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Understanding Greece's new foreign policy towards the Arab world: Instrumentalisation, balancing, and emerging opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Despite Greece's centrality in Eastern Mediterranean history and politics, the evolution, characteristics, and rationale behind the country's relations with the Arab world have yet to be identified. This article examines post-World War II Greek foreign policy towards the Arab world across four key periods (1945–80; 1981–89; 1990–2018; and 2019 onwards). It builds on a historical institutionalist approach to argue that Greece's relationship with the Arab world has remained a pillar of the country's diplomatic strategy, albeit instrumentalised in terms of Greece's two main foreign policy goals in the post-World War II era: maintaining the country's Western orientation and navigating the vicissitudes of Greek-Turkish relations. Thus, the Arab world has traditionally been approached by Greek policymakers in a profit maximization manner that sought to either amplify Greece's relationship with Western powers or respond to Turkish initiatives in the region. Aiming to provide the first systematic overview of Greek diplomatic strategy towards the Arab world, the article highlights the importance of path dependence in evaluating Greek foreign policy initiatives towards the Middle East. It also seeks to contextualize Greece's current attempts to forge a proactive role across the region by providing necessary historic nuance and a comparative perspective.

KEYWORDS Greece; Middle East; Mediterranean; foreign policy; Arab world; historical institutionalism

I. Introduction

'Greece's role is central', Nikos Dendias, the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs declared in November 2020, 'in linking the European Union (EU) and the Arab world' (Athens Macedonian News Agency [AMNA], 2021). Only a few months later, Dendias hosted the *Philia* ('Friendship') Forum in Athens, bringing together foreign ministers from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, Cyprus, and Greece (*al-Ahram*, 2021). This occurred less than a year after the signing of a maritime deal between Egypt and

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Greece, which partially delimited their respective exclusive economic zones (EEZs) in the Eastern Mediterranean (Grigoriadis & Belke, 1992). The relevant academic literature has yet to engage with this re-orientation of Greek foreign policy as researchers continue to focus either on the country's evolving ties with other Western states or, more prominently, on Greece's mercurial relationship with Turkey. Similarly, work on Arab states' foreign policy typically prioritizes relations with the EU as a whole; even when bilateral or multilateral initiatives are examined, they usually focus on Arab states' ties with stronger European states, such as Germany, France, or Italy; smaller EU states' policymaking is rarely taken into consideration. These approaches have led to a skewed understanding of Greek policymaking in the Eastern Mediterranean: for one, they downplay the historic, economic, and sociocultural linkages between Greece and the Arab world, which continue to reverberate today; more importantly, for the purposes of this article, they offer an incomplete understanding of Greek foreign policy.

We seek to identify and explain the foreign policy shifts in Greece's relations with the Arab world. To do so we employ a *longue durée* approach in arguing that Greece's relationship with the Arab world remains a crucial component of the country's diplomatic strategy, albeit instrumentalised in terms of Greece's two main foreign policy pillars in the post-World War II [WWII] era: maintaining the country's Western orientation and navigating the vicissitudes of Greek-Turkish relations. While the Arab world has featured in numerous post-1945 diplomatic initiatives by successive Greek governments, these invariably constituted a means to two different ends. They aimed to either strengthen the country's relations with Western great powers (and, in some cases, challenge them), or respond to Turkish regional initiatives through a zero-sum mentality of Greek-Turkish regional competition. Ultimately, Greece's long-term diplomatic strategy has led to both missed opportunities as well as the development of Turkish counterstrategies, which further undermined prospects for stability in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Methodologically, we draw on Greek, English, and Arabic-language primary sources to identify the drivers behind Greece's relations with the Arab world since 1945. We adopt a historical institutionalist approach that emphasizes the importance of context, embeddedness, and temporality. We break down the 1945–2022 period by focusing on three critical junctures in Greek postwar foreign policymaking: the rise of the Panhellenic Socialist Movement [*Panellinio Sosialistiko Kinima* – PASOK] to power in 1981, which attempted to put the country's post-WWII pro-Western orientation into question; the return of the New Democracy [*Nea Dimokratia* – ND] party to power in 1990, which brought a degree of pragmatism in the country's foreign policy strategy; and, finally, the aftermath of the European migration crisis and the novel rise of

Greek-Turkish tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which rekindled a proactive Greek approach towards the Arab world since 2019.

The article is structured as follows: firstly, we examine the relevant secondary literature on the key debates and dominant approaches to Greek foreign policy, which allows us to establish how diplomatic initiatives towards the Arab world have been marginalized in favour of analyses of the country's relations with Western powers or Turkey. Secondly, we discuss our methodological and theoretical approaches, which aim to draw out this unexplored component of Greek diplomacy: we apply process-tracing techniques and place our findings within a historical institutionalist approach to foreign policymaking that emphasizes the importance of path dependence, critical junctures, and sequencing. In the article's third part, we examine the evolving relationship between Greece and the Arab world across four periods: 1945–80, 1981–89, 1990–2018, and 2019 onwards. We conclude by identifying how a historical institutionalist approach to Greek foreign policymaking is able to identify the entire gamut of the country's strategies towards the Arab world while revealing a range of missed diplomatic opportunities. At the same time, we endorse the continuation of an inclusive Greek foreign policy agenda that can contribute to long-term regional stability.

II. Arab-Greek relations through a foreign policy lens

This section examines how the Arab world features in analyses of Greek diplomatic strategy and puts forth three main observations. Firstly, most of the work examining the country's foreign policy focuses on either the relationship between Greece and its Western counterparts or the evolution of Greek-Turkish relations. Secondly, while a small group of historians and political scientists have explored the linkages between Greece and its Arab counterparts, this research agenda remains limited, for it either focuses on bilateral relations with specific Arab states or suffers from short timeframes of analysis. Finally, the small number of scholars that have attempted more ambitious research tend to examine Greece's relations with the Arab world only insofar as these affect the country's other foreign policy priorities – in other words, falling into the very trap that this article aims to critique. With these three observations in mind, we contend that the time is ripe for a re-examination of Greek foreign policy towards the Arab world in a macro-historical and comprehensive manner that will allow for its proper analysis and evaluation.

Greece's position in the post-WWII era as a key strategic ally of Western powers – at first, Great Britain and, increasingly over the second half of the twentieth century, the United States – paved the way for a vast literature that examines the intricacies of its relationship with European and North American states and institutions (Couloumbis & Dalis, 1997; Kavakas, 2000). Greece's

membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] in 1952 and of the European Economic Community [EEC] in 1981 were milestone events that shaped its strategic orientation. The country's position within these institutions, as well as ongoing debates around the Westernization or Europeanization of its foreign policy, dominated the scholarship on Greek diplomatic strategies both historically (Economides, 2005; Tsardanidis & Stavridis, 2005) and, more recently, in the context of the European debt crisis (Chryssogelos, 2019). This is not to say that Greek foreign policy scholars have only looked to the West. Enduring tensions between Greece and the Ottoman Empire (or, since 1923, the Republic of Turkey), have led to a second major area of research around Greek diplomatic strategies towards its neighbour to the East, including matters relating to land and maritime border delineation, the Cyprus problem, or minority rights (Grigoriadis, 2014; Tsakonas, 2003). Many scholars have approached these twin foreign policy pillars of engagement with Western actors and Turkey in combination: the literature features a range of analyses on American and NATO involvement in easing Greek-Turkish tensions (Stearns, 1992); the role of Western actors in specific foreign policy imbroglios (Tsakonas & Tournikiotis, 2005); or, frequently, the European dimension of the Greek-Turkish bilateral disputes and the Cyprus issue (Agnantopoulos, 2013). Yet, in terms of this article's purposes, the literature typically omits any significant reference to the Arab world.

Greece's foreign policymaking towards the Middle East – Greek-Turkish relations excluded – has attracted limited academic attention and has not typically been considered a priority (Triantaphyllou, 2001). Scholars have produced research that sketches out the country's involvement in select issues, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict (Agnantopoulos, 2007; Athanassopoulou, 2003). At the same time, some work exists on Greece's bilateral strategies, primarily vis-à-vis Israel (Abadi, 2000; Tziampiris, 2014). Beyond foreign policy scholars, historians have been drawn to the country's long relations with the Arab world (Hatzivassiliou, 2006) and the Orthodox Patriarchates (Vatikiotis, 1994), while others examined the negotiations over the fate of sizable Greek populations in North Africa and the Levant in the post-WWII era (Dalachanis, 2017; Tsourapas, 2018). Valuable research has been produced that examines key turning points of Greek foreign policy with regard to its populations in the Middle East – most prominently, the rise of Gamal Abdel Nasser to power, which coincided with the exodus of the Greek community of Egypt (Kazamias, 2008). However, these works' focus on specific issues prevents them from offering a broader perspective of Greek foreign policy towards the Arab world.

Finally, a small subset of research attempts a broader examination of Greece's relations and standing vis-à-vis the broader Arab world (Athanassopoulou, 2010; Sakkas, 2004). These works tend to examine how Arab states' agendas may play into the hands of Greek policymakers – thus,

the question of Arab-Greek relations is not approached as a separate line of academic inquiry. Arguably, this literature belongs to a broader group of Greek foreign policy analyses that are particularly policy-driven: research on Greek policymaking in the Western Balkans, for instance, is characterized by similar tendencies (cf. Huliaras & Tsardanidis, 2006). At the same time, these works draw exclusively from Greek- and English-language sources that offer a somewhat skewed understanding of the evolution of Arab-Greek relations. In this respect, the scholarly gap in terms of Greek diplomatic initiatives towards the Arab world and how these may relate to other foreign policy priorities pave the way for this article's argumentation and analysis. Still, our point here is slightly different – Greek diplomatic overtures towards Arab states are neither accidental nor the result of *ad hoc* policies of specific governments. Instead, they are traditionally instrumentalised to augment Greek main foreign policy priorities towards the West and Turkey. This argument will be elucidated further below, after a note on the article's methodological approach.

III. Arab-Greek relations in a historical institutionalist analytical setting

The burgeoning literature on EU-MENA relations typically highlights power asymmetries between the two blocks (for recent overviews, see Bouris *et al*., 2022; Youngs, 2021) It tends to focus on EU relations with individual Middle East states, rather than *vice versa*, often through the prism of interstate leverage through a variety of policies and arrangements (for instance: Seeberg and Völkel, 2022 Ceccorulli, 2021; Laube, 2021; Youngs and Zihnioğlu, 2021). Contrary to this shared claim, Greek foreign policy towards the region has frequently followed a separate path that strayed from a common, European-wide approach. In this sense, a rationalist approach that would examine deviant cases predicted by theory would be less useful than a historical institutionalist one, which would 'begin with empirical puzzles that emerge from observed events or comparisons', enabling perspectives that emphasize institutional change within complex processes (Thelen, 1999, p. 386). A popular approach to understanding EU policymaking (Pierson, 1996), historical institutionalism is also distinguished by its emphasis on examining processes over time rather than via specific snapshots (for an overview, see Fioretos et al., 2016) In this sense, it is particularly conducive to a *longue durée* analysis of Greek foreign policy, given that it offers space for the description and interpretation of elements of continuity as well as change on specific policies.

Embedded within the institutionalist turn in international relations, historical institutionalism offers valuable mid-range causal tools that draw on context, embeddedness, as well as temporality, which allow it to highlight

issues that may be overlooked in standard analyses of world politics (Nexon, 2012). For the purposes of this article, an explicit identification of how actors' policymaking is primarily constrained by decisions and policies adopted in the past. This brings to the forefront two key issues that arguably offer a more nuanced understanding of Greek foreign policymaking towards the Arab world. Firstly, as Fioretos has argued, historical institutionalism highlights 'the microlevel processes that create incentives for individuals to reproduce (or not) designs during and after [critical] junctures' (2011, pp. 375–6). These critical moments set in motion processes of change that can 'send countries along broadly different development paths' (Thelen, 1999, p. 387). While the concept of critical junctures has itself sparked a range of debate (see Capoccia, 2016), it remains a central part of historical institutionalism and can provide comprehensive explanations for policy change (Hogan, 2019). Secondly, historical institutionalism draws from institutional sociology to enable a more accurate understanding of path dependence processes, as decision-makers are 'locked in' in certain policy alternatives (Thelen, 1999). The concept of path dependence refers to 'a process in which the structure that prevails after a specific moment in time (often a critical juncture) shapes the subsequent trajectory in ways that make alternative institutional designs substantially less likely to triumph, including those that would be more efficient [. . .]' (Fioretos, 2011, p. 376). The notion that early decisions, however small, may reinforce certain paths and have significant long-term impact can shed valuable nuance in Greek foreign policy analysis, particularly in understanding how policy decisions may become fixed once a policy reversal becomes more costly than policy continuity.

IV. Methodology

In order to shed light on Greece's foreign policy towards the Arab world, we employ a qualitative, case-study research design in an exploratory fashion, an approach that is well-suited given the paucity of relevant scholarship on the topic (George & Bennett, 2005). We also apply process-tracing in identifying the role of actors, instruments, beliefs and procedures at critical junctures in the evolution of the Greek foreign policy towards Arab states of the Middle East (Panke, 2015). Without delving into the long-standing debate on the strengths and demerits of case-study research (on this, see Gerring, 2017), we agree with the mainstream social scientific approach that highlights its suitability for in-depth, holistic investigations of under-researched topics (Levy, 1997). At the same time, we are aware of the Orientalist risks involved in examining Greece's foreign policy towards 'the Arab world', as well as the substantive and analytical perils of such an exercise in essentialism. We seek to avoid Orientalist tropes in our analysis by eschewing any attempt to treat the region as a monolithic entity, and we consciously engage with Arab and

Greek scholarship that moves beyond culturalist stereotypes. Yet, we have decided to employ the term due to both its widespread use across Greek diplomatic circles, as well as the fact that it is the most accurate reflection of how Arab states have historically featured in Greek foreign policy.

Our data collection strategy has involved a meticulous collection of the coverage of Arab politics in the Greek policy and media debates within the analysis' timeframe in the post-World War II era. As a first step, we engaged in a detailed analysis of secondary literature on Greece's bilateral relations vis-à-vis Middle East states within existing Arab, Greek, and Turkish scholarship, exploring the views of key actors and the process of their transformation. This has identified 1981, 1990 and 2019 as key critical junctures in terms of the country's foreign policy towards the Middle East. As a second step, we delved deeper into primary and secondary sources to comprehend the rationale behind, as well as the effects, of Arab-Greek relations in the 1945–1980 and 1981–1989 periods. This has involved the study of elites' memoirs, interviews, and biographies, as well as publicly available official reports by relevant Greek ministries. Finally, an engagement with contemporary and media coverage of Greek foreign policy towards the Middle East identified a third critical juncture, 2019, which prompted the study of two additional periods, namely 1990–2019 and post–2019. This occurred via an analysis of elite speeches, interviews, and communiqués published in Greek.

V. Between Israel and the Arabs: 1945–1980

The first phase of Greece's foreign policy towards the Middle East, between 1945 and 1980, was characterized by elites' support of the Palestinian cause within a broader pro-Arab policy of engagement, albeit without espousing an overtly anti-Israeli agenda. An initial test of the post-WWII Greek government's stance on the issue was the opportunity to vote against United Nations [UN] Resolution 181 (II), which proposed a partition of Palestine (Greece became the only European country to oppose it). Although it denied full diplomatic recognition to Israel, the Greek government proceeded to a *de facto* recognition in 1949, tying 'high-level diplomatic relations to a final resolution of the Palestinian issue that would take into account the rights of the Palestinian people' (Athanassopoulou, 2010, p. 220). Greek policymakers acknowledged Israel's right to exist, which put the country at odds with the Arab bloc within the UN, but was not surprising given Greece's distinctly pro-United States orientation in the context of the Cold War (Cheila, 1988, p. 361). Similarly, while Greek diplomats endorsed the pro-Palestinian UN resolutions during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, the country also granted permission for the use of Greek soil by American forces aiming to assist Israel (Abadi, 2000, p. 52). In fact, the country's voting record in the UN demonstrates that Greece would abstain or vote against sanctions against Israel. Even when the 1978 Camp

David Accords excluded Palestinian voices in the context of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty – thereby contradicting Greece's long-standing position for a comprehensive solution to the conflict – Athens did not raise any objections. Similarly, when the Karamanlis government recognized the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the representative of the Palestinian people, in accordance with the 1975 UN General Assembly vote, it also sought to make clear that this did not mean diplomatic recognition (Cheila, 1988, pp. -371–372).

Beyond Cold War exigencies, Greece's manoeuvres were shaped by several historical legacies. Fioretos argued that 'investments in past designs may feature heavily in the calculations that individuals make when confronted with new realities and the decision of whether to incrementally reform or fundamentally transform policies' (Fioretos, 2011, p. 376), and this is evident in the case of Greece. During the Cold War, Athens sought to maintain the Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem under the control of an ethnically Greek synod, thereby preventing it from falling into the influence of the Moscow Patriarchate and, thus, the Soviet Union. This necessitated the need to both avoid alienating Israel and maintain a pro-Palestinian attitude, as per the wishes of the Orthodox Christian community in the Middle East, the majority of whom were Arabic-speaking and identified with the Palestinian cause. This also tied to a long historical discourse that identified a 'special link' between Greece and the Middle East, which underscored the evolution of Greek national identity throughout the centuries (Koliopoulos & Veremis, 2008, pp. 227–235). Such a relationship of 'sincere friendship' and 'mutual respect' with local communities, distilled in the use of terms such as 'our East' [*kath'imas Anatoli - καθ΄ ἡμᾶς Ἀνατολή*], conferred upon the Greek government the responsibility of protecting Orthodox Christians abroad.

Successive post-WWII Greek governments aimed to meet the needs of Greek expatriate and diasporic communities in the Middle East, a duty promulgated by successive Greek constitutions. In the context of decolonization, Greece sought to prevent any backlash against its ethnic communities that settled across the Arab world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly the *Aegyptiotes* of Egypt (Kazamias, 2008, pp. 13–16). The costs of alienating Egypt and, by extension, other Arab states were seen as exorbitant. Within Greek policy circles, parallels were frequently drawn between the Greek community of Egypt and the Greeks of Anatolia and Eastern Thrace, who had been expelled following the 1919–1922 Greek-Turkish War and the 1923 Greek-Turkish Population Exchange Agreement. The Karamanlis government saw the preservation of the Greeks of Egypt as a 'vital issue' (Karamanlis Archives, 2005, p. 316), given that it was one of the major bastions of Hellenism in the Middle East (Agnantopoulos, 2007, p. 366). During the 1956 Suez Crisis, Greece offered military support to Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser against Britain, France, and Israel despite strong American pressures

to the contrary (Vatikiotis, 1994). The fear of losing Arab support at the United Nations and endangering the Greek community was simply too great (Karamanlis Archives, 2005, pp. 143–47). As early as the mid-1950s, Greece sought to take advantage of its relations with the Arab world in its dealings with the United States: 'Greece is the only Western state with which the Arabs have friendly relations', wrote Karamanlis in the aftermath of his August 1957 visit to Egypt. 'Unfortunately', he continues, 'our Western allies and especially the Americans did not want to understand Greece's useful role in the Middle East, and to support it' (*Ibid*., p. 400).

The rise of Arab and, in particular, Egyptian nationalism contributed to the gradual withering of the Greek communities. Still, the Greek state sought to make the *Aegyptiotes'* exodus as smooth as possible. Yet, another matter would shape the Greek governments' stance towards the Middle East in the pre-1981 era: the post-independence status of Cyprus and the Greek-Cypriot community within ongoing negotiations with the British and Turkish governments. The wish to ensure Arab states' support on the Cyprus issue became particularly pressing following the Greek government's formal appeal to the United Nations in 1954 (Hatzivassiliou, 1992, pp. 49–52). A degree of solidarity evolved between Greece and Arab states over the statuses of Cyprus and Palestine, as Arab support on the Cyprus problem became linked to Greece's support of Palestine and its non-recognition of Israel. In the aftermath of the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974, the occupation of the northern part of island, on the one hand, and Israel's occupation of Gaza, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, on the other hand, were not seen as dissimilar. For Greeks and Arabs alike, the Cyprus and the Arab-Israeli conflicts were characterized by the use of violence, as the violation of sovereignty, and the lack of respect for territorial integrity. Greek governments went as far as to espouse a broadly postcolonial rhetoric that spoke of common struggles: 'we have been united by the past, but we are even more unity by the present . . . the hope that we can build a liberal and peaceful regime in the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East based on self-determination, solidarity and mutual respect' (Karamanlis Archives, 2005, p. 316). At the same time, Greece's interest in strengthening relations with Arab states was also marked by a wish to limit the country's growing dependence on the United States (perceived to have failed to prevent the 1974 invasion) by developing novel partnerships with Western European and Arab states.

Not unexpectedly, the strategy of promoting Arab-Greek friendship also sought to promote the interests of the Greek capital, namely the country's shipping and construction industries (Bitsios, 1983, pp. 154–155). As historical institutionalists would expect, 'public policy creates a set of'incentives that shape group identities and interests,' which, in turn, oftentimes reinforce 'a particular institutional setting' (Nexon, 2012) In this case, the oil-producing Arab states were seen as a promising source of hard currency,

a significant destination for Greek exports, and a potential source of contracts for Greek business leaders. Already in the 1950s, Greek policymakers sought to foster Arabs' economic development – not merely to preserve the status of the Greek community in Egypt but also to strengthen the country's position as a link between Europe and the Middle East within NATO. By the mid-1970s, Greece, like most Western states, demonstrated strong economic interest in the Middle East following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the subsequent oil crisis (Sakkas, 2012).

VI. The radical turn: 1981–1989

Karamanlis' efforts towards a multifaceted Greek foreign policy that shifted away from the United States took a radical turn with the rise to power of Andreas Papandreou and his political party, PASOK, in the 18 October 1981 elections – at least, on the level of rhetoric. Winning by a landslide, Prime Minister Papandreou was able to form the first socialist government in the history of Greece. In this sense, 1981 constitutes a critical juncture, for the rise of PASOK to power was accompanied by a novel approach to Greece's relations with the Arab world. Elected on a populist, anti-Western, platform, Papandreou promised to develop a foreign policy that counteracted Western dominance, for the latter was perceived to be at the heart of Greece's problems (Mavrogordatos, 1997). PASOK considered 'Israel [to be] the spearhead of American presence in the Middle East region, a sub-imperialist power', while 'the Palestinian Movement is the spearhead of the anti-imperialist movement, even possibly on a global scale' (PASOK, 1977, pp. 17–19).

Instead of continuing to strengthen the country's relations with Western powers, PASOK would seek to develop close relations with a number of 'radical' personalistic autocratic Arab regimes – particularly that of Muammar Gaddafi's Libya and Hafez al-Assad's Syria. Assad's regime had severed relations with the United States and other Western governments because of his support for the Islamic Republic of Iran in its war against Iraq and its sponsorship of various terrorist organizations in the Middle East. Toasting Assad at a 1986 dinner, Papandreou stated that there should be a distinction between terrorism and 'national liberal struggles'; as a result, 'we cannot accept the principle that terrorism is directly related to states characterized as terrorist, because if we had sufficient time, I could read a list of countries either in the West or the East, North or South that should be included in that category' (Kamm, 1986).

Beyond Syria, PASOK sought to engage with the Gaddafi regime in Libya. Gaddafi, who had been trained as a cadet at the Hellenic Military Academy, was anathema to numerous EEC member-states due to his support for terrorist acts against Western targets (Cooley, 1982). Despite the objections

of Karamanlis, now President of Greece, Papandreou flew to Tripoli on 23–24 September 1984, while Gaddafi visited Greece on 15 November 1984, when he met Papandreou and French François Mitterrand at Elounda, Crete. During that meeting, Papandreou attempted to mediate between France and Libya, which were at loggerheads over a territorial dispute between Libya and Chad over the Aouzou Strip – highlighting again the intermediary role that Greece traditionally sought to play between Western and Arab states.

The rationale behind PASOK's shift away from a decades-long policy of careful diplomacy was multifaceted. For one, Papandreou sought to distance himself from previous governments' efforts in order to present a popular alternative to an electorate disappointed with Western powers' lacklustre reaction to the July-August 1974 events (Pappas, 2009). It is hard to overestimate the extent to which Greek public opinion at the time focused on Turkey, the Cyprus issue, and bilateral disputes in the Aegean Sea. Papandreou sought to build on this for electoral purposes, portraying PASOK's shift towards the Arab world as both a challenge to Greece's Western orientation and a strategic upgrade of the country. In 1981, for instance, Greek objections prevented the participation of EEC peacekeepers in the Multinational Force and Observers in Sinai (Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 1986). At the same time, local elites started perceiving of the Middle East in a particular zero-sum fashion, for they expected that any diplomatic strengthening of Greece's relations with Arab states would automatically weaken Turkey's standing in the region. Significantly, from 1983 on, Athens became heavily invested in a diplomatic effort to prevent the recognition of the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus', which was unilaterally declared under Turkish auspices on 15 November 1983; all Arab states supported United Nations Security Council Resolution 541 and opposed this self-proclamation, declaring it 'null and void'.

And yet, historical institutionalism allows us to understand why initial widespread fears that PASOK's re-orientation of Greece's foreign policy towards the Middle East would affect the country's Western credentials never materialized. Papandreou's engagement with Arab radicalism rarely went beyond rhetoric or bombastic gestures, while the country developed ever-closer economic and defence ties with its European and North American allies (Economides, 2005). One explanation for this disjuncture between policy and discourse lies in the particularities of Greek domestic politics: Papandreou's Third Worldism was never picked up by senior officials or shared widely by PASOK elites, which prevented radical rhetoric from evolving into a consistent foreign policy orientation within the party (Athanassopoulou, 2010). This suggests that anti-Western rhetoric was never intended to translate to political action. A second, potentially more convincing, explanation refers to the Greek state's structural limitations,

namely its power status and the need to maximize the country's external security via association with powerful Western allies (Ioakimidis, 2000). This became particularly as Greek-Turkish relations turned strained in the aftermath of the 1974 events. The risk of alienating Greece's Western allies via a potentially pro-active Greek policy towards radical and anti-Western elements within Arab world was high. In the aftermath of the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus and the sharp deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations, no Greek government could afford to jeopardize its position within NATO, or its historic relations with Washington. Not surprisingly, any substantive Greek-Libyan connections were duly dissolved by 1986, partly as a result of pressures on Athens by the Reagan administration (Papastamkou, 2015). Thus, by placing PASOK's strategies into a historical institutionalist perspective, we can understand the rationale behind Greece's foreign policy stance vis-à-vis the Arab world; rhetoric aside, a substantive reversal of the country's pre-1981 policy would be particularly costly.

VII. The disengagement: 1990–2018

The end of the Cold War coincided with the rise of the New Democracy party to power under Konstantinos Mitsotakis (1990–93). Under Mitsotakis, Greece's foreign policy in the Middle East was imbued with pragmatism, and the lofty statements of the PASOK administration were shelved. The Mitsotakis government officially recognized the state of Israel, and paved the way for the improvement of bilateral relations which had been neglected for decades. The signature of the Oslo Accords provided a window of opportunity for such a development, which proved relatively narrow: Andreas Papandreou returned to power in 1993, and Israel decided to upgrade its strategic and military cooperation with Turkey, while the latter had adopted a pro-active role in the Balkans. As Mitsotakis himself argued (Athanassopoulou, 2010, pp. 224–225), this decision had been strategically driven due to a sense of national isolation vis-à-vis the country's Western partners in the post-PASOK era. It was also driven by the need to strengthen relations with both the United States as well as Germany (Coufoudakis, 1996), thereby reiterating Athens' decades-long commitment to the West.

At the same time, the decision to support the Republic of Cyprus' application for EU membership signalled a significant shift in Greece's policy towards the Middle East. The resolution of the Cyprus issue would no more be sought through the United Nations channels, where Arab votes were seen as crucial, but through EU mechanisms (Tsakonas, 2005, pp. 7–8). In that respect, the support of key Arab states, such as Egypt and Syria, was no longer considered vital. The fact that Arab economies had entered a recessionary period from 1985 onwards had also strengthened the sense that PASOK's high-risk policy towards radical Arab states was unlikely to yield any substantial material

rewards for Greece (cf. Cammett et al., 2015). The Middle East would now attract less attention in the country's foreign policy given Greece's limited diplomatic resources, the promotion of relations with Israel, and a stronger emphasis on the Balkans as the war following the disintegration of Yugoslavia raged. From a historical institutionalist perspective, Greece's shift away from the Arab world may be understood, again, in terms of past events: the traditional instrumentalisation of Arab UN voting on the Cyprus issue suggests that, when Greece sought to resolve the matter within the EU context, there was no longer a need for close Arab-Greek relations. More broadly, however, this speaks to a lost opportunity in terms of a forward-looking Greek foreign policy towards the Middle East.

The trend of marginalizing Greece's role in the Arab world was consolidated under the administrations of Costas Simitis (1996–2004) and Kostas Karamanlis (2004–09), as conflict spread from Bosnia to Kosovo, approaching Greece's borders. Greece sought to be portrayed as the European country of the Balkans, and its status as an EU member-state was employed to reframe Greek-Turkish bilateral disputes and the Cyprus issue (Couloumbis & Kentikelenis, 2007, pp. 517–519). A similar approach was developed in establishing Greece's ever-closer relationship towards Israel: Simitis was able to minimize domestic opposition by framing the bilateral relationship within the framework of Greece's EU membership obligations, essentially transforming a *rapprochement* with Israel 'from being a provocative issue into almost a matter of routine' (Athanassopoulou, 2010, p. 228).

The EU launched the 1994 Barcelona process with the aim of developing a framework of engagement with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, but Greece failed to claim a leading role within it. Other EU member states, namely Italy and Spain, appeared willing to provide leadership. Greece's Mediterranean identity was shelved, while its role as a bridge between Europe and the Arab world was not underlined. Despite significant improvements in EU-Turkey relations following the December 1999 Helsinki decision of the European Council to name Turkey a candidate state (and extensive political reform between 1999 and 2005), the failure to resolve the Cyprus issue through the United Nations' Annan Plan and refer Greek-Turkish maritime delimitation disputes to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 2004 meant that Cyprus and Greek-Turkish disputes would continue posing limits to Greece's diplomatic manoeuvring ground in the Middle East (Tsakonas, 2003, pp. 148–155). Moreover, Greek foreign policymakers did not take account of the rise of the Gulf states and the decline of traditional Arab powers, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. By 2009, the Greek government-debt crisis would add to the qualms of Greek foreign policy in the Middle East.

The outbreak of the Greek economic crisis and the 2011 Arab Uprisings contributed to two countervailing trends affecting Greece's relations with the Arab world. On the one hand, the acuteness of the Greek economic crisis

meant that the Middle East would not be included among Greece's foreign policy priorities: the Arab world was going through a transformation of momentous proportions, but Greece appeared unwilling to claim a major regional role, even though fundamental national interests were at stake. In this sense, Greece's past previous foreign policy arrangements – primarily in terms of embedding the country within the West or, more recently, the EU – arguably prevented policymakers from a more ambitious policy towards the Middle East. On the other hand, as the Arab uprisings led to the outbreak of civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen, Turkey attempted to ride the wave of the Arab Uprisings in order to reinforce its leadership profile in the Middle East, leading to the reshuffling of the diplomatic map in the region (Altunışık, 2014). While Turkey's open support for the Muslim Brotherhood and direct involvement in the Libyan and Syrian civil wars and the Palestinian question turned it into a revisionist force within the Middle East, a backlash against Turkey's regional policies became visible. Meanwhile, Turkey's identification and sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood alienated it from almost all the governments in the Middle East (Öniş, 2014).

In that context, the sharp deterioration of Turkey's relations with Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates provided Greece with unprecedented opportunities to improve its relations with key states in the Arab world and re-establish itself as a regional actor in the Middle East. Before the Arab Uprisings, countries like Egypt or Saudi Arabia would normally avoid alienating Turkey by supporting Greek positions or developing special agreements bypassing Turkey. Yet, the sharp deterioration of their relations with Turkey removed such concerns and paved the way for ever-closer cooperation with Greece. The improvement of US-Greece relations and growing US influence on Greek foreign policy in the 2010s also played a significant role. Given the Obama administration's relatively more flexible approach towards the management of the Greek economic crisis and the deterioration of US-Turkey relations, Greece's vigorous pursuit of its interests in the Middle East met with US endorsement and support.

The initial trigger for Greece's renewed interest was the discovery of sizable natural gas reserves across the Eastern Mediterranean, more precisely in the exclusive economic zones [EEZ] of Israel, Cyprus, and Egypt. The monetization of these reserves required sizeable investment and regional collaboration (Grigoriadis, 2014, pp. 124–126). Nevertheless, any hope that this discovery could help conflict resolution in terms of the Cyprus issue proved unfounded. The Cyprus issue emerged once again as a Gordian knot for Greek foreign policy in the region. The construction of the EastMed natural gas pipeline to transport Cypriot, Egyptian, and Israeli natural gas to Greece and to the European natural gas market was hailed as a possible game changer for the region. The high financial cost, the technical difficulties of the project, and Turkey's obstruction of the project made its realization difficult

(Ellinas et al., 2016. p. 24; Ntousas, 2021). Meanwhile, the organization of regular tripartite summits with Cyprus and Egypt or Cyprus and Israel were viewed as provocations by Turkey (Hamedi, 2015), as this raised atavistic fears about its encirclement in the Eastern Mediterranean and reinforced its resolve to engage in unilateral actions aiming to derail any projects excluding Turkey.

VIII. The return: 2019 onwards

2019 could be considered a milestone for Greece's new Middle East policy due to two main reasons. Firstly, the country exited a decade-long era of economic depression and political turmoil. The clear victory of New Democracy under the leadership of Kyriakos Mitsotakis in the parliamentary elections of 7 July 2019 signalled a move away from populism-driven politics that had dominated the Greek political agenda throughout the crisis, as well as before. Newly-found self-confidence, coupled with a wish to reclaim Greece's regional role, were evident in the new government's foreign policy-making. Secondly, the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East, Turkey's increasing attempts to fill this gap, and the growing spill-over of Middle East political crises towards Europe pointed to the need for a more proactive Greek foreign policy in the Middle East. As Turkey established military bases in Qatar and Somalia and maintained troops in no less than six countries in the region (Cyprus, Libya, Syria, Iraq, Qatar, and Somalia), other regional actors became increasingly concerned (Adar et al., 2021). Using the Muslim Brotherhood as a tool for Turkey's regional hegemonic ambitions and identifying with Qatar backfired heavily in terms of Turkey's relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The crisis in the Qatari-Saudi relations was also linked to Turkey's growing involvement in Gulf affairs (Ulrichsen, 2020). Turkey's propensity to unilateral acts in its region substantially increased as the dire state of the economy and declining domestic fortunes incited the Turkish government to change the political agenda by pursuing diplomatic and military successes abroad.

This became particularly pronounced in the Mediterranean, where Turkey became increasingly involved in the Libyan civil war and attempted to obstruct Cypriot efforts to explore and monetize its off-shore natural gas reserves. The centrality of the Cyprus issue was proven once again, as rising tension due to unilateral Turkish explorations in the Cypriot EEZ spilled across the Eastern Mediterranean, leading to a sharp deterioration of Greek-Turkish relations and the shift of their confrontation to the Eastern Mediterranean. Following the abortive coup of 15 July 2016 in Turkey, the alliance of the Erdoğan administration with a group of retired senior officers of the Turkish Armed Forces facilitated the official adoption of the 'Blue Homeland' (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine (Gingeras, 2020). Disregarding Greek sovereignty and sovereign rights in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, the doctrine's

adoption would cast a bad omen for Greek-Turkish relations. The 27 November 2019 signature of a memorandum between Libya's Tripoli-based Government of National Accord [GNA] and Turkey alarmed Greece, as far as the protection of its sovereign rights was concerned, since the memorandum included the delimitation of Turkish and Libyan EEZs in the Eastern Mediterranean, blatantly disregarding Greek sovereign rights in the region (Erdemir & Kowalski, 2020). Expelling the Libyan ambassador to Greece and promoting relations with the Tobruk-based House of Representatives/ Libyan National Army [LNA] became imperative for Greece following the identification of the GNA government with the Turkish position on the delimitation of maritime zones. It also necessitated the intensification of negotiations with Italy and Egypt for the signature of a bilateral Egyptian-Greek agreement on the delimitation of their exclusive economic zones. While an agreement on the delimitation of the EEZ between Greece and Italy was signed on 9 June 2020, the signature of a partial delimitation agreement between Egypt and Greece on 6 August 2020 was an even more crucial diplomatic development, as Egypt took a clear position in support of Greece and against the Libyan-Turkish memorandum, registering a new international dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean (Grigoriadis & Belke, 1992, pp. 3–4).

Nevertheless, the destabilization of the Eastern Mediterranean and the emergence of additional and more concerning conflicts in the region meant that the Cyprus issue might not always be treated as a priority. Leaving the exploration of Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves hostage to a resolution of the Cyprus issue was something neither Egypt nor Israel would be content with, as it could result in the cancellation of all monetization projects. The recent Egyptian proposal of bypassing the Cyprus problem and Greek-Turkish maritime disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean by rerouting the proposed EastMed natural gas pipeline overland to the Egyptian-Libyan border, and from there undersea to Crete, was indicative of that will. The establishment of the EastMed Gas Forum on 22 September 2020, the first regional organization to emerge in the Middle East for many years, was an example of Greece's growing involvement in the region (Reuters Staff, 2004). Bringing together Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, the EastMed Gas Forum aspired to promote regional cooperation through the integration of the regional energy market. The absence of Turkey from the organization added a clear hue to the initiative (al-Sharq al-Awsat, 2021) In addition, military drills between Egyptian, French, Greek, UAE and Saudi airforce in the Eastern Mediterranean pointed to a new regional environment (Newsroom, 2020). The organization of the *Philia* Forum in February 2021 brought to Athens foreign ministers from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, and Cyprus (Pollatos, 2021). It suggested that Greece's novel, more robust diplomatic engagement

with the Middle East aimed far beyond balancing Turkey's activities in the region and planned to be a permanent feature of the country's foreign policy. Greece's ambitious comeback to the Eastern Mediterranean was only a part of a more comprehensive plan (Gorvett, 2012). Moreover, the European Green Deal offered new opportunities for cooperation between Greece and the Arab world, given the need to promote decarbonization and the huge potential of the Middle East in renewable energy resources.

Under these circumstances, the UAE rose as Turkey's main regional rival in the Arab Middle East. Emirati opposition to Turkey went beyond the Libyan civil war and touched upon Turkey's identification with the Muslim Brotherhood and its ambition to lead the Sunni world. The UAE's cooperation with Greece emerged from the organization of joint military drills and culminated in the November 2020 signature of a 'strategic partnership' agreement that includes 'joint foreign policy and defence cooperation' (Didili, 2020). This mutual defence pact, the first such treaty signed by Greece in decades, pointed towards a more substantial involvement in Middle East politics well beyond the energy resources of the Eastern Mediterranean. Synergies in air force arms procurement projects were of particular interest, as Greece and the UAE lined up to order US F-35 aircraft, and Greece was interested in purchasing UAE's Mirage-2000 fighter jets that were expected to retire early following the anticipated acquisition of F-35 aircraft (Bianco & Rocha, 2021). Greek-UAE defence cooperation is also reinforced by their improving relations with France and the latter's ambition to promote its Middle East strategy (Iddon, 2020).

Meanwhile, Greece's pivot towards the Middle East were indicative of a broader shift towards more ambitious foreign policymaking. Greece's economic recovery underwrote new goals regarding claiming a strategic role in the development of economic and political links between the European Union and the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean. This could enable Greece's rise as a trans-Mediterranean power, bringing Europe closer to Eastern Africa and Europe to the Gulf states via East Africa-to-Europe and Middle East-to-Europe manufacturing value chains, or allow Greece to serve as a critical node of Euro-Africa Connectivity (Diakopoulos, 2021; Tanchum, 2005). Greece's intention to apply for observer status at the League of Arab States (Arab League) pointed to its determination to deepen its relations with the Arab world. In the aftermath of Greece's troubled experience as a front-line EU state during the 2015 European migration crisis (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis, 2022), the decision to strengthen ties with the Arab League coincided with a broader re-evaluation of Greece's strategic stance in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Greek foreign ministry's decision to appoint a special envoy for Syria signalled its willingness to claim a more active role in the Syrian conflict. Greece could no longer afford indifference towards the Syrian Civil war. Following decades of inertia, Greece's integration into the

most important political manifestation of Arab unity manifested a strategic shift in Greece's attitude to the Middle East (News Desk, 2021). Importantly, Greece's overtures in the Middle East did not come at the expense of its improving relations with Israel, which continued to strengthen. Moreover, the April 2021 visit of the Greek Prime Minister to Libya signalled an attempt to restart a relationship that had hit rock bottom following the signature of the Libyan-Turkish memorandum.

IX. Conclusion

Despite the country's historical, geographic, cultural, and socio-economic centrality to the Eastern Mediterranean, Greece's relationship with the Arab world has not been the subject of sustained academic inquiry, with scholarship focusing primarily on the country's ties with either Turkey or the West. As a result, there exists a skewed understanding of political interactions in a crucial part of the Mediterranean that downplays the diverse range of linkages between Greece and the Arab world, which continue to reverberate today. Taking this into account, we have sought to examine the development of Greece's position vis-à-vis the Arab world from 1945 until today, focusing on four key periods: 1945–80; 1981–89; 1990–2018; and, finally, from 2019 onwards. This builds on a historical institutionalist approach that allowed for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of context in the relations between the Arab world and Greece. Past strategies and decisions have proven resilient and able to overcome centrifugal forces, as the moderation of Andreas Papandreou's Middle East policy showed in the 1980s. At the same time, the centrality of the Cyprus issue has shaped Greece's relations with Egypt and other Arab countries of the Eastern Mediterranean.

A close analysis of the country's evolving relationship with the Middle East demonstrates how the Arab world remains a key component of Greece's diplomatic strategy, but it is habitually instrumentalised in terms of Greece's two main foreign policy pillars in the post-World War II era, namely the evolving dispute with Turkey over Cyprus (and beyond), and the maintenance of the country's Western orientation. In terms of the former, Greece's relations with Arab states invariably sought to balance or deter Turkish initiatives and policies; in terms of the latter, Greek diplomatic overtures towards Arab states served as a tool to strengthen Greece's diplomatic prestige in the eyes of Western allies, oftentimes seeking to have Greece act as a node in relations between the Arab world and Europe or North America. We noted how the use of Arab-Greek relations as a means to different ends had distinct limitations, pointing to the need to address Greece's wider role in the region within a positive-sum mentality outside diplomatic preoccupations with Turkey or Western states. Arab-Greek relations also appear to fall victim to path-dependent processes,

in which past-era decisions can restrain attempts at forward-thinking foreign policy strategies. The fact that the rapid improvement of the relations between Greece and key Arab states, such as Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, was facilitated by the rapid deterioration of their relations with Turkey during the 2010s reinforces this point.

At the same time, a re-evaluation of Greece's relationship with Arab states has important policy-level implications, particularly as the country currently seeks a more proactive role across the Eastern Mediterranean. While the global economic recession following the COVID-19 pandemic makes the realization of energy projects even more complicated, there have been vast reserves of untapped cooperation potential in the region; these could be translated to higher trade volumes as well as investment on transport infrastructure and renewable energy, given the European Green Deal. Although the economic feasibility of the East Med natural gas pipeline was questioned even before the outbreak of the CoVID-19 pandemic led energy prices and investment appetite to plunge, the EastMed Gas Forum pointed to the urgent need for regional integration in a region where conflict became easier due to the lack of any interdependence links between the key actors. Greece's growing involvement in Middle East politics is likely to outlast the latest escalation of its bilateral disputes with Turkey, and it should not be understood merely as a knee-jerk reaction to it.

The gradual withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East and the growing spill-over of Middle East political crises towards Europe have elevated Greece's regional position and pointed to the need for a more proactive Greek foreign policy in the Middle East. The country faces the reality of devising a Middle East strategy that could guide its regional policy in the coming years. A crucial leg is economic: the recovery of the Greek economy could be accelerated through stronger economic relations with Gulf states, while the reinforcement of bilateral ties with Egypt and other North African states is likely to be boosted through EU plans to support interconnectivity across the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, Greece's return to the Middle East amounts to more than economics. It signals a rising strategic ambition for Greece to become a bridge between Europe and the Arab world, regardless of its relations with its eastern neighbour.

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