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AHIF Student Foreign Policy Trip Participants Describe their Personal Experiences

WASHINGTON, DC – The American Hellenic Institute (AHI) has released nine essays authored by participants of the Fifth Annual American Hellenic Institute Foundation College Student Foreign Policy Trip to Greece and Cyprus. The students' insightful essays describe their personal experiences from the trip to Greece and Cyprus held June 19 to July 6. During the two-week program, the students were in Cyprus, June 22-27 and Athens, June 27 to July 6. They received firsthand experience about the foreign policy issues affecting Greece and Cyprus, their relations with the U.S., and the interests of the U.S. in the region.

The National Herald has published three of the essays. Including the following:

A Call to Live Up to American Values in the Eastern Mediterranean

By George Gabriel

One of the more unique characteristics of United States foreign policy is that it is predicated on the American value system. These values stem from what the Founders set forth in the Constitutional Convention in 1787 but have large consequences in today's international setting. Whether it is declarations of war, billions of dollars in foreign aid, or diplomatic relations with foreign countries, the United States has a large arsenal at which it can express and reinforce its values upon foreign nations. This type of vast influence is uncommon and is a responsibility that the United States must carefully articulate to enhance credibility on those values in the international realm.

The Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 clearly expresses the idea that U.S. foreign policy must embody American values. After traveling to the eastern Mediterranean on a foreign policy trip sponsored by the American Hellenic Institute Foundation, it required me to answer the question, "How does United States foreign policy reflect American values in the Eastern Mediterranean?"

To answer this question shortly and frankly, it does not. While American values are limitless and difficult to determine, I have sought to look at values such as: State sovereignty and ethnic self-determination, rule of law, and religious freedoms as critical American values that the U.S. government fails to adequately act upon in the eastern Mediterranean.

STATE SOVEREIGNTY AND ETHNIC SELF-DETERMINATION

Cyprus is a sovereign nation that has been occupied by Turkey since July 20th, 1974. Using American weapons, Turkey stormed the island of Cyprus under the pretext of protecting Turkish Cypriots they felt were 'endangered.' Currently, a UN buffer zone divides the Republic of Cyprus from an illegitimate government Turkey has created on the northern third of the island. Since World War I, the U.S. has advocated a principle that supports a supreme independent authority over certain geographic areas and the ability for ethnicities within that area to determine their authority. Turkey

has violated that value in a multitude of ways that includes: 1) encouraging the settlement of 180,000 Turkish settlers, 2) establishing a puppet regime in the northern third of the island (solely recognized by the Republic of Turkey), 3) altering the demographics to undermine the interests of Turkish Cypriots and prioritize the interests of the Republic of Turkey. In the 39 years since the invasion, the U.S. has stood idly by and exerted little pressure on Turkey to remove its 43,000 troops from the island of Cyprus.

Rule of Law. The goal of law at its most basic level is to provide a framework for parties to distinguish what is deemed acceptable or unacceptable. When countries sign and ratify international treaties, in spirit each country is bound to carry out the duties and obligations of each treaty. Nevertheless, over the past 100 years Turkey has chosen to ignore their obligations under international law. The Treaty of Lausanne, signed in 1923, established that Turkey would renounce all claims to Cyprus. Fifty-one years later, they changed their mind and blatantly ignored a longstanding international treaty.

On July 20, 1974, Henry Kissinger (then United States Secretary of State) was aware of Turkey's impending violation of international law and saw it as an advantageous development for the United States. He stated, "There is no American reason why the Turks should not have one-third of Cyprus." If I were alive and present when Mr. Kissinger made that statement, I would respond, "American values are enough to justify an American reason." If America fails to uphold valid longstanding international treaties regardless of whether they are signatories, then Americans lose their credibility to establish and enforce international laws in the future.

RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS

Since Turkey's inception as a nation, its treatment of religious minorities has always been controversial and particularly harmful to Greek Orthodox Christians. So much so that the leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in Istanbul (also known as Constantinople), the Ecumenical Patriarch, is treated as a second-class citizen. This is primarily due to the limitations on candidates eligible to succeed him, the expropriation of Church property, and the enforced closure of the Halki Patriarchal School of Theology. In addition, once Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974, the Turks desecrated Greek Orthodox churches by pillaging them, stealing their valuable inventory, and selling it on the black-market throughout Europe. All of these acts have limited the ability of minority religions to freely express themselves – a fact reaffirmed in legislation passed by the U.S. Congress. The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) requires the United States to oppose violations of religious freedoms, but it has been hesitant to strictly enforce the legislation.

While efforts have been made to advance American values, greater efforts need to be made. Strategic relationships (in particular, with Turkey) that aim to advance U.S. influence in the Middle East have made the eastern Mediterranean a region that requires significant attention be paid to it. However, that trust with various nations in the region has caused complacency that has stifled the facilitation of real action to advance American values.

In President Obama's State of the Union speech of 2013, he called for "a return to American values." The eastern Mediterranean provides ample opportunity to do just that. It's time for American values to not simply be used as a talking point to garner political capital. Instead, American values need to be placed as a legitimate means to adhere to foreign policy goals.

George Gabriel is a Greek American graduate student at Pepperdine University's School of Public Policy. He is currently a candidate for a Master of Public Policy degree specializing in international relations.



THE NATIONAL HERALD

Monday, December 16, 2013

Hellenic Armed Forces: An Important International Ally

By Despina Vastakis

With a population of only 11 million and an economic crisis that is crippling the nation, Greece is not thought of as a formidable military opponent. After our briefings with the Hellenic National Defense General Staff and the Greek Naval Headquarters located at Salamina Island, I was able to truly appreciate the significance of the Hellenic Armed Forces, not simply for domestic security, but for the international realm as a whole. Greece is located in a geographical hotspot. Turkey continues with its aggressive naval movements, the conflicts in the Middle East are escalating and threaten to spillover even further into the region, and the conflicts in northern Africa pose a potential security threat. Our meetings proved that the Hellenic Armed Forces are more than capable and prepared to handle any threat that may occur.

Not only did we have the opportunity to discuss the current security issues facing Greece, but we were also able to observe day-to-day operations of the Greek Navy. We were fortunate enough to go on a tour of a submarine and frigate, and hear about the issues that the Greek Navy must deal with on a daily basis. The Greek Navy has an extremely difficult job when dealing with their aggressive neighbors. Turkish ships are constantly crossing into Greek waters with more than two-to three-hundred incidents per year, averaging out to one incident per day. Whenever a Turkish ship crosses into Greek waters, the Greek ships must change the course of their exercises to "chase" the Turkish ships out of Greek waters. This is wasteful in both time and finances, and the Greek Navy submits reports of these incidents to no avail.

Souda Bay is a vitally important location to American interests, yet few people have even heard of it. Due to its vital strategic location, Souda Bay has been used by NATO for reconnaissance missions and air refueling support for Operations Desert Shield/Storm, Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Greece has contributed to so many different international events and crises, especially through NATO. However, Souda Bay is not a large topic of discussion in the international community. Greece is one of three NATO countries to meet the minimum defense spending of two percent. Greece continues to be a strong and important country to United States interests, and it should be recognized as such by the international community.

This trip has opened my eyes to the great importance of the Hellenic Armed Forces, not only for domestic security, but for the United States and NATO. The Hellenic Armed Forces has continued to be a stronghold through Greek history despite the current economic crisis that is gripping the nation. With its important strategic location and dedicated armed forces, Greece is a significant international ally that should not be overlooked.

Despina Vastakis completed her first year of graduate school at Georgia Institute of Technology where she is majoring in International Affairs.



Tuesday, December 19, 2013

The Greek Crisis and Foreign Policy: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

By Elissa Bowling

The “Greek economy” has become little more than punch-line of a joke or dug up as an example of what not to do. This tendency brushes over the actual causes of the crisis, which are numerous and complex: government corruption and betrayal of the people’s trust, a weak tax-collecting system, the experiment that is the European Union and the Eurozone, etc. This article, however, will focus on the good, bad, and ugly realities of the Greek economic state and what it means for Greek foreign policy now and in the near future.

Let’s start with the bad; it is a worldwide crisis, after all. The statistics speak for themselves: 27.6% unemployment and 64.9% unemployment between the ages of 15-24 as of May 2013. Those most able to provide professional experience, innovation, and growth (recent university graduates and young professionals) are increasingly moving to more stable European countries, mainly Germany.

Greece can also claim the single greatest illegal immigration problem in Europe. Located in an intercontinental crossroad, Greece finds itself as the entry point for many migrants from both Africa and the Middle East trying to reach Europe and a better quality of life. However, most of them are stopped at the border of other European countries, while those who do make it are sent back to where they came from (Greece). This system results in the country with sky-high unemployment for its own citizens given the extra burden of providing for a huge daily influx of immigrants. Like the crisis itself, this immigration issue is not simply a Greek problem: it is a European problem.

The aggregate effect of these issues and others has created a less-than-ideal context for Greece to conduct foreign policy. Many in Europe are inclined to view Greece as the problem, rather than the whole European Union. On one hand, it makes sense that other countries would not want to take responsibility for major economic setbacks and a rampant immigration problem. Before the creation of the EU and the Eurozone that might have been almost acceptable, but not anymore. That is what Greece should focus on in its foreign policy. Not only do other countries in the EU have the responsibility to help Greece as a member state, but it is also in their interest as part of the Eurozone and greater world economy. If Greece goes down, it’s taking them all with it.

Though the good is less easily identifiable, there are some positive outcomes stemming from the crisis. There is an undeniable gradual change occurring in the psyche of the Greek citizens materializing in the ways people are reaching out to one another in a way that had gone out of style in more prosperous times. Sons and daughters are re-strengthening family ties, religious centers and local communities are organizing clothing swaps and food drives to share the collective burden, and landlords are allowing tenants to keep their residences even with no foreseeable end to the months of unpaid rent. Even the road rage on the streets of Athens has decreased. Rather than fighting over what little there is, the Greek people are coming together in the same way they have for generations.

Greeks also always find ways to enjoy themselves. On any night of the week, throngs of people walk the streets of Athens, park themselves at cafes for hours, and hit up the nightclubs. While this might seem counterintuitive, anyone who knows anything about Greek culture would not blink an eye. Greeks tighten their belts by not buying new clothes for a few years or leaving door hinges loose or windows broken for another generation or two, but they will maintain their culture and enjoy life to the fullest. That sense of self sustained them through hundreds of years of occupation, and it will continue to sustain them through this economic crisis.

The communal resiliency and cultural strength is reflected in the Greek government. Despite all of its setbacks, the state has held together and taken considerable motions toward overcoming the ever-towering financial challenge. Start-up companies are popping up in the private sector – some more successful than others – implying attempts at continuing innovation. Other countries and private investors recognize these positive movements. Recently, President Barack Obama met with Prime Minister Antonis Samaras and confirmed America's conviction that Greece will bounce back and its willingness to aid in the recovery. While Greece has a long way to go before it is safely out of the fire, there are many positive signs for its future.

That leaves us with the buzz-killing ugly. Chrisi Avgi (in English, "Golden Dawn") is the far right (and purportedly Neo-Nazi) political party that won 11% of seats in Parliament in the last election. Like similar groups, Golden Dawn feeds on fear caused by the economic crisis and growing xenophobia brought on by the influx of immigrants competing for jobs and livelihood. Early in their development, Golden Dawn members engaged in "protection" that included escorting the elderly to and from cafes or places of work to their homes. Soon they traveled in roving bands and acted as unchecked policing forces and beating up the closest identifiable immigrant scapegoat when the real police were too slow or unmotivated to get involved. Golden Dawn is completely open about its Holocaust denial and blaming the crisis entirely on the immigrant population and meddling foreign powers. They even sport a symbol that eerily resembles the Nazi swastika. The ugliest part is that these thugs are sitting in the democratically elected Greek parliament. Greece said no to fascism during World War II – only to vote political thugs with those same ideals into parliament 72 years later.

Golden Dawn, though vocal and present, currently constitutes a small minority in Greek politics and appears not to have had a major effect on Greece's international relations. However, based on its development and base, the so-called political party is here to stay – at least for a while. If its support increases and it becomes a more effective voice in Greek government, there could be serious repercussions in terms of foreign policy. Germany, the current center of European economic strength and backbone of Greece's economic recovery, is deeply scarred by its fascist past and could alter its economic policies towards Greece. Similar-thinking countries would likely follow suit, including other EU states and the United States, potentially generating tensions within the EU and the pulling out of military personnel. It would essentially amount to political and financial suicide.

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