

Greece: Police, far-right thugs attack Muslim immigrants

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6 June 2009

The church basement of St. Panteleimon in the Athens district of the same name was torched last month. It had been designated by the church's priest, Father Prokopios, as a shelter for homeless immigrants and a place to store clothes and food for poor families.

St. Panteleimon is a working class area with a large Muslim community. While the identity of the culprits remains unknown, far-right groups are suspected, given that the fire coincided with a demonstration outside the church by the Residents' Committee of Ayios Panteleimon, believed by many to be a front used by fascist groups.

Father Prokopios was verbally attacked by the demonstrators for allowing his church to be used by immigrants. Costas Onisenko-Kathimerini, editor of the Greek daily *Kathimerini*, who arrived at the church along with TV news crews shortly after the fire, was physically assaulted.

He told *Eleftherotypia*, "When we appeared in the [church] square, I was verbally assaulted and forced to leave under strong police protection. They did the same to other colleagues.

"My name was being called out through a megaphone for a long time in the square. About 30 people then gathered around and began to beat me. I was pulled away by policemen who were present in the square. We were transported to St. Panteleimon Police station, where I was threatened with being charged."

For the past year, the media has been systematically demonising immigrant residents of Ayios Panteleimon, blaming them for the rise in crime, drug use and the spread of diseases. This has been accompanied by an increase in the harassment of immigrants by the police, as well as by far-right groups.

Onisenko-Kathimerini's articles have not pandered to

this trend. He has cited the desperate social conditions in the neighbourhood as the primary cause of the area's ills. This has provoked the ire of the far-right. In one article in January he described Ayios Panteleimon as a social time bomb.

He wrote, "Immigrants that came earlier live in rented apartments with their families or friends. Those who came recently find shelter in the so-called 'hotels'—run-down apartment blocks charging 50-70 euros per head. Those less fortunate—and we are talking about whole families that can't find shelter—sleep in cardboard boxes propped against the wall of St. Panteleimon or elsewhere. These days, aid for immigrants is provided exclusively by charitable organisations and the church."

One of those organisations is PRAKSIS, which provides free health care and drugs. Doctor Dimitris Constantinou told , "We are identifying health problems that are clearly associated with bad hygiene and poor living conditions... We help out around 45 people daily. Most of them can't speak Greek, so communicating is difficult. We are finding that the area has received a large number of refugees without the necessary infrastructure in place, and has become ghettoised. The material intervention by the state is nowhere to be seen."

It is in this context that criminality has grown. While the media is quick to blame immigrants, they are often the ones brutally exploited by criminal gangs. An article in the Internet newspaper *madata.gr* states, "The profits are huge from the sale of drugs, prostitution, people smuggling, the slave-like work of illegal immigrants in foreign illegal operations, the serious breach of health and safety laws, the subletting of whole apartment blocks to lumpenised fugitives as well as the network of intermediaries that legalise foreigners

with black market money.”

A recent police clampdown on crime, dubbed Operation Broom, has seen the criminalisation and victimisation of innocent immigrants. In an Arabic café in St. Panteleimon on May 21, a police officer ripped and then stomped on a copy of the Koran belonging to an Iraqi asylum seeker. Hundreds of angry young Muslims clashed with police.

Around a thousand Muslim immigrants marched on Parliament the next day. Some protesters threw rocks and bottles at police and smashed windows at a luxury hotel in Syntagma Square.

Far-right thugs burned a makeshift mosque during clashes that weekend, injuring five Bangladeshi nationals.

In the present economic crisis, immigrants and Muslims, in particular, serve as a convenient scapegoat for Greece’s ruling elite. Greece is the euro zone’s second most indebted nation in terms of gross domestic product (GDP).

The European Commission expects Greece’s debt to reach 103.4 percent of GDP this year and 108 percent next year. The IMF warns that Greece’s economy will shrink by around two percent.

The financial crisis has shaken investor confidence in the Greek economy. The premium Greece must pay on its bonds compared to higher-rated core European issuers like Germany rose to record levels earlier this year, putting further strain on government finances.

Attacks on Muslims must also be viewed in the wider context of Washington’s “war on terror.” In a recent speech to a conference organised by the *Economist*, the US ambassador to Greece said that the country could play a strategic role as a buffer against illegal immigration from the Muslim world, which the US cites as a source of terrorism in Europe and America.

Muslim community leaders have been quick to offer their services in diffusing the situation. Naim Elghantoor, a representative of the Federation for the Support of Muslims of Greece, said of the protest called against the police attack on the Koran: “As a Muslim Union, we from all the mosques have refused to take part in today’s march. We have chosen the legal path. We are waiting to learn who the policeman was so we can move judicially. We do, after all, have complete trust in justice.”

Mehmet Imam of the same organisation was openly

hostile to the protesters. “The thieves and swindlers that took to the streets are shameful to the Muslims who live in Greece,” he said. “They are guests here and guests should respect all they are given.”

The Coalition of the Radical Left (SYRIZA) and the Stalinist Greek Communist Party (KKE) have focused on the stalled plans for the Greek government to build a mosque and a Muslim cemetery, portraying this as the primary reason for the eruption of anger. Athens has an estimated 400,000 Muslim residents, but no mosque at which to worship. The KKE even met with representatives from the Ministry of the Interior, declaring afterwards that the government had pledged to begin construction soon.



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