical legacies of the creation of the Greek nation-state after centuries of Ottoman rule. This state-building process had a clearly religious dimension and shaped a deeply rooted dichotomous discourse, which pits the national Christian Orthodox 'self' against the religious 'other', particularly the Muslim 'other' (Sakellariou 2015: 45).

Negative perceptions of Islam have risen alongside the rise in the number of Muslim immigrants and refugees in Greek society. This increase dates back to the 2000s but became more visible in 2015 with the so-called 'refugee crisis' related to the Syrian civil war.[3] It is important to distinguish here between what is referred to as 'Old' and 'New' Islam in Greece. The former label is ascribed to the Muslim minority of Thrace, located in the northeastern part of Greece, consisting of about 120,000 Muslims living alongside the Greek Christian majority (Tsitselikis 1999; Ktistakis 2006; Katsikas 2012). Thrace's Muslim community, along with

the Greeks of Constantinople in Turkey, were protected by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, which exempted them from the mandatory population exchanges between Greece and Turkey. Despite this protection, Muslims of Thrace have faced integration obstacles, discrimination and social exclusion due to their religion, but also their ethnic background, which is mostly Turkish.[4] This group is distinct from the recently arrived Muslim immigrants and refugees – who come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and profess a range of religious dogmas – referred to as 'New' Islam (Tsitselikis 2012). It is this latter group that has been the object of concerns about the security threat posed in relation to radicalisation and Islamist extremism.[5]

In relation to this threat, it is important to note that, while extremist violence by terrorist organisations proclaiming a leftist ideology and by extreme-right groups, like Golden Dawn, is well documented (Psarras 2012; Sakellariou 2020), Greece has not witnessed any organised Islamist violence. Although from the 1970s until the 1990s a series of Islamist-inspired terrorist attacks occurred in Greece, these were sporadic and mainly related to international issues such as Israel's invasion of Lebanon or the Palestinian issue (Bossi 1996: 143–44). They were not targeted at Greek society directly and lacked any religious dimension. Thus, notwithstanding these attacks, there was no ostensible anti-Muslim hatred or stereotypes against Islam and Muslims in Greek politics or society until the 2000s, and sympathy and support for Palestinians continued to be expressed.

One final historical aspect to take into account concerns the ongoing historical, legal and political issues surrounding the debate over the construction of a mosque in Athens, which was finally inaugurated in 2020 (for illuminating studies of this debate, see Triandafyllidou and Gropas 2009; Anagnostou and Gropas 2010; Antoniou 2010). Although official mosques exist on the islands of Rhodes and Kos as well as in Thrace (the home of the longest-standing Muslim community, whose members are Greek citizens, as discussed above), the lack of an official mosque in Athens has been one of the burning issues for Muslims for many years (Verousi and Allen 2021). The history of the construction of a mosque in Athens began in the late 1970s, although such discussion is documented as far back as the end of the nineteenth century (Tsitselikis 2004: 281–90). The absence of a mosque in Athens, alongside the lack of an Islamic cemetery, is viewed by Muslims as illustrative of the religious inequality they face. In the absence of an official and state-recognised mosque, Muslims in Greece have found their own locations (former storehouses, derelict houses and factories and open public spaces) to practise their religious duties (Sakellariou 2011).

Politics: The Dominance of the Extreme Right

Although 9/11 marked a watershed moment in the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments and violence in most Western countries (Hilal 2022; Zine 2022), in Greece it was only after the terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), and the parallel rise of the extreme right in Greek society, that Islamophobic discourses and violent attacks against Muslims and their places (mosques and homes) started to take place. The key theme in political and public debate during the 2000s was the construction of an official mosque in Athens, the only European capital without one (until 2020). The debate was initiated in relation to the 2004 Olympic Games, when domestic and international actors began to exert pressure on the Greek government to build a mosque. In 2000, a new law was passed (Law 2833, Government Gazette A150) providing for the construction of a mosque in Athens as well as an Islamic Centre. The mosque was to be built far from the city centre, close to the new airport. This law was never implemented, and six years later, new legislation was initiated (Law 3512, Government Gazette A264). It was this law that, after almost fifteen years, was finally implemented and the mosque started to function in 2020.

During the parliamentary discussion about the 2000 law, all the political parties unanimously acknowledged the need for the construction of a mosque, notwithstanding the issues it raised. Even in 2006, despite the preceding attacks in the US, Madrid and London, the majority of MPs agreed once more on the necessity of constructing a mosque on the grounds of respect for human rights and religious freedom. Although issues of cultural identity and homogeneity, terrorism and security, all related to the mosque, were first raised during that period, at this point, extreme voices were marginal. However, the construction of the mosque in Athens and the presence of a large number of Muslims in Greek society subsequently started to play a central role in the public debates stigmatising Muslims for their perceived criminal and terrorist activity. This was evident in the parliamentary discussion of the legislation noted above. In 2000, an independent MP from the conservative party, and later the leader of the extreme right-wing LAOS party,[6] asked a parliamentary question about the existence of illegal mosques (prayer houses) in Athens, arguing that these places were used as centres of proselytisation and propagation and sought to disrupt the ethno-religious homogeneity of the Greek nation.[7] In the discussions from 2006 onwards, such views multiplied and even a socialist MP argued that preventing the new mosque falling under the control of fundamentalist and extremist groupings would be very difficult.[8]

The rising threat presented by possible infiltration of the new mosque by Al-Qaeda and other extremist organisations featured prominently in the arguments of the extreme right against the establishment of the mosque.[9] A general fear of criminality around the new mosque was used as a further argument against its construction:

> Look what is happening around Europe! We are not suggesting that these people should not pray somewhere. However, it is impossible to build a huge mosque with Muftis and minarets . . . and create a ghetto, a place where no one would speak Greek! And you know it, because you have experience from abroad, you have seen the dead ends they [Western societies] face in places where big Muslim mosques have been constructed. We could find alternative places – not such huge premises that could become an attraction for [danger-ous] people in times when fundamentalism is on the rise.[10]

One of the major issues raised about the construction of the mosque related directly to the protection and preservation of national identity. Even in 2000, when the majority of MPs agreed on the need to build the mosque, some marginal voices opposed the selected site. The conser-vative party MP (later the LAOS party leader) mentioned above strongly objected, arguing that that there is no reason to 'advertise the mosque' by building it near the airport. Similar views were expressed by other conservative MPs, arguing that such a decision would give the impres-sion to visitors to the country that Greece was an Islamic country.[11] These debates might be compared to those around the Swiss minarets and the associated reactions and mobilisations that led to the 2009 referendum (Mazzoleni 2016: 52–56).

Since these two laws were passed (in 2000 and 2006), four populist and/or extreme right-wing parties entered parliament: the Popular Or-thodox Rally (LAOS) in 2007, Golden Dawn in 2012, Independent Greeks (ANEL) in 2012 and Hellenic Solution in 2019. The fragmentation of the political system, especially after the economic crisis of 2010, gave space to new political parties or empowered already existing but marginal ones, for whom the 'problem' of immigrants in general, and Muslims in particu-lar, was at the top of their agenda. Exploiting the economic crisis to evoke fear about Islam and Muslims, especially in relation to refugee and immi-grant flows from the Muslim world, these parties have managed to gain influence in the wider public sphere, especially regarding debates on Is-lam and on the construction of the mosque in Athens. Consequently, from 2010 onwards, Greece entered a phase of open anti-Muslim hatred and violence against Muslims and their prayer houses in Athens. After the electoral breakthrough of Golden Dawn (2010–12), a political party with

a national-socialist ideology, this discourse intensified and Islamisation became portrayed as the principal threat to national identity (Sakellariou 2017). Golden Dawn's MPs claimed that 'Greece will become Islamised and Greeks will listen to the *muezzin* from minarets and thus experience a new Ottoman rule' and pledged to fight against the Islamisation of Greece.[12] As argued elsewhere, populist and extreme-right parties regularly present themselves as the protectors of Christianity and Christian values (Marzouki, McDonnell and Roy 2016), and this is mirrored in the case of Golden Dawn in Greece (Sakellariou 2021a: 19–20). MPs from the party Independent Greeks argued that it was impossible to achieve the social inclusion of Muslims in Greek society,[13] while MPs from the right-wing party New Democracy claimed Muslims opposed the Western way of life.[14] Thus, in the extreme right-wing political discourse, Islam and Muslims appear as a threat to Greek national identity and Greek-Orthodox values while the construction of an official mosque in Athens and the existence and functioning of non-official prayer houses are portrayed as places of violence and religious fundamentalism and, as such, a threat to the country's security.

In this way, Islam has become a core theme in what has been called the politics of fear (Furedi 2006). Furedi argues that the term 'fear' is used, or rather over-used, not to indicate a reaction to a specific danger, but as a broader cultural metaphor to interpret and make sense of a range of experiences through a narrative of fear. The culture of fear increases the role of instability and exacerbates distinctions between the friendly 'us' and hostile 'others', which may be exploited for political gain as well as to construct a kind of national and religious homogeneity. The major purpose of these discourses of fear is to promote a sense of disorder and a belief that 'things are out of control', implying that someone needs to take back control. In this way, fear is 'being exploited by numerous claims-makers, including politicians, who promote their own propaganda about national and international politics' (Altheide 2003: 10); the extreme right in Greece has been doing this systematically in relation to Islam and Muslims.

The Media: Reproducing Panic about Islam

It was during the 2010s that, despite the lack of evidence on Islamist extremist violence, the stigmatisation of Islam and Muslims in Greece started to be fuelled by information emanating from the police and the secret service through the media. Several press articles and headlines claimed that fanatics or jihadists had been present, and in some cases had preached, in the non-official mosques of Athens. One example was the headline of a populist right-wing newspaper *To Proto Thema* (The

First Issue), on 13 August 2015, which read: 'Government's great crime: Hundreds of thousands of illegal immigrants arrive [in Greece] without control. Who knows how many jihadists came to Greece?'. Of course, no evidence was provided in the article, nor any figures regarding the number of jihadists that might have crossed the border. Another example was the front page of the newspaper *Eleftheria tou Typou* (Freedom of Press) on 28 August 2017. The front page showed the inside of a mosque (not from Greece) and, next to it, an image of people wearing masks and holding rifles. The title read: 'Mosques of hatred in Attica. The police has put under its microscope three (of the eighty monitored) places of the Muslim cult (*sic*) where extreme speeches were given'. In a third example, the moderate right-wing newspaper *I Kathimerini* (The Daily) published an article on 9 September 2017 with the title 'Imams of hate', based on an alleged 'highly confidential' police report about Islamist extremist activities in Greece and, in particular, in Muslim prayer houses. The article described how one of these non-official mosques had close relations with the Muslim Brotherhood – 'an organisation of political Islam, which has as its slogan "*jihad* is our path"'. The article also noted that 'the anti-terrorist service is highly interested in a cultural centre and improvised mosque which operates near Piraeus, because according to police information the person responsible for the place seems to be involved in cases of illegal transfer of people from North Africa to the regions of the Caliphate [i.e. ISIS]'. It is not unusual for the media to reproduce information emanating from the security services or the police, but in these cases it was reproduced without any additional concrete evidence to support the argument for the presence of extremists in Greek society.

The media have played a central role in the reproduction of moral panics in the modern age by repeatedly warning of the possible dangers of moral laxity. Such panic plays, and capitalises, on the fears of the majority (Cohen 1972; Thompson 1998; Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009). As this panic increasingly shifts towards 'aberrant' behaviours of Muslims, a kind of 'religious panic' has been generated in which 'Muslims in the West have emerged as the new "folk devils" of both popular and media imagination' (Zempi and Chakraborti 2014: 24). This is evident in the Greek case where a significant number of mainstream media outlets elaborate and reproduce this kind of panic about Islam and Muslims.

Security Experts and State Authorities: Securitising Islam and Muslims

Alongside the media, there is a second source of information about the activities of Islamist extremists in Greek society, particularly regarding

the non-official prayer houses. This source consists of self-proclaimed security specialists who try to present a more substantiated argument about the threats from such activism in the form of reports, which are mainly published abroad, as well as websites dedicated to the monitoring of radical Islam (e.g. RIMSE-Radical Islam Monitor in Southeast Europe).[15] The evidence included in these reports and online texts is mainly from anonymous police/secret service sources through the implementation of informal, in some cases off the record, discussions or interviews, but also from the media. There thus appears to be a network of police sources, media and security specialists, which circulates more or less the same information.

After the rise of ISIS, the main question asked by these security specialists was when Greece would become a target of a future terrorist attack. The country's geographical location, for example, in relation to the immigration issue, is considered to create a significant threat for Greece (Symeonides 2017), and there is a pragmatic expectation that radical Islamist groups could participate in low-risk assignments and operations (e.g. recruitment, funding and propaganda) that would not be detected easily by the Greek authorities. The Greek context facilitates such operations, it is argued, for a number of reasons: geographical proximity to countries that export extremism; illegal immigration and porous borders; social unrest; a growing Muslim community; indigenous terrorist networks; and corruption in the private and public sectors. According to this analysis, the networks based in Greece to date have performed mainly non-violent activities, but provide support for other groups located in other European cities (Kostakos 2010: 3–5).

Such reports commonly argue that, although no verified Islamist terrorist attack has been organised and executed in Greece, in recent years there is evidence of increased, mainly background, logistical, recruitment and accommodating activities, which have created a hub of uncontrollable, 'loose' individuals who act and operate freely (Giannoulis 2011: 22). This makes the trafficking of people from Asia and the Middle East through Greece easier and facilitates recruitment of Islamist radicals for operations beyond the borders of Greece (ibid.). It is suggested also that signs of Wahhabism and radicalism in Greece have been detected and that the country is likely to face difficult challenges in the years ahead (Kostakos 2007). Some authors (Papageorgiou and Samouris 2012: 377) have urged the authorities to be cautious and control those Islamic groups and associations in Greece whose goal is to implement the Sharia law in Greek society or practise *dawah* as a way to attract converts. They also note that 'the arrival in Greece of people with extreme extremist (*sic*) (jihadist) action creates the risk of the transfusion of Salafist jihadism among the communities of Muslim immigrants' (ibid.: 384).

It is important to emphasise, however, that while the authorities and police have initiated some programmes to tackle Islamist extremism, they have never stated openly or officially that Islamist extremist groups have been active in Greek society, being very cautious with the information they reveal and their characterisations. However, as stated in a pocket guide (KEMEA 2016: 28–29) published for public servants in the field (including security services and police officers on the mainland and along the borders), 'Greece, due to its geographical location, is at the epicentre of the issue of "foreign fighters", because their main movements and activities take place either in or through countries neighbouring Greece', implying mainly Turkey, but also the MENA region. Furthermore, security services and the police have started to surveil Muslim activities and non-official mosques, including paying visits to keep an eye out for radical ideologies. As discussed below, this kind of surveillance has been received very negatively by Muslim communities as it stigmatises them as potential threats to the country and as terrorists.

Public Perceptions of Islam and Muslims

This raises the question of how Islam and Muslims are perceived in wider society and how public opinion stands towards the construction of a mosque in Athens. It was at the end of the 2000s that anti-Muslim attitudes started to become more open and diffused not only in the political sphere but in wider society as well. This was illustrated by a 2010 opinion poll (Public Issue Survey 2010) on Greeks' views about Islam and Muslims, which confirmed the negative perceptions: 51% of the respondents believed that Islam engenders violence much more easily than other religions; 53% considered that relations between Islam and the West are bad or quite bad; 67% answered that there is probably a clash between Islam and Christianity currently; and 55% foresaw a clash between Christianity and Islam in the future. When it came to the context of Greece, 27% believed that the country is threatened by Islam and more were against the construction of a mosque in Athens (46%) than in favour of it (41%). A few years earlier, in 2006, 52% had been in favour of the construction and 34% against, and in 2009, 56% were in favour and 29% against – a significant shift within only four years.

Such views were also illustrated in more recent opinion polls. In one of these (Dianeosis 2015), 40.8% of the interviewees said that they would be disturbed by the establishment of a mosque in Athens ('yes'/'probably yes') as opposed to 58.6% who responded 'no'/'probably no'. When people were asked if they would be disturbed by the construction of a mosque in the area in which they live, 45.1% replied 'yes'/'probably yes',

while 54.4% answered 'no'/'probably no' (Dianeosis 2016a). Finally, according to another survey regarding the refugee crisis (January 2016), the words 'Islam', 'Muslim' and '*jihad*' appeared to have negative connotations and a terrorist attack in Greece was considered as possible according to 39% of the participants (Dianeosis 2016b). Two comparative surveys conducted by the Pew Institute in 2014 and 2016 also showed high levels of negative attitudes among the Greek population. In 2014, Greece had the second-highest level of unfavourable views towards Muslims (53%) of seven EU countries studied. In a subsequent survey, in 2016, focused on attitudes towards immigrants and refugees, Greece was ranked fourth (of ten EU countries) in terms of negative views towards Muslims, with almost two-thirds (65%) holding such views.[16]

These data suggest that the politics of fear, reproduced mainly but not exclusively by the extreme right, and the panic about Islam disseminated by the media facilitated by security experts and the ever-present historical past have managed to shape negative perceptions about Islam and Muslims in the minds of the population at large.

The Extreme-Right Milieu: Islam as Threat

The primary role in the reproduction of anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobic discourses on the political and societal levels is played by the extreme right, spearheaded by Golden Dawn (Sakellariou 2015, 2019). Golden Dawn was the primary organiser of large demonstrations against the construction of the mosque in Athens and has openly opposed its construction either through the party's websites or through its newspaper under the slogan 'No, to an Islamic mosque, either in Athens, or in any other place'. In October 2018, together with a committee of locals, the party organised a rally objecting to the location of the mosque in the Votanikos district of Athens. The call for the rally on the party's website declared that 'our region can't afford further degradation; we don't want to become a centre of illegal immigration; we can't afford more unemployment and criminality; our region should not be Islamised' (Sakellariou 2020: 16–17). Similar demonstrations continued to be organised right up until the mosque's official opening, while slogans against Islam, Muslims and the construction of the mosque were graffitied at the site selected for its construction. In this sense, space, in its various formulations, might be examined not only as a locus of religious activity but also as a tool used by religious and political groups to engage in society, to exert authority and power and to reinforce or subvert a dominant order, regime or discourse. Thus, space is an important analytical tool that can

help reveal the inherently complex interrelationships between religious and political groups and parties, the state and wider society through the disclosure of new ontological conditions of difference (Kong and Woods 2016: 163; Hussain 2022).

The study of the extreme-right milieu revealed that it included a number of Christian Orthodox, anti-Muslim groupings, which have a common ethno-religious identity and perceived enemies and who cooperate with one another in order to confront them. Two of the groups in the milieu – the Military Union and the Greek-Orthodox Group – have common members and, along with other Greek-Orthodox associations, had co-organised a public event against globalisation, religious ecumenism and the 'New World Order', which was also attended by representatives of extreme-right organisations and parties. Apart from being personal friends, the two leading figures of these groups joined forces in the 2016 four-month protest occupation of the Athens mosque construction site and participated in the protest organised by Golden Dawn in 2018 noted above (Lagos et al. 2021: 57).

For the milieu participants, the mosque was considered alien to Greek-Orthodox culture and a dangerous development that could pave the way towards Greece's Islamisation. Even those informants who, in the context of respect for religious freedom, recognised the right of Muslims to freely practise their religion, disagreed with the financing of the Athens mosque from the Greek state budget, interpreting this as an injustice done to Orthodoxy, whose temples and churches the Greek state does not fund. In fact, this is an unfounded grievance, since the Greek state regularly funds construction and restoration work on Greek-Orthodox churches and monasteries as well as, among other things, the digitalisation of their archives. Participants also expressed discontent and frustration that a mosque in Athens would evoke the country's Ottoman past, blurring and eroding the image of an alleged homogeneous Greek-Orthodox society, while at the same time increasing the risks of Islamic extremism not only in Greece but in Europe as well (Lagos et al. 2021: 44).

Mediated by the historical and long-lasting rivalry and enmity between Greece and Turkey (Sakellariou 2017: 519–20; Katsikas 2021), the perception and interpretation of Islam and Muslims reproduces nationalist generalisations and stereotypes that generate prejudice, fear and hostility towards them. According to the milieu participants, Islam is completely alien to the Christian European and Greek-Orthodox cultures and values. Muslims are seen as hostile to Europe, Greece and Orthodoxy and as unable to achieve any degree of integration in Christian European societies. One of the informants (Vangelis 1) framed the above through the reproduction of common stereotypes, that is, that Islam and Mus-

lims are 'incompatible with European culture' because 'Islam is a religion that teaches about disciplining women through beating' and women are treated as inferior to men and have no rights. The stereotypical perception of Islam as a backward religion that degrades and abuses women and accepts sexual relations with minors, which is incompatible with the Christian European culture, is interwoven with anti-immigrant stereotypes that stigmatise immigrants as potential rapists (Pilkington 2016: 132–35). The combination of Islamophobic prejudice that views Islam as 'a religion of hate' whose followers 'accept incestuous relationships, rape and paedophilia' (Thomas) and fears of immigrant criminality such as the generalisation that 'in every robbery, in every crime, in every rape, a foreigner is involved' (Kosmas) defines the cultural framework within which Muslim immigrants are perceived as both dangerous and incompatible with Greek-Orthodox culture (Lagos et al. 2021: 41). This kind of discourse not only incorporates conspiracy theories about the Islamisation of the West via migration and Islamic extremism, but also justifies Islamophobic discourses and anti-Muslim radicalism and extremism as inevitable or even necessary.

This incompatibility and threat emerge from the discourse of even the most moderate of the respondents when they reject multiculturalism and consider the integration of Muslims in Christian societies as practically impossible. The fear of Greece's Islamisation, through the mixing of incompatible peoples, religions and cultures, indicates the operation of a racialising mechanism in the production of Muslim 'otherness', revealing Islamophobia as a contemporary form of racism (Hafez 2014; Kirtsoglou and Tsimouris 2018; Kaya and Tecmen 2019). These, relatively less radicalised respondents pointed out the Islam-Christianity/West 'historical rivalry' manifest in a generalised image of Muslims as 'not forgetting the Crusades' whilst also underlining what they called 'the West's responsibility' for Islamist extremism, referring to the geopolitical intervention of Western powers in the Middle East and other Muslim countries; this responsibility is similarly attributed to the West by some of the participants in the Islam(ist) milieu (Sakellariou 2021b: 29–30). Those with stronger anti-Muslim attitudes in the milieu – though few denied the 'West's responsibility' for contemporary Islamist extremism – tended to emphasise their view of Islam as a religion in which fanaticism and violence are endogenous, that is, included in and propagated by Imams in mosques and through its core teachings (Lagos et al. 2021: 33).

The stronger the anti-Muslim sentiment among the milieu participants, the more they stressed fanaticism as a core characteristic of Islam. For the more radicalised respondents, Islamist extremism stems from the Qur'an and Sharia, while Islamophobia and anti-Muslim attitudes and activism

are responses towards the perceived threat of the Islamisation of Greece, and Europe, and the failure of the mainstream political parties to address such threats. The belief expressed by these milieu actors that they are at war with an 'absolute evil' (Thomas) and a 'satanic religion' (Father Gabriel) underpins the connection between Orthodox zeal – captured in the slogan 'Orthodoxy or Death' – and anti-immigrant, extreme-right nationalism and authoritarianism articulated by the Greek-Orthodox paramilitaries and neo-Nazi supporters of Golden Dawn also active in the milieu (Lagos et al. 2021: 49).

In addition to their active shaping of public discourse during the 2010s, extremist groups have regularly attacked mosques and prayer houses as well as immigrants and refugees. These have taken the form of (occasional) arson attacks, graffitiing the walls or throwing pigs' heads, and have taken place in prayer houses and mosques around Greece, for example on the island of Crete and in Komotini in Northern Greece, where the native Muslim minority lives, as well as in Athens (Sakellariou 2020: 19–21).

The dominant stance within the milieu is that of disapproval towards extremist messages and views. The strong correlation between extremism and violence and the perception of extremists as uneducated and marginalised fanatics generates aversion to, and rejection of, extremist messages by the non-radicalised part of the milieu. Extremist attitudes and behaviours are perceived as 'zeal without awareness' and 'mob force' without real effectiveness, even in the case of causes that are recognised as just and legitimate (Lagos et al. 2021: 31, 34). Moderation, as well as Christian and humanitarian values, are promoted and mobilised by these respondents. For these participants, Orthodox ideals and teachings help control passions and violent instincts and are essential both for individual and social betterment.

In the radical discourse of some informants, however, violence – physical and symbolic – is omnipresent, celebrated, planned and necessitated by the dire 'situation of the country that requires us to be tough' (Thomas) (Lagos et al. 2021: 61). These respondents accuse those with moderate attitudes of 'cowardice' and 'passivity' and talk about their own experience of violent confrontation with opponents holding extremist ideologies, mainly Islamists (Lagos et al. 2021: 34–35). The leader of the paramilitary Military Union, for example, described the operation of his group to bring down an ISIS flag that reportedly had been raised in a refugee camp. He repeatedly referred to the threat that Muslim extremists, who are supposedly entering the country in disguise as immigrants/refugees, are seen to represent, although research has shown the absence of any radical milieu among refugees (Eleftheriadou 2020). Along with other Greek-Orthodox

anti-Muslim radicals among the respondents, he stressed the need to pre-
pare and organise in order to confront them, should they decide to revolt
and attack the locals. His Military Union, comprising former commando
soldiers with extreme-right ties, trains and prepares for the armed sup-
pression of such an anticipated revolt (Lagos et al. 2021: 35).

In general, immigration, mostly referring to Muslims, is seen as involv-
ing and posing serious national, social and cultural risks. These cover a
wide range of dangers and threats from criminality, terrorism, degrada-
tion and decline of neighbourhoods to fears of alteration of the Greek-
Orthodox national, religious and cultural identity of the country through
Islamisation. It is not surprising, then, that the vast majority of the mi-
lieu favours strict limitations to immigration as well as the deportation
of large numbers of immigrants, particularly of Muslims, while they are
suspicious, reluctant or even totally negative towards the construction
and operation of the Athens mosque. This threat of cultural difference
through what has been described as the 'influx of difference' (i.e. the
arrival of large numbers of Muslim immigrants and refugees) (see Pilk-
ington and Vestel, this volume) is found in other extreme-right milieus
across Europe and has rendered Muslim immigrants the main 'other' af-
ter 9/11 (Marzouki and McDonnell 2016: 5).

Religion plays a central role in the radicalisation of some of those within
the extreme-right milieu. It is not the Orthodox religion itself that drives
radicalisation, however, but the perception of Islam as an inherently vio-
lent religion and a direct threat to Orthodox religion and culture. In this
way, Islam – as in the case of the construction of the Athens mosque –
becomes a symbol of threat. This appears to confirm Juergensmeyer's
(2017: 18) argument that violent extremism is driven by the sense and
fear of a loss of identity and control in the modern world. At the same
time, many milieu participants emphasise Orthodox teachings as a way
to underline their opposition to violence and extremism. Thus, whilst for
some, religion appears to offer a path to radicalisation, in other cases, re-
ligion stalls the radicalisation process and guides individuals away from
embracing violence.

The Islam(ist) Milieu:
Islam as Bulwark against Radicalisation

As evident from the discussion above, Muslims in Greece have become
explicitly and routinely stigmatised and perceived as a threat to Greek
society and culture. Islam is widely considered an inherently violent reli-
gion, and mosques, official and non-official, to be sites of the promotion

of violence, terrorism and radicalisation. It is also clear that the extreme-right milieu has taken up this etic discourse, fuelling and reinforcing negative perceptions of Islam, Muslims and mosques. At the same time, Muslims have often felt the exercise of acts of violence against them in the places they live and pray. This raises the question of how young Muslims respond to this stigmatisation, how they react to acts of violence and whether this might encourage radicalisation in their milieu.[17]

Despite many cases of violence perpetrated against Muslims, the evidence from the study of this milieu indicates that significant effort has been expended in order not to respond to such attacks. Such attitudes prevailed even in conditions of close territorial proximity to Golden Dawn, as in the case of one informal mosque located just a short walking distance from Golden Dawn's offices in Athens city centre. Although the interviewee stated that no problems had arisen, he added:

> Now, on how are we going to react, I generally believe in the same calm way as towards all other provocation and disturbances that we have faced till now here and there; calmly and without actually responding to them. Okay, at this moment for good or bad what we Muslims do is that we can't do anything. We have only what the law offers us. There is no other way, this is the right thing to do and this is how things should be done. And if something happens and we can't deal with that, then we should all get up and leave the country. . . . We will never use any other means [of reaction]. If we get to the point of no return, to which we are slowly moving, if we can't stand it anymore, we will get up and leave . . . (Vangelis 2)

Dialogue between Muslim communities and wider Greek society was another crucial dimension of dealing with the extreme right. As another interviewee explained, the Muslim community did not avoid spaces where they might encounter Golden Dawn, but sought to avoid clashes with them and react through dialogue and communication:

> we didn't stay quiet; we didn't stop, or be afraid of . . . but we tried to control our own people too. This was not an easy task, because many of us, from many communities were angry, their 'blood was boiling' . . . meaning that they might also have attacked [Golden Dawn] with whatever means, using anything they could. Imagine that. . . . This is what we tried to control, through dialogue, using other tricks. . . . We did that so as not to give any excuse from our side, because it would be us who paid for this afterwards . . . not them [the extremists]. Unfortunately, everyone would say, 'Look, immigrants did that'. (Vassilis)

Vassilis acknowledges here that the actions of Golden Dawn caused an angry reaction among many in the community, which might have resulted

in a process of cumulative extremism (Eatwell 2006; Busher and Macklin 2015; Knott, Lee and Copeland 2018) or reciprocal radicalisation. The latter is described by Pratt (2019: 50) as 'the phenomenon of a perception of a religious "other" as being an inherent threat whereby, in response, an extreme action is undertaken that, relative to the religion or cultural norms of those responding, is abnormal'. However, despite the targeting, with hate speech and violent attacks, of Muslims in Greece by many extremist groups and the grievances they have expressed over their lack of rights, violent reactions on the part of Muslims have not materialised. On the contrary, it seems that Muslims and their official organisations have sought to absorb any grievances or negative feelings caused by the perpetration of violence and racist speech.

International events – which build on existing grievances and perceived injustices – could also play a crucial role in the radicalisation process. For example, following the attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand which left forty-nine Muslims dead and fifty wounded, one of the milieu participants made a specific reference to the attack in his message after the Friday prayers. However, he employed a peaceful and reconciliatory tone, emphasising that such acts are outside of the logic of Islam, an implicit call against any retaliation.

> I end today's talk with a reference to something . . . all of us as believers woke up shocked by what happened with those gun shootings in the two mosques [New Zealand], an incident which left many dead Muslims in a prayer house. All of us pray that God will forgive those who died and we need to stress that Islam, Islam's values, have nothing to do with these kinds of acts, and that Islam despises these kinds of behaviours. (Nikos)

The above excerpt could be considered as another effort to avoid any violent reactions on the part of Muslims and thus works towards the prevention of reciprocal radicalisation.

Surveillance from the authorities was another key issue for Muslim respondents, who felt there was an institutional discrimination and racism, especially on the part of the security services, who sought to control their places of prayer:

> After all, we started [the mosque] . . . and the day we had the presentation, which was Friday . . . they came, they broke down the door with the Counter-Terrorism agency . . . There was a panic here and of course I realised that this was the plan of the secret service. It was a clear . . . a plan to scare us, to let us know 'we are here'. (Dimitris)

This relationship with the secret service was described as long-standing and typical for such informal mosques, and in some cases started

in the 1980s. However, this kind of relationship is interpreted as direct discrimination because no other religion is required to have contact with, or permission from, the police or the secret service in order to open a religious venue. This kind of behaviour from state authorities, as implied by Dimitris, could even be counterproductive and encourage radicalisation.

> In order to get the paperwork for the mosque you must have links to the secret service. If you do not have a good relationship and you do not have a specific goal, you will not be allowed to do it. That is to say, instead of going through the Ministry of Education, we go through the Ministry of Citizen Protection. That is wrong from the beginning. A young person may take this in a different way. This is inequality and it is one of the major forms of inequality – that a Muslim should be under surveillance by the Ministry of Citizen Protection. That means, automatically, you are dangerous, right? This is one of the first forms of inequality that I have experienced very strongly and badly. . . . Okay, partly I understand the stress that exists but on the other hand you can't digest, I personally can't accept the notion that you belong to a ministry that has to do with the country's defence. As if I'm a threat. . . . But you know, and this is how it is born, that is, it is one of the causes of radicalisation. When someone perceives you as a threat to the defence of his country from the beginning, then the other [Muslim] starts to live and behave that way [as a potential threat]. This kind of [state] behaviour, implying that the country is in danger [from Muslims] could lead some [Muslims] to feel ok with this [and become radicalised]. (Dimitris)

Grievances about human rights and religious freedom, such as the construction of an official mosque in Athens, racism, Islamophobia, the role of the state authorities and international issues, such as the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem or the situation in Palestine, were mentioned by the majority of the participants. Thus, this milieu seems to reflect the findings of others that the two most common grievances among young Muslims are not being able to enjoy all the rights and opportunities to which they are entitled and feeling constrained by various forces, including family, society as a whole and political power (Abbas and Hamid 2019: 6). The Greek milieu also appears to confirm that sociopolitical inequalities are a crucial factor in radicalisation (see Franc, Poli and Pavlović, this volume).

The fieldwork revealed that some participants had personally encountered extremist and radical messages through their established relationships (friends, brothers, online communication). In all the cases mentioned, the participants managed to deal with the messages and none of them was involved in, or established, any relation with radicals online or offline. One respondent recounted one such incident when he was in

the Netherlands: 'I was threatened by Muslims, younger ones. . . in the Netherlands. Online, of course, curses, threats, etc. Not for any serious reason, but because I wanted to organise a group of Muslims, Christians and Jews for charitable purposes, and, let's say, some young ones didn't like that and thought they should warn me' (Kyriakos).

The common response to such incidents was either to step back from their plans or to leave the online sphere (such as a Facebook group) in order to avoid any conflicts, as in the following example:

> I left because I just expressed my opinion. And unfortunately . . . one principle of Islam that at the moment is not implemented among all Arabs is the acceptance of other opinions. . . . If you disagree, you shouldn't quarrel, that means that disagreement shouldn't lead to quarrel; [nowadays] there is no respect for a different opinion. (Nikos)

Stepping back and being silent was not the only option. An interesting finding emerging from the interviews was that, in some cases, those who considered others to have expressed radical or pro-violence views had responded by reporting this to the authorities.

> If I knew someone who held views similar to ISIS and Al Qaeda, an Imam or an ordinary Muslim, I would have mentioned this to the counter-terrorism authorities, as I already did once. I saw someone, it doesn't matter from which country, a migrant, clearly writing various things [on social media] . . . he was trying to convince people that a particular [Islamic] organisation was right. I reported this to the police, I sent an email saying that this person in his Facebook account says that . . . etc. and you should look into this. . . . I did what I thought was the right thing. (Pavlos)

Indeed, as noted above and stressed by a number of interviewees, many Muslims, especially those running prayer houses, had to keep close relations with the police and the secret service, and, if any extreme element appeared, the police would have known. This casts doubt on the media reports discussed earlier claiming informal mosques are centres of extremism and radicalisation; such reports are probably exaggerated and have the effect, primarily, of reproducing fear about Islam.

The role of religion in the rise of violence has been a key theme of public debate. While some have suggested that religion is the key to understanding violence and terrorism, however, other scholars have argued that religion is not a major factor in violent radicalisation (Sonn 2016: 105–13; Cavanaugh 2017; Juergensmeyer 2017; Nanninga 2017). Studies of former terrorists have also confirmed that religion has played a minimal role in their recruitment (Botha and Abdile 2014). According to Roy (2017: 76, 159), those who radicalise do not embrace violence after re-

flection on sacred texts; they have neither the necessary religious education nor interest. They are radicalised not because they misinterpret the sacred texts or because they are manipulated, but because they choose this path. Radicalisation has many, complex, origins but is, fundamentally, a personal, and political, choice (ibid.: 164).

Contrary to the perception constructed by the media, extreme-right politicians, vigilante groups and state authorities, young Muslims have consistently argued that in Islam, and in the non-official mosques, they have found a religious path and gateway to a life of non-violence. All of the participants denied that the atrocities committed in the name of Islam have anything to do with Islam's true message, which is only peace. According to one respondent, extremism is 'anything that doesn't cope, anything that is out . . . of Islam, for me anything that is not Islamic, how much out of Islam it is. Eh, okay, there are variations to that, but . . . if it is out of the path, out of the spirit, the values and the principles of Islam, more or less, it is out' (Nikos).

Common to all the explanations offered by the milieu participants as to why young Muslims engage in violent extremism is a lack of religious knowledge and religious education, that is, a lack of awareness of the true substance of Islam (see also Dechesne, this volume). Religion, thus, is seen as playing a crucial role in radicalisation, through its absence or, more often, its distortion. At the same time, evidence from the fieldwork shows that religion can also act as a protective factor against radicalisation by functioning as a barrier. This was explicitly articulated in the interview with one female respondent who argued that religion can become a factor for challenging extremism: 'Because what every religion says about loving one another, for example, the same is said in the Qur'an' (Maria). Emphasising the dimensions of peace and love in Islam, she argued that true knowledge of Islam is crucial in order to protect Islam, and its teachings, from distortion but also to help those young people who have embraced violence to find a path towards deradicalisation. This group of informants was not suggesting the need for more religion, however, but rather for the importance of tolerance and co-existence, achieved through a more open and looser interpretation of Islam. In this way, they appear to confirm Beck's (2010) argument that a solution to religious violence would be to *combine* truth with peace rather than to *replace* one with the other. Other participants, however, while also stressing the need to live in peace and present the true meaning of Islam to other Muslims and the public, argued that this necessitated a stricter version of Islam (usually Salafism).

The above analysis suggests that religion plays a key role both in radicalisation and non-radicalisation. Indeed, as Wilkinson et al. (2021: 22)

demonstrate in their study of conversion to Islam in prison, switching to, or intensification of belief in, Islam, in some cases, leads to the development of an 'Us' versus 'Them' Islamist worldview, while in other cases it encourages more positive attitudes among prisoners to rehabilitation (engagement with work, education and the avoidance of crime). Extremism is thus not a product of religious belief, nor is it confined to any one religion; jihadism is a movement based on a specific version of Islam and only one way of interpreting the religion (Khosrokhavar 2009: 2). However, the fact that religion is not a proximate cause of extremism is not a reason to avoid studying how religion informs extremism. The desire for simple explanations keeps many of these incorrect assumptions about the connection between Islam and extremism alive. However, in order to understand why people become extremists and how to combat extremist violence, it is necessary to move beyond the clichés (Berger 2018: 85–87). Here, we suggest, the holistic case study approach (Selengut 2003), which examines all the dimensions and context of each case in which the relationship between a specific religion and violence is studied, is the most appropriate.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored the etic discourse on Islam and violence in Greek society as well as the responses by young Muslims to the negative perceptions of, and violence towards, Muslims that this discourse has generated. It has shown, first, that contemporary Greek society is characterised by an anti-Muslim/anti-Islam social and political environment. Stereotypical images about Islam and Muslims are repeatedly reproduced, including by the mainstream media, and are reflected in the findings of a number of opinion polls measuring Greek people's attitudes towards Islam, Muslims, immigrants and the construction of a mosque in Athens. Secondly, we have shown that the extreme right plays a leading role in shaping this stigmatising discourse through its systematic promotion of openly anti-Muslim attitudes. Through empirical research with one such extreme-right milieu in Greece, we have identified distinct segments of radicalised and non-radicalised actors within the milieu alongside the important role of religion across the milieu. This is expressed, by the radicalised, as the need to protect the Orthodox religion from the alleged threat of Islam, implying a clash of civilisations, while the non-radicalised milieu members suggest Orthodox teachings and values can be used to prevent violence and extremism. We find, thirdly, that members of the Islam(ist) milieu consistently avoid violent responses to the extreme right

or to other etic stigmatisation. Here, again, religion appears as a barrier against radicalisation and violent extremism. While religion can play a significant role in the embracement of violence (Selengut 2003), it would be inaccurate to claim that religion has a single, unchanging and inherently violent essence (Armstrong 2014). This study of both extreme-right and Islam(ist) milieus, and the struggle over the building of the Athens mosque, thus appear to suggest that the non-response by the latter milieu to stigmatisation and violence by the former has avoided a spiral of reciprocal radicalisation. Moreover, in both milieus, religion was far from always 'the problem'; rather, as Juergensmeyer (2004: 3, 6–9) suggests, 'religion can offer images of a peaceful resolution, justifications for tolerating differences, and a respect for the dignity of all life'.

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NOTES

1. For a discussion of 'etic' and 'emic' perspectives and their role in the DARE project overall, see the Introduction to this volume.
2. As discussed in the Introduction to this volume, milieus were considered appropriate for selection for the study if they were widely considered to be

'Islamist' in etic discourse. This was the case here, especially in the context of the influence of the anti-Islam extreme-right milieu on etic debates. However, our research findings, as well as the distinctions drawn in the wider literature on Islam between 'mainstream Islam', 'Islamism' and 'Islamist extremism' (Wilkinson 2019), led us to conclude that the milieu studied belonged primarily to mainstream Islam, whilst including some Islamist (e.g. activist Islam, contingent Muslim/non-Muslim separation) and non-violent Islamist extremism elements (e.g. absolute Muslim/non-Muslim separation). For this reason, we refer to it as 'Islam(ist)' rather than 'Islamist'.

3. In 2015 alone, more than 800,000 refugees crossed the border with Turkey into Greece.

4. On the social exclusion of Muslims in Thrace, see http://www.mar.umd.edu/chronology.asp?groupId=35001 (retrieved 23 March 2022).

5. Prior to this, during the 1990s, most debates and conflicts around Islam in Greece were related to the minority of Thrace, which was marginalised and discriminated against.

6. Laikos Orthodoxos Synagermos (Popular Orthodox Rally) was an extreme-right political party, which played a crucial role in anti-Muslim hatred and Islamophobia.

7. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 25 October 2000: 1503.

8. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 7 November 2006: 903.

9. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 10 December 2010: 2389–90.

10. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 19 November 2010: 1415.

11. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 12 June 2000: 22, 27, 29.

12. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 27 April 2015: 49; Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 8 May 2015: 264.

13. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 12 May 2015: 176.

14. Parliamentary Minutes, Plenary Session 24 June 2015: 71.

15. For more on RIMSE, see https://www.rimse.gr (retrieved 23 March 2022).

16. For these opinion polls, see https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2014/05/12/chapter-4-views-of-roma-muslims-jews/ and https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/07/11/negative-views-of-minorities-refugees-common-in-eu/ (retrieved 23 March 2022).

17. For more details about the milieu and the findings from the ethnographic study, see Sakellariou 2021b.

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