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Review by **Ekavi Athanassopoulou, Athens University**

On Wednesday, 26 November 1947—the date initially set for the UN General Assembly vote on Palestine—the Ad Hoc Committee on the Palestinian Question presented its report which recommended partition to the then 57 members of the General Assembly convened at Flushing Meadows. A day earlier Greece was among the seventeen countries that had abstained when the United Nations Special Committee for Palestine (UNSCOP) majority plan favouring partition was put to the vote. However, on the day of the vote on partition, Vasilis Dendramis, the Permanent Representative of Greece, did not mince his words. The Greek delegation, he stated, was particularly interested in the debate because the Palestinian question was of “capital importance from the stand-point of peace and security in the Eastern Mediterranean...the serious repercussions from every disorder in Palestine cannot but affect the neighbouring countries.” As the Arab countries had

“declared that they will mobilize all their forces and even resort to violence to combat partition [...] there can, in our opinion, no doubt left that the application of this plan would be likely to create serious difficulties. Speaking in favour of the partition plan, certain representatives have expressed the opinion that it is better to run the risks it involves than to do nothing. The Greek delegation unfortunately cannot share this opinion. It therefore finds itself compelled to vote against partition.”¹

Dendramis was booed as he was arguing against partition while Greece’s position caused “real indignation” for Rabbi Louis I. Newman and other Zionist observers.² Even though both the U.S. and the USSR were

¹ United Nations, General Assembly, A/PV.124, 26 November 1947.

² Rabbi Louis I. Newman, “The U.N. Partition Decision of November 29, 1947: A Personal Account,” 2nd December 1947, 2, http://americanjewisharchives.org/primarysources/originals/newman_personalAccount.pdf, accessed

supporters of the partition plan, the outcome of the General Assembly vote was doubtful. It was a “black Wednesday”³ for the Zionist cause and its supporters had to resort to filibustering so as to gain extra time in an eleventh-hour effort to rally maximum support.

Greece was immediately identified as one of the countries that could be persuaded to switch its vote because it was thought to be more susceptible to pressure on account of its dependency on the United States following the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in March. But an ‘unofficial’ American effort to persuade Athens to change its vote was in vain. On Saturday, 29 November, when the General Assembly finally voted on the partition of Palestine, Greece remained firm on its policy. Of the seventeen countries that had abstained on 25 November, nine maintained their position while seven switched their votes in favour of partition. Only Greece moved from an abstaining position to a negative vote.

Although one of the interesting side-issues of the partition drama, the explanation for Greece’s vote has been neglected by diplomatic historians and students of international relations. In fact, Greece’s broader policy towards the Palestinian issue and the state of Israel during the first years of its existence has been very much understudied. One notable exception is Amikam Nachmani’s study, *Israel, Turkey and Greece*⁴ which dealt in part with aspects of the of the Greece-Israel relationship up to the 1980s. Following this pioneering work there was a large gap before any further analysis was produced. It was after the establishment of diplomatic relations between Greece and Israel (1990) that a very small number of studies appeared in both the English and Greek which partly explored Greece’s policy towards the Palestinian question in the late 1940s and its early interactions with Israel.⁵ Manolis Koumas’s article, which deals with Greece and the Palestinian Question from 1947 to 1949, is thus a welcome addition. Even though the territory the study covers is not entirely unexplored, the author has added valuable details by using hitherto unstudied Greek official archival material.

Following the introduction and a rather long synopsis of Britain’s policy on Palestine from the Balfour declaration to the end of the British mandate, the paper features a sketchy outline of British and U.S. post-War influence in Greece. The author also introduces Panayotis Pipinelis, the Permanent Undersecretary of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whom he identifies as “exerting the greatest influence” on Greece’s foreign policy between 1947-1949 (105, 117). Koumas concentrates his research on the Records of the Greek Foreign Ministry Council of Political Affairs which in the period under examination was the main foreign policy making body under Pipinelis’s stewardship. Indeed much of Koumas’s story concentrates on Pipinelis’s messages and opinions as expressed in the official documents. The reader learns more about Pipinelias his

22 October 2017. Rabbi Newman was appointed by the Central Conference of American Rabbis as an ‘observer’ at the UN General Assembly.

³ UN Partition Plan Documentary, uploaded by Jewish United Fund, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9rNRPC9mtQ>, accessed 15 January 2017.

⁴ Amikam Nachmani, *Israel, Turkey and Greece: Uneasy Relations in the Eastern Mediterranean* (London: Frank Cass, 1987).

⁵ The best examples are Jacob Abadi, “Constraints and Adjustments in Greece’s Policy towards Israel,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 11:4 (2000): 40-70; Ioannis Sakkas, *Greece in the Mediterranean, 1950-2004* [ΗΕλλάδα στη Μεσόγειο, 1950-2004], 12-15 (Athens: ΣΕΑΒ, 2015).

words and decisions are presented, but a more in-depth discussion of this experienced diplomat's world-view would have added another dimension to Koumas's discussion.

The rest of the paper is organized in a non-linear manner along three thematic sections, each of which discusses different sets of concerns which influenced the Greek government's thinking in relation to the Palestinian issue. While this is a useful approach for presenting a particular set of concerns, one wonders how all these issues were feeding into each other as well as which concern took priority over others in the light of constantly unfolding developments.

The first section explores how the Greek government's security predicament immediately after the war influenced its Arab policy. Koumas starts with a discussion of the need Pipinelis felt in 1947 and 1948 to broaden and deepen ties with other Mediterranean countries including the Arab states in order to somewhat counterbalance the pressure that the Communist regimes in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria exercised on Greece's northern borders (105). The understanding that the civil war in Greece dictated to the government a need for good and closer relations with the Arabs is not new.⁶ As a matter of fact, immediately after the UN voting session on partition, press reports interpreted the Greek vote by writing that Greece had pledged its vote to the Arabs in exchange for the latter's support for Greece in relation to the 'Greek Question.'⁷ But Koumas makes a most valuable contribution by confirming the great importance Athens placed on winning the Arab votes at the UN in the late autumn and early winter of 1947 (115-116).

Was there then a *quid pro quo* deal between Greece and the Arab bloc? Thanks to the evidence provided by Koumas we now know that there was. In early autumn 1947, in return for Greek support on the Palestinian issue the six Arab states agreed to provide Greece with full support at the UN (115). Unfortunately, the study offers no further findings that can inform us as to the state of affairs between the government in Athens and the Arab states during the crucial last week of November, after on 21 October the latter abstained from the UN General Assembly resolution that called upon Albania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to refrain from aiding the rebels in Greece. Were negotiations between Athens and the Arab states renewed and on what terms? Did Athens abstain from voting because it wished to force the Arabs' hand? Or did the Arabs resort to a last-minute offer (or a threat) that the Greeks could not ignore?

Rather surprisingly, Koumas does not discuss the Greek government's urge to secure the Arab block vote in the section discussing the security situation in Greece but as a separate issue in the third section of his study, ten pages later, entitled the "Greek Question." In not bringing this component into the broader framework of discussion of Greece's security, Koumas missed an opportunity to illuminate the fact that the internal situation in Greece had a particularly strong influence on the policy of the government in Athens on the

⁶ Ekavi Athanassopoulou, *Turkey: Anglo-American Security Interests, 1945-1952: The First Enlargement of NATO* (London: Frank Cass, 1999), 95-99.

⁷ In December 1946 the Security Council established a Commission of Investigation to investigate the Greek allegations of illegal border incursions from Albania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. The Security Council was unable to reach any decision on the 'Greek Question' and removed the matter from its agenda on 15 September 1947. From that point on the General Assembly took it up and established the United Nations Special Committee on the Balkans (UNSCOB) on 21 October 1947.

Palestinian issue. Koumas could also have strengthened his study by pursuing this important connection at greater length. For example, did the formation of a 'provisional democratic government' by the Greek Communist Party just before Christmas 1947, which raised fears of its recognition by Yugoslavia and Bulgaria, made it even more imperative for the Greek government to court Arab support? In late September 1948, in his discussion with a member of the U.S. delegation, Amir Faisal, the head of the Saudi Arabia delegation to the UN drew a parallel between the government of 'Free Greece' under the Communists and Israel's provisional government (May 1948-March 1949).⁸ Did Athens also see similarities between developments in Palestine and northern Greece, and hence have another major reason to vote against its partition?

Koumas also correctly connects Greece's pro-Arab position to Greek officials' fears that the partition scheme gave the Soviet Union the opportunity to enter the Middle East and further endanger Greece's security. He builds his case by using interesting research material, but this section of the article is extremely frustrating because it is badly organized. The inverted sequencing deprives the reader of historical context that would help make sense of Greek concerns and fears from the start.

At the end of the 1940s civil war in Greece, when anti-Communist feelings were strong among government circles in Athens, the "mutual slurring concerning Israel's Communism and Greece's Fascism" was a "repeated motif which hindered any improvement in relations."⁹ Koumas illustrates the perceptions of many Greek officials that the Jewish state was "a willing instrument of Soviet intrigue" (108), but he stops short of investigating the reasons behind such views. Was it because of Kremlin's support for the partition plan? Could it also be because Yugoslavia backed the Haganah in Palestine in the name of the fight against colonialists and oppressors, in this case the British, as it had backed the Communists in Greece? Even though the support of Yugoslavia's leader, Josip Broz Tito, for the Yishuv began waxing in 1947 (for a variety of reasons), it continued and was seriously restricted only after his break with Stalin in 1948.¹⁰ Was perhaps the pioneering socialism of the Jewish settlers another reason? It is interesting to note that these facts were very much present in the mind of the leaders of Turkey, the other U.S. military aid recipient under the Truman Doctrine, and were primarily responsible for Turkey's vote against partition out of fear that a Jewish state would allow the Soviet Union to penetrate the Middle East.¹¹

The next section on Greek regional interests and their impact on the Palestinian question recounts in afresh way how Greece's regional interests, namely the wish to protect the large Greek Diaspora living in Egypt, the interests of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem, and also its commercial interests in the eastern Mediterranean dictated a pro-Arab policy. "Greek policymakers," Koumas writes, "viewed the establishment

⁸ Herbert A. Fine and Paul Claussen eds., *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1948, Volume V, Part 2, The Near East, South Asia and Africa (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1976), Document, 611.

⁹ Nachmani, *Israel, Turkey and Greece*, 104.

¹⁰ Fritz Liebreich, *Britain's Naval and Political Reaction to the Illegal Immigration of Jews to Palestine 1945-1948* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 81-85.

¹¹ George E. Gruen, "Turkey's Relations with Israel and its Arab Neighbors: The Impact of Basic Interests and Changing Circumstances," *Middle East Review* XVII:3 (1985), 42.

of a Western-type civic state like Israel in the eastern Mediterranean as a potential competitor for trade, shipping, and markets” (114).

Anti-Semitism, particularly when it comes to the policy of a country towards Israel, is hard to ignore. Koumas touches upon the issue in a separate but very brief section. He claims that Pipinelis had an anti-Semitic attitude but he concludes that anti-Semitism was “an important but secondary factor” that drove Pipinelis’s policy towards Israel “which was based primarily on a realistic reading of international affairs” (117). However, he builds his case on rather tenuous evidence.

The final section of the study recounts the sequence of developments surrounding Greece’s vote against the UN Partition Plan for Palestine. These developments are well known but now thanks to Koumas’s research we also learn that on 29 November, when Dendramis sought U.S. advice, he was assured by Loy Henderson, the State Department’s Director of the Office of Near Eastern Affairs, that “Greece should not change its vote” (120-21). Koumas also informs us that in late September 1947 Pipinelis had concluded that Greece should adopt a pro-Arab stance over the Palestinian issue, but as the British and U.S. attitudes were not known yet the Greek government “should not displease them” (117). Koumas’s research shows that at the end of the day this did not prove to be a tough call for the Greeks because on the question of Palestine, “the U.S. government never brought serious pressure to bear on Greek decision-makers” (119).

Koumas explains the U.S. stance by making three assumptions: U.S. officials understood Greece’s special interests in the Middle East; Greece’s policy in the Middle East could help reduce Arab resentment against the U.S. for its support of partition; and when Henderson spoke with Dendramis the necessary majority of votes in the UN Assembly had been secured (121). However, these are mere assumptions that are not empirically substantiated. On the basis of the evidence available so far, Koumas’s research rather confirms the standpoint of those who have challenged the claim that the Truman administration exerted a considerable amount of ‘official’ pressure on UN members and who point out that although just before the final vote the U.S. delegation became more active in the direction of assisting the passage of partition, their effort was mild as they tended to present the U.S. point of view.¹²

Ultimately Koumas treads on shaky ground when he concludes, in conjunction with his previous assumptions, that the Truman administration “adopted self-restraint in the imposition of its policy” on Greece, and that its “ability to allow minor partners space for manoeuvre points to its ‘pragmatic’ outlook” (124). In the final analysis, as the historian William Roger Louis elegantly summed it up: “Though cynics then and later found it difficult to believe, the element of impartiality played an important part in American attitudes towards Palestine in the winter of 1947-1948,” but not as a result of pragmatism but rather of “confusion in U.S. policy” (484-486).¹³

¹² John Snetsinger, *Truman, the Jewish Vote and the Creation of Israel*, 69-70. On the acceptance and rejection of the ‘pressure’ claim see Ramendra Nath Chowdhuri, *International Mandates and Trusteeship Systems: A Comparative Study* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955), 108-109.

¹³ Wm. Roger Louis, *The British Empire in the Middle East, 1945-1951: Arab Nationalism, The United States and Postwar Imperialism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 484-486.

In conclusion, while there is room for adjustment in Koumas's study, those interested in better understanding the issues and concerns that influenced the Greek government's policy towards the Palestine question between 1947-1949 will appreciate it for a number of reasons: it brings together the various major components that influenced Greece's behaviour, it offers interesting illustrative research material that helps provide insight and understanding about these issues, and it pushes the discussion one step further while it brings to light many interconnections that are worthy of more exploration.

Hopefully future research will provide much more detailed understandings of Greek foreign policy and diplomacy and perhaps it will establish how and why Greece in the course of 24 hours changed its position from abstaining to voting against the partition plan for Palestine.

Ekavi Athanassopoulou, an assistant professor at Athens University, is the author of *Strategic Relations between the U.S. and Turkey: 1979-2000: Sleeping with a Tiger* (London: Routledge, 2014) and *Turkey: Anglo-American Security Interests, 1945-1952: The First Enlargement of NATO* (London: Frank Cass, 1999). Her most recent publication is "What's in a name? Reflections on Greek perceptions of the 'Turk'," in Zuhail Mert-Uzuner, ed., *Role of Image in Greek-Turkish Relations* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018).