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ARAB STUDIES IN THE GREEK ACADEMIA: HISTORICAL CONTINUITIES, MODERN TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Abstract. This essay intends to shed light on the historical evolution of Arab Studies in Greece from the establishment of its modern state in the 1830s until the present. More specifically, the major driving forces behind the Greek educational and academic institutions' re-discovery of the so-called "Orient" are discussed, reflecting the great orientalist traditions of Europe, in addition to domestic political considerations and regional geopolitical repercussions. Taking into account the relevant academic literature written in Greek and today's respective university departments and courses, as well as the dominant approaches towards the teaching of Islam and the culture of the Arabs, this research addresses first the historical and intellectual peculiarities of Greek Orientalism and then analyzes the factors that have affected and continue to affect the content and orientations of Arab Studies in the Greek academia between the 20th and the 21st century. The essay concludes with an assessment of the continuities with past experiences and the most recent trends regarding the status of Arab Studies.

Keywords: Greece, Graeco-Arab relations, Arab studies, Orientalism

Introduction: Tracing the Trail of Arab Studies in the Modern Greek Academia

As it is the case in other European nations, examining the status of Arab Studies in today's Greece needs revisiting this academic field against their intellectual and historical backdrop, not least their orientalist underpinnings. Even before the inception of the modern Greek state, a – mostly literary – Greek Orientalism had been articulated among the Greek Orthodox clergy of the Arab (Ottoman) East, the Phanariots of Wallachia and Moldavia, and the Greek intelligentsia of

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the West, although the neohellenist George Kehayiolglou suggests that the origins of that tradition may be traced even earlier (1989: 65-67). After all, it was the 11th century Byzantine scientist, Simeon Seth, who translated Ibn al-Muqaffa's famous book of fables *Kalīla wa Dimna* from Arabic to Greek, renaming the two animal protagonists to "*Stephanites*" and "*Ichnelates*" respectively, well before the Europeans' discovery of the *Arabian Nights* (Bassoukos-Condylis 1997; Muhawi 2005), not to mention John of Damascus (675-749 AD), who could be called the first non-Muslim "Islamologist" (Sahas 1972) and the 9th century Byzantine monk, Nikitas Vizantios, who seems to be the first non-Muslim scholar who has ever attempted to translate parts of the Quran (Grypeou 2010; Kondyli 2020: 254).

However, as the orientalist pendulum was gradually shifting during the following centuries in favor of the West by virtue of its technological, commercial, political, and military advancements, it comes as no surprise that the first (complete) Greek translation of the Quran was conducted by the late 1760s through the intermediary of an Italian translation instead of the Arabic prototype (Kehayiolglou 1989: 68). In this regard, Alexander Kazamias attributed throughout his survey on an extensive body of Greek literary works a "*borrowed construction*" status to the Greek orientalist discourses between the late 18th – early 20th centuries, which had been in tandem with the great orientalist traditions of Europe of that time and the colonialist-imperialist schemes that engendered them (2022: 161). Nevertheless, several peculiarities pertinent to the Greek case distinguished the local orientalist tradition from its Western European context in various historical phases, such as the young kingdom's irredentist dream of reviving the Byzantine Empire at the expense of the Ottoman lands, i.e. the concept of *Megalē Idea* (Great Idea) (Roukounas 1983: 299-315), the presence of a large Greek community in Egypt since the early 19th century, known in Greek as *Egyptiōtes* and in Arabic as *Mutamaşşirîn*, and their exodus that ensued almost a century and a half later due to their disaffection with Nasser's reforms (Kitroeff 1989: 12-16, 37; Soulogiannis 2010: 9-19), the Greek scholars' preoccupation with medieval Graeco-Arab intellectual relations, notably the translation movement of *bayt al-ḥikma*, and, last but not least, the national historiography's shift towards the concept of *Hellenism's continuity* (Liakos 2001: 32-33) being confronted "from time immemorial" by a "nexus of Oriental enemies", be they Persians, Arabs or Turks; these two last points remain relevant to date, judging by the bulk of the Greek Arabists' academic production and the schools' curricula ethnocentric imbuelement with orientalist stereotypes.

Definitely, the diaspora Greeks of Egypt contributed for almost a century (1870-1960) to the enrichment of Greek Orientalism in a literary and scholarly fashion alike (Michailidis 1966; Moussa 2015), no matter the fact that only a few intellectuals mastered Classical Arabic, given that its teaching had been virtually absent from the Greek community schools until the late 1940s, as a recent study aptly demonstrates (Adamantidou 2024: 26-43). Well-known

authors and poets, inter alia, Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933), Penelope Delta (1874-1941), Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), and Stratis Tsirkas (1911-1980) are deeply affected by their presence in or travels to Egypt (Karampetsos 1984: 39, 45; Kazamias 2007: 99; Kazantzakis 1991: 21-22); Demetrios Gutas (1945-), perhaps the most well-known Greek Arabist of our age, was born in Cairo, while some of the most interesting historical treatises on modern Egypt written in Greek (Politis 1928; Radopoulos 1930), the first Greek-Arabic dictionaries and vice versa (Kamel and Thalassinou 1950; Pentakis 1885), in addition to a history of the Arab conquests (Nomikos 1927), were all works of the *Egyptiōtes*. At the same time, it should be stressed that Greece was the only European country that voted against the United Nations Resolution 181 for the Partition of Palestine on 29 November 1947, invoking the fate of the 100.000 Greeks residing in Egypt at that juncture, whereas it was the last EEC (European Economic Community) member to recognize the state of Israel *de jure* (Kourgiotis 2023: 40-41). Yet, neither the *Egyptiōtes*' knowledge of Arabic and their valuable first-hand experience from the largest Arab country and neighbor of Greece, nor the latter's undisputedly pro-Arab stance for many decades were translated into an advanced level of Arab Studies in the country's academia, except for a few essays and two scientific journals: *Graeco-Arabica* and the *Journal of Oriental and African Studies*, which were founded in the early 1980s, i.e. at the peak of Greek pro-Arabism. These two journals represent the Greek Orientalism's main academic references at present, albeit the former is published intermittently, while the latter, which is published annually, cannot be considered exclusively arabist. It is noteworthy that among the founders of *Graeco-Arabica*, was also an *Egyptiōt*, the late Professor Vasilios Christidis (†2024).²

Overall, the Arab Studies' main deficiency in the Greek academia has historically concerned a lack of institutions rather than journals. As early as 1909, the Greek lawyer and historian, Nikolaos Eleftheriadis, lamented the absence of Oriental Studies similar to those of Europe and his compatriots' obsession with westernization which, in his view, contradicted Hellenism's historical, geographical, and cultural proximity to what he called the "Orient" (Eleftheriadis 1909: 15-17). He was then followed by Evgenios Michaelidis (1895-1976) a prominent *Egyptiōt* and Greek arabist who filed a much-detailed report to the universities of Athens and Thessaloniki in 1933, urging them to introduce Arab Studies (Ziaka 2010a: 439-40). Several decades later, geopolitical developments in the broader region spurred Greek academic interest vis-à-vis the field of Area Studies, resulting to the emergence of Balkan, Slavic, and Oriental Studies (1998, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki), Mediterranean

² Professor Christidis taught Classical Arabic in the Department of Mediterranean Studies, University of the Aegean, for the spring semester of the academic year 2001-2002. I was lucky enough to meet him and be a student of his; this paper is dedicated to his memory.

Studies (1999, University of the Aegean, Rhodes) and Turkish and Modern Asian Studies (2003, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens). Despite that growing trend towards the discovery of the non-European worlds, Greece has yet to develop a distinct university department, or an academic research center dedicated exclusively to the study of the Arab world, its languages, peoples, diverse cultures, and history. The greatest achievement of the, almost defunct today, Association of Greek and Arabic Studies that was established in Thessaloniki in 1980 has been the nonperiodic publication of *Graeco-Arabica*; still, the Association's stated goal, in the words of its first president, Professor Nikolaos Konomis, of establishing a Research Center of Greek-Arabic Studies remains unfulfilled (*Graeco-Arabica* I 1982 :9).

Finally, yet importantly, it should be noted that the first Arabists in the modern Greek academia were either professors of Byzantine and Classical Greek literature, like John Theophanes Papademetriou, who studied the Greek translations of Arabic manuscripts, or theologians, e.g. the Archbishop of Albania at present, Anastasios, and to a lesser extent historians. That explains their epistemological preoccupation either with the medieval translations of the ancient Greeks or with Islam and its encounters with Christianity. Arabists associated with the more modern disciplines of political science and/or international relations would not come to the forefront before the turn of the 21st century. Likewise, Arabic Studies were introduced for the first time as an academic major in 1994 at the Faculty of Philosophy of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens;³ yet, it has not developed into a separate scientific branch since. In comparison to the rest of Europe, Greece seems to lag behind and faculties remain reluctant in granting Arab Studies the institutional autonomy they need to flourish. Notwithstanding that delay, some steps forward have been made during the last quarter of a century; apart from the rising numbers of publications about Islam, the Arabs, the Middle East, and the Arabic language, as of today, four faculties offer the study of the Arabic language as either a compulsory or optional course, thus breeding a new generation of local Arabists. Furthermore, a new undergraduate program of Islamic Studies within the Faculty of Theology – the first of its kind in the Greek academia – accepts students since 2016. In the sections that follow, I will present the factors which, in my view, affected the most and continue to affect the content and orientations of Arab Studies in Greece.

³ “Conference de l'EFA (Ecole Française d'Athènes) – E. Kondyli: The Arabic studies in Greece”, April 30, 2015, video, (42:56) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uux2lSL_22o&t=2776s&ab_channel=Ecolefran%C3%A7aised%27Ath%C3%A8nes (in Greek).

The Centrality of the Medieval Graeco-Arab Relations; Ethnocentrism, Orientalism and Beyond

If the study of the ancient Greek thought's Arabic translations by the 18th century orientalists vindicated their "imaginary" vision of Europe as the legitimate heir to classical antiquity under the auspices of the, then prevalent in the West, current of Classicism (Mavroudi 2015: 28-50), for Greece *per se* it has represented the most popular subject of the local orientalists' scholarly research, in fact, the *raison d'être* of Arab Studies in the nascent nation's academia. Its scientific value aside, in the Greek case that preoccupation lies in national-ideological reasons as well, as soon as the new nation-state introduced a system of tertiary education for its population and produced its own intellectuals, who had been assigned with the task of narrating its history. What remains remarkable though, until nowadays, is the national narrative's oscillation between viewing the Arabs as the – religiously driven – conquerors of the Byzantine East and appreciating their role as guardians and transmitters of the ancient Greek heritage.

Depicting the Arabs as "enemies of Hellenism" makes sense within the still dominant, in the school curricula and the official historiography, dogma of "*Helleno-Christian synthesis*", marking the Greek nation's supposedly uninterrupted continuity from the ancient to Byzantine times up to the modern era (Soper and Fetzer 2018: 110-15; Zambeta 2000: 148-51). That concept in turn stemmed from the appropriation of the Byzantine period by the nationalistic historians Spyridon Zambelios (1815-1881) and Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos (1815-1891), who incorporated the Byzantine Empire, its achievements and endless wars in what could be called by the late 19th century "national history" (Kim 2023: 16; Zervas 2012: 104-105). The Byzantines' military confrontation with the Islamic Caliphate constituted a significant part of both medieval empires' history, but there were periods of peaceful exchange and cultural contacts too (Gutas 1998: 17-24; Paparrigopoulos 1902: 256-79). In the meantime, the filling of that huge historiographic gap intersected with the internalization of the European orientalist discourses into the domestic narratives of Hellenism's cultural superiority compared with the "underdeveloped Orientals" (Kazamias 2022). In that sense an almost axiomatic belief has been nourished in the country's academia, history textbooks and public discourses in general: the Arabs owe to a large extent the evolution of their civilization to their study of Aristotle, Hippocrates, etc., while the West has been reconnected to its "original, Hellenic matrix" thus paving the way for its Renaissance and Enlightenment only by virtue of its discovery of Greek philosophy, medicine, and science through the translations of the Arabs (Koutsounaki 2022: 54-68; Mavroudi 2019: 281).

As far as the academic institutions and literature are concerned, we may assume that their emphasis on the medieval Graeco-Arab intellectual contacts benefited Greek scholarly Orientalism since the last quarter of the 20th century,

even at the expense of other fields of the – still embryonic – Arab Studies. Apart from its undisputed scientific significance, the Greek Arabists' preoccupation with the Arabic translations of their ancestors' heritage seems to pay lip service to national-ideological imperatives in the same wavelength with the school curricula. Under that prism, it is easy to understand Professor Gregory Ziakas' latent comment on the negligence of what should have constituted the country's Arab Studies' outmost priority:

despite the direct interest that the incorporation of the Greek and Aristotelian thought in the Arab-Islamic tradition represents for our own (i.e. the Greek) intellectual tradition, relevant studies are missing from the Greek bibliography, with the exceptions of the work of Demetrios Gutas and Ilias Giannakis who have written in English (Ziakas 2007: 12)

The *Egyptiōt* Gutas, indeed, is considered among the “founding fathers” of the Graeco-Arabic Studies in today's Greek academia. Upon the completion of his doctoral thesis in the 1970s on the Arabic translations of the ancient Greek philosophers, i.e. the Graeco-Arabic *Gnomologia*, he would be soon recognized as one of the most prolific researchers of Graeco-Arab intellectual relations and Arab-Byzantine mutual perceptions, along with the late Professor Irfan Shahid (†2016), Daniel J. Sahas, Nadia El Cheick and others; his seminal *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture* has been translated in several languages, among them Greek, Arabic, Turkish, and Japanese⁴ and remains to this day perhaps the most classical work of reference in the study of the Abbasid translation movement. Notwithstanding his Greek origin and impact on the next generations of Greek Arabists, Gutas was affiliated, both as student and tutor, with Yale University, not Greek academia. It was the Professor of Religious Studies at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Theology, and among the founding members of *Graeco-Arabica*, Gregory Ziakas, who introduced the Greek public to the Arabic translation movement via the first treatise of its kind written in Greek, *Greek Letters and Aristotle in the Arab Tradition*; his study was first published in 1980 and was based on a series of lectures organized by the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Faculty of Philosophy, in 1978-79 marking the 2.300th anniversary of the great philosopher's demise in 322 B.C. (Ziakas 2007: 11). Seen from such a political-ideological perspective, Ziakas' choice to commemorate “*al-mu'allim al-awwal*” (the first master), through the lens of his Arab disciples reflected, among other things, the aura of the exceptional diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties of that age between Greece and most Arab countries.

⁴ “Conference de l'EFA (Ecole Française d'Athènes) – E. Kondyli: The Arabic studies in Greece”, April 30, 2015, video, (22:22) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uux2lSL_22o&t=2776s&ab_channel=Ecolefran%C3%A7aised%27Ath%C3%A8nes (in Greek).

Ziakas' work has been republished many times since and should be considered a turning point for the Greek academia and its nascent Arab Studies. Even though in the 2007 edition of his – by now classical – study he asserted that there was still a gap in the Greek literature in the study of Graeco-Arab intellectual relations, the progress made during the previous decades cannot be underestimated. With published articles in Greek, Arabic, English, German and French, and over twelve volumes since 1982, *Graeco-Arabica* remains at the forefront of the local arabist academic production concerning Graeco-Arab relations throughout history, although the bulk of the journal's topics are related to the study of the premodern era, *ergo* confirming its continuous centrality for the Greek Orientalism. In the words of its senior editor, Professor Christidis, the purpose and aims of *Graeco-Arabica* were outlined as follows:

The cultural interrelations between Greece and the Arabo-Islamic world have been numerous and diverse. The urgent need to evaluate data from various disciplines leads us to the publication of a special periodical which provides the necessary forum for articles on Greek-Arabic topics (*Graeco-Arabica* I 1982).

The ideological drive behind certain state policies of that period should not be downplayed at this point. The fact that the first volumes of *Graeco-Arabica* have been partially funded by the Ministry of Culture, in addition to the National Research Foundation of Greece, speaks volumes for the staunch pro-Arab policies of Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou (Kourgiotis 2023: 46-48); in other words, the Greek pro-Arabism of the 1980s contributed to the cultivation of that sense of “indebtment” to the Arabs for saving our heritage from oblivion in the academic and educational discourses.

The *Journal of Oriental and African Studies* (JOAS) is the second international academic journal of its kind in Greece. Having published its first volume in 1989 and being issued annually, the geographic and thematic span of JOAS is more diverse as compared to that of *Graeco-Arabica*, yet at least twenty of its articles examine Graeco-Arab relations of several periods, again with a preference shown by the researchers towards the Byzantine and Islamic medieval eras.⁵

Professors who were assigned teaching positions in the Greek universities throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s would make new inroads into the country's Arab Studies, in spite of the Graeco-Arab intellectual relations' continuous dominance. Helen Kondyli (or Condylis, as she is more often mentioned), an Arabist from the Catholic University of Louvain (PhD, 1989) and Maria Mavroudi, a Harvard Byzantinist (PhD, 1998), moved towards the opposite direction of Gutas and Ziakas and shed light on the Byzantines' translation of Arabic manuscripts

⁵ The contents of the journal's volumes since 1989 can be retrieved from its website <https://joastudies.wordpress.com/contents/>.

into Greek (Mavroudi 2019: 285-89). Nonetheless, Mavroudi's contribution to Greek Arabic Studies has been mostly literary, since she has never taught in a Greek university⁶ (she remains a Berkeley affiliate), whereas Kondyli had been teaching the major of Arabic Studies at the University of Athens since its introduction in 1994 until her retirement almost thirty years later. Her overall contribution includes several studies, *inter alia*, her seminal *Introduction to the Arabic Literature*, that was first published in 1991 and which covers all the literary history of the Arabs since the *Jāhiliyya*, *Arabic Civilization* (2008) and a Greek translation of Adonis' *al-Muṭābaqāt wa-l-Awā'il* (2019), as well. On the other hand, Elias Giannakis, an arabist from Oxford (PhD, 1992) specialized on the Arab translations of Greek manuscripts; while all his publications are in English, he has been teaching the major of Graeco-Arabic Studies (7th-15th century) since its introduction in 2000 in the Department of History and Archeology, University of Ioannina.⁷ Theodora Zampaki, Giannakis' former doctoral student, followed in his footsteps and published the monograph *Alexander the Great: His Image in the Early Arabic Historiography* (2006) and an essay focusing on the translations of Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *Hellenic Letters in the Arabic Literature* (2022). The contribution of the Professor of Philosophy, Konstantinos Romanos (1947-), should be mentioned in the same context; although not an arabist in the strict sense of the term, Romanos too exalted the Arabs' contribution to the survival of the Greek civilization thanks to their appropriation of the classical thought, as he asserts in his study *Hellenistic Islam* (2001).

The names of two academics of non-Greek origin, who earned their PhD from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (1989 and 2007, respectively) and contributed in the local Arab Studies from the discipline of medieval history, deserve to be mentioned: Hasan Badawi, an Egyptian, and former Assistant Professor (now retired) of Arab-Islamic history in the Department of History and Archeology, Aristotle University, who compared the Byzantine with the Arab model of administration in Egypt after the 7th century conquest⁸ and Marco Miotto, an Italian, who is a faculty member at present in the Democritus University of Thrace, Department of History and Ethnology, and whose work focuses on the Arab conquest of Byzantine Syria and the Fatimid-Byzantine relations (10th – 11th centuries).⁹ Last but not least, Giannis Sakkas, who teaches Modern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern History since 2001 in the Department of

⁶ Mavroudi's bio can be retrieved from Berkeley University's website <https://history.berkeley.edu/maria-mavroudi>.

⁷ Giannakis bio can be retrieved from the university's website http://users.uoi.gr/gramisar/prosopiko/giannakis/index_en.htm.

⁸ Badawi's dissertation can be retrieved in Greek from the National Archive of PhD Theses <https://www.didaktorika.gr/eadd/handle/10442/1149?locale=en>.

⁹ Miotto's bio can be retrieved from the university's website <https://www.he.duth.gr/en/staff/marco-miotto>.

Mediterranean Studies, University of the Aegean, was the first Greek academic who focused on the modern and contemporary history of the Arabs, thus filling a gap in the Greek bibliography (Sakkas 2002: 11-14). As it will be discussed in the following section, the challenges posed by the dramatic events in the Eastern Mediterranean neighborhood of Greece in the turn of the 21st century would gradually pivot Arab Studies away from their traditional emphasis on Graeco-Arabic medieval contacts towards other more “modern” domains.

The Arab Spring and Its Ramifications for the Greek Academia

More than a decade after the eruption of the so-called Arab Spring revolts that led in some cases to democratic change and political destabilization, e.g. Tunisia and Egypt and even civil war followed by severe humanitarian and refugee crises as were the cases of Libya, Syria, and Yemen (Bayat 2017: 18; Rogan 2017: 483-512), Arab Studies in the Greek universities seem to have been enhanced both in the scope of their subjects and in the number of students attending them, regardless of the continuous lack of a relevant department and/or academic program. Progress has been witnessed first and foremost in the expansion of the academic teaching of the Arabic language throughout the last two decades and the emergence of the first modern “Orientalist”, if the term could be still applicable, Greek think tank, the Center of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (CEMMIS).¹⁰ Hence, it is strongly suggested that there exists a direct link between regional geopolitics and the orientations of domestic academia.

Time and again, Greece has been dubbed the Middle East’s “*getaway to Europe*” (Drozdiak 2016; European Commission 2015). Recent crises tend to vindicate that characterization, given that Greece received an unprecedented inflow of Arab refugees escaping turmoil and sectarian strife in their countries. It is worth mentioning that in 2016 alone, Syrians constituted 46% and Iraqis 15% of the total number of refugees who arrived in the country (Ministry of Education 2017).¹¹ Apart from their accommodation mainly in northern and central Greece, the Aegean islands and Crete, the government has undertaken the task of providing education to their children either in reception classes or in mainstream schools in close proximity to their area of residence (Foulidi et al. 2019: 3-5; Palaiologou et al. 2018: 4-22; Vergou 2019). As it is argued in this section, new realities on the ground gave an impetus to the academic teaching of the Arabic language, mainly for two reasons: first, the realization in the Greek media and public discourses that the Middle East is not as far as it was

¹⁰ <https://cemmis.edu.gr/index.php/en/>

¹¹ Relevant data can be retrieved from the Ministry’s website https://www.minedu.gov.gr/publications/docs2017/16_06_17_Epistimoniki_Epitropi_Prosfygon_YPPETH_Apotimisi_Protas_eis_2016_2017_Final.pdf.

perceived to be, and second, the need to properly educate Greek social scientists, educators, and even police and coast guard officers so as to cope with the growing numbers of Arabic-speaking refugees.

Recent trends concerning the status of Arabic language in the Greek academia seem to comply with the new geopolitical and humanitarian challenges. Suffice it to say that during the first decade of the 21st century Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) has been taught only in two departments, i.e. Balkan Slavic and Oriental Studies¹² (University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki) and Mediterranean Studies¹³ (University of the Aegean, Rhodes), whereas in the aftermath of the Arab Spring the total number of university departments teaching MSA increased to four; these include the new program of Islamic Studies within the Department of Theology¹⁴ (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) and the Department of Language and Intercultural Studies¹⁵ (University of Thessaly, Volos) founded in 2016 and 2019 respectively. According to their latest study guides, Mediterranean and Islamic Studies offer eight semesters of MSA to students (Arabic I to VIII), the students of Language and Intercultural Studies may attend up to five semesters (Arabic I to V), while those of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies four academic semesters (Arabic I to IV). Also, the increasing number of students attending Arabic classes support this section's research hypothesis. The data provided by the Department of Balkan Slavic and Oriental Studies, where Arabic is not a mandatory course, is quite illuminating in this regard. While during the 2000s hardly 10% of the registered students chose Arabic, by the late 2010s that percentage skyrocketed to around 25%, reaching its apogee in the academic year 2021-22 (37%).¹⁶ The students' preference for Arabic over other optional courses keeps at pace with the repercussions of the Arab Spring, as most students usually suggest when asked why they chose Arabic.¹⁷ At the postgraduate level Hellenic Open University, in fact Greece's only public virtual university, operates since 2017 an English-speaking Master's Program titled *Language Education for Refugees and Migrants*. As its name suggests, that program was especially designed to meet the needs of educators in Greece who have encountered for the last ten years hundreds of refugee children mostly of Arabic origin; the program's module *Introduction to the Arabic Language and Culture* remains indispensable to the tutors' special training, while its importance has been affirmed anew in view of

¹² <https://www.uom.gr/en/bso#undefined1>.

¹³ <https://dms.aegean.gr/en/>.

¹⁴ https://theo.auth.gr/en/eisagogiki_mousoulmanikon_spoudon_eng/.

¹⁵ <https://gdia.uth.gr/en/undergraduate-studies/>.

¹⁶ Special thanks to the department's secretary and more specifically, Mrs. Anna Soulioti for providing me with all the relevant data.

¹⁷ The students' opinions on the matter have been collected and evaluated at the beginning of every academic year since 2015-16, when I was assigned to teach Modern Standard Arabic in that department.

the dramatic developments in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria as these lines are being written. In the module's general description special reference is made to "the recent socio-political conditions that hold in Greece and Europe" that "challenge educators to become acquainted with aspects of the Arabic language and culture" and "appreciate its complexities".¹⁸

Meanwhile, the study material for learning Arabic, that was virtually non-existent or largely outdated during the 20th century, consisting mainly of the works of a few *Egyptiōts* (Petroxeilos 1927), has been remarkably improved during the last quarter of a century and readjusted to the new needs of the Greek public. A Greek-educated Egyptian professor, who was then teaching Arabic in the Department of Balkan, Slavic, and Oriental Studies and is now a VU-Amsterdam affiliate based at Holland, published the first Arabic textbook for Greeks (Ellethy 2006). After six years the first grammar was published (Kourgiotis 2012) by another professor, this time Greek, who currently teaches Arabic language, Middle Eastern history, and politics in the same department as his Egyptian predecessor back in the 2000s. As of today, that book remains an essential part of teaching Arabic in all the university departments mentioned above, while the fact that it was republished in 2018 speaks volumes for the language's reception by Greek students and non-students alike. Interestingly enough, in the 2012 edition the author pinpoints the necessity of such a book by invoking the critical juncture of the Arab Spring and its timely coincidence with the Greek debt crisis of 2009; parallels, indeed, can be drawn between the two crises (Tsibiridou and Bartsidis 2016: 35-41), while their ramifications intersected in multiple ways. If the Greek social scientists and educators needed Arabic to communicate with the rising numbers of refugees from the war-torn Middle East, highly educated engineers and doctors from poverty-stricken Greece were surging, among other destinations, into the rich Arab nations of the Gulf in search for better payment and working conditions (Labrianidis and Pratsinakis 2016: 10-18).

Parallel to the Arabic language's academic development, the emergence of CEMMIS as a research group under the aegis of the Department of Political Science and International Relations of the University of Peloponnese constitutes a great leap forward for the study of the Middle East in the Greek academia. Quoting the words of its founders "the initial team of scholars and researchers embarked on an ambitious plan to initiate an academic dialogue on the Middle East and the Mediterranean" and since 2008 it "transformed itself into a Centre for Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies (CEMMIS), broadening its interests to include Muslim societies and communities in South Asia, Africa and Europe".¹⁹ As was the case with Arabic language, the establishment of such

¹⁸ <https://www.eap.gr/en/language-education-for-refugees-and-immigrants/topics/#160>.

¹⁹ <https://cemmis.edu.gr/index.php/en/about-us/about-cemmis>.

a specialized think tank definitely illustrates the way geopolitical challenges emanating from the Arab Spring and the reorientations of the Greek academia are closely associated. Nevertheless, as it becomes obvious from the Center's numerous reports and analyses which are published regularly, its scope far exceeds the boundaries of the Arab countries, while on no account its scholars could be described as Arabists in the classical sense of the term, nor do they intend to do so; their academic profiles are those of international relations specialists focusing on various Middle Eastern topics.²⁰ In that fashion, if *Graeco-Arabica* claims to be an heir to classical Greek orientalists, like Sahas or Gutas, CEMMIS presents as its academic "forefather" the well-known political scientist and historian of the modern Middle East, P.J. Vatikiotis (1928-1997). Not surprisingly, CEMMIS too refers to a "great disappointment" concerning the status of Middle Eastern Studies in Greece and speaks of the gap that the Center aspires to fill.

Islamic Studies in the Absence of Arab Studies

Although Greece has yet to establish her own department of Arab Studies, Islamic Studies do exist within the framework of the Faculty of Theology in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and their first students were enrolled in the academic year 2016-17. In that case too, the inception of the new undergraduate program has been dictated by an interplay of domestic policies and geopolitical realities, with its designers and supporters portraying it as a question of national interest. The general secretary for religious affairs, George Kalantzis stated in this regard: "although as a country we have an indigenous Muslim minority and we are Europe's border with the Muslim world, we still do not have an Islamic studies program" (Ekathimerini.com 2016). Indeed, what sets Islamic Studies in Greece apart from similar programs across Europe is that they are not only poised to produce a new generation of local experts on Islam, i.e. islamologists, but rather to offer adequate theological training to Greek Muslims who wish to be appointed as imams in the state schools of the Muslim minority (Koukoumakas 2016). According to the program's webpage, its graduates have:

the necessary scientific training and inner culture to deepen their study of Islamic theology and tradition, as well as the religious phenomenon and its relationship with society, politics and culture. In addition, they meet all the necessary requirements to teach Islam in public schools in Thrace, to work in various scientific, cultural and social organisations and in public or private enterprises.²¹

²⁰ All the center's affiliates' bio can be retrieved from CEMMIS website <https://cemmis.edu.gr/index.php/en/about-us/team>.

²¹ https://theo.auth.gr/en/eisagogiki_mousoulmanikon_spoudon_eng/.

Islam has been from the very beginning an integral part of modern Greece. Muslims constituted the largest religious group after Christians in the newly independent state, whose irredentist ambitions between the 19th and 20th centuries, locally known as *Megalē Idea*, entailed the Greek kingdom's territorial and demographic enlargement, leading to the inclusion of the former Ottoman subjects many of whom being Muslims (Katsikas 2013: 47-49). Institutionally speaking, the Muslims of Greece were internationally recognized as a protected minority "enjoying religious and educational autonomy" for the first time in 1881 by the Convention of the Constantinople and a number of successive treaties, i.e. the Convention of Athens in the aftermath of the Balkan Wars on November 1913, and the Treaty of Sèvres signed on August 1920 (Tsitselikis 2007: 363; Ziaka 2013: 126-27). Even though the percentage of the country's Muslims shrank from 7 to 2 percent as a result of the compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and the newly founded Republic of Turkey following Greek defeat in the Greek-Turkish War (1919-22), the minority status of those exempted from the exchange was enhanced under the terms of the Lausanne Treaty in 1923. Their population comprised Turks, Slavophone Pomaks and Roma (Gypsies) residing in the region of West Thrace in eastern Greece; in view of their diverse ethnolinguistic profile, back then it was agreed by the signatory states to regard them collectively as "Muslim minority" (Tsitselikis 2004: 406). It is worth mentioning that, by the time Kemal Atatürk abolished the *Şarī'a*, Greece had already incorporated it in its national legislation and constitution in accordance with the Lausanne Treaty. Thus, to this day, Greece is the only EU member to apply the *Şarī'a* regardless of European court rulings against it on discrimination grounds (Berger 2020: 116-127). In a sense, while the Greek state boasts about its legal pluralism, in fact it imposes on its Muslim citizens what the expert on the institutional aspects of Greek Islam – professor Tsitselikis calls "neo-millet", i.e. "a system which keeps alive pre-modern legal divisions based on religion and inserts them into the larger framework of modern citizenship" (Tsitselikis 2007: 355).

For several decades, however, the academic study of Islam had been inconsistent with its official status as a Greek state religion. Apart from a few theologians from the universities of Athens and Thessaloniki, like Anastasios Giannoulatos, Archbishop of Albania at present, and the – now retired – Gregory Ziakas, who had systematically studied Islam since the 1970s and attempted via their teaching and treatises to address anti-Islamic prejudices emanating from a decades-old "Turcophobia" intertwined with the ethnoreligious dogma of "Hellenic-Christian synthesis" (Grigoriadis 2015: 67-75; Ziaka 2010a: 444-45), the Greek academic institutions as a whole were rather indifferent at best towards the faith of an important segment of the country's citizens. In the meantime, Islamic demographics in Greece started to change since the 1990s and the 2000s and so did the interest of the Greek academics on Islam, giving

way to a much more interdisciplinary approach; to mention but a few, these include professors of religious studies, like the expert on Shia Islam and Ibadism, Angeliki Ziaka (the daughter of Gregory Ziakas mentioned above), professors of law and legal history, e.g. the aforementioned Konstantinos Tsitselikis, who illuminated the legal dimensions of the Muslim minority regarding the Šarī‘a, anthropologists, who conducted rich ethnographic fieldwork in Muslim environments both inside and outside Greece, like Gerasimos Makris and Fotini Tsibiridou, in tandem with political scientists, such as the scientific advisor and founder of CEMMIS, Sotiris Roussos, who has combined the discipline of international relations with the study of Islam and authored many interesting studies on Political Islam, among them *Why Islamists Go Green?* Manos Karagiannis. Consisting mostly of economic immigrants from Asia (mainly Pakistan and Bangladesh) and Africa at first, Muslim presence in Greece was augmented during the last decade by the flows of refugees to Europe, mainly Arabs, Persians and Afghans. In order to differentiate between the Muslim Greek citizens of the Lausanne Treaty and these new-comers, Greek scholars tend to call them “new Islam” as compared to the “old Islam” of the minority. Still, “new Islam” is neither institutionalized nor does enjoy the rights and the autonomy of the “old Islam”, notably with respect to the jurisdiction of the Šarī‘a (Hatziprokopiou and Evergeti 2014: 604-606; Ziaka 2010b: 263-294).

It is against this background that the senate of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki voted in early 2014 in favor of establishing for the first time in the Greek academia, Islamic Studies within the Faculty of Theology. As it had been expected, a part of the Greek Orthodox clergy and the most conservative academics and politicians belonging to the right of the political spectrum, vehemently opposed the initiative from the outset by staging public rallies and even appealed to the Council of State, the country’s supreme administrative court, questioning its constitutionality, despite the fact that the Archbishop of Athens and all Greece, Ieronymos, gave its consent (Tzimas 2017). The arguments of the Islamic Studies’ critics, the fiercest among them being the then Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, Anthimos, revolved around the “incompatibility” of teaching Islam and Orthodoxy together within the same faculty, the creation of a “breeding ground for Islamic extremism” and the “hidden agendas” of Erdoğan’s Turkish Islamism, echoing well-known islamophobic clichés of the Greek public discourse during the last quarter of a century (Sakellariou 2017: 515-20; Sakellariou 2021).

The supporters of Islamic Studies on the other hand, defended their decision on scientific and national grounds alike. The program’s “chief architects”, Professor Chrysostomos Stamoulis, then president of the Department of Theology, and Angeliki Ziaka, undertook the task of informing the public and addressing misconceptions surrounding the project. The promotion of interfaith dialogue

between Christianity and Islam (both “old” and “new”), which almost ten years ago had reached approximately 5% of the country’s overall population,²² has been mentioned several times in interviews and public interventions (Paratiritis tis Thrakis 2016). Additionally, political arguments have been expressed, invoking the need to keep extremist views at bay through the supervision of the future Greek imams’ theological training, i.e. what the general secretary for religious affairs has described as “checking fundamentalism through knowledge” (Lakasas 2016), or even the national necessity to curtail Turkey’s influence on the religious instruction of the Greek madrasas’ teaching personnel (Fotopoulos 2016). Such arguments, apparently tried to reverse in their favor the ultranationalist and islamophobic rhetoric of Islamic Studies’ critics. After all, it should be remembered that before the inauguration of the program, the Greek imams were either – inadequately – trained as teachers and not theologians in the State Special Pedagogical Academy of Thessaloniki (EPATH) that was founded in 1969, or they received their theological training from Turkey or the Arab countries, like Egypt and Saudi Arabia (Ziaka 2009: 141-178). Therefore, Islamic Studies in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki could truly fill that existing gap, even though, Ziaka has made it clear that on no account does the specific academic program intend to “compete in any way with Islamic universities of Muslim majority countries on a confessional level” (Ziaka and Koukounaras 2021: 174) or “replace the Qur’anic schools, but rather contribute in a more scientific and broader understanding of the Islamic worlds and civilizations” (Paratiritis tis Thrakis 2016).

Regarding the program’s content, it is carefully designed to keep the balance between endowing the future imams with all the theological requirements they need to undertake their teaching assignments and providing all students (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) with an interdisciplinary approach towards the study of Islam, according to the study guide.²³ In the same fashion, the inclusion of Arabic language courses in every semester does not only intend to pave the way for the students’ immersion in the scientific disciplines of Islamic theology, e.g. *Tafsīr*, whose attendance demand a decent understanding of Classical Arabic terminology, but also train them in Modern Standard Arabic, reaching a level equivalent to B2. Besides, “the learning of the relevant languages (with emphasis on Arabic and Persian)”²⁴ is explicitly referred among the program’s goals. The program’s professor of Arabic language and history, Evina Dimitriadou-Badawi, who kindly shared her experience from the class, clarified that the use of examples from the Quran, the Hadith or traditional Islamic historiography throughout the language acquisition process,

²² <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/01/27/table-muslim-population-by-country/>.

²³ <https://qa.auth.gr/en/x/studyguide/600000173/current/>.

²⁴ https://theo.auth.gr/en/eisagogiki_mousoulmanikon_spoudon_eng/.

generally keeps a pace with more secular themes related to contemporary Middle Eastern politics, especially in the advanced levels (Arabic VI-VIII).²⁵ Consequently, the program's contribution in teaching the Arabic language at an academic level should be highlighted, remedying to some extent the country's institutional deficit with regard to Arab Studies.

Conclusion

The article illustrated the breakthroughs in the development of Arab Studies in the Greek academia, along with the impediments to their growth and materialization. Definitely, there are no easy answers to the question why an autonomous university department of Arab Studies has yet to be established, considering the main obstacles at play at several historical junctures throughout the period under examination: the reassessment of priorities and an emphasis on the study of the West, notably for political and ideological reasons, at the expense of the non-European worlds, the lack of state funding and initiatives, the traditionally negative attitudes towards Islam and consequently the Arabs, stemming from the "Hellenization" of the Byzantine history and/or the memory of Ottoman rule in the national consciousness, as well as a belief that the academic discipline of Arab Studies is sufficiently served within the existing departments of Mediterranean and Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies, in tandem with the program of Islamic Studies.

As our research has demonstrated, both orientalism and – the closely associated with it – Arab Studies in the Greek academia, have been more developed in literary terms, i.e. studies, treatises and literature, rather than institutional, i.e. in the form of research centers and university departments. The few bright exceptions, which saw the light of the day from the early 1980s onwards, like the Association of Greek and Arab Studies (1980), CEMMIS (2008) and, of course, the undergraduate program of Islamic Studies (2016), prove that rule. Nonetheless, in the absence of a specialized academic program or center of Arabic Studies, the above-mentioned initiatives constitute an important leap forward, whether through the publishing of essays on the Graeco-Arab medieval relations and contemporary Arab and Middle Eastern affairs or the preparation of local experts on Islam, those academic endeavors combinedly enhance the status of Arab Studies. This is particularly true for Islamic Studies' constructive role in advancing the academic study of the Arabic language.

Furthermore, in accordance with the essay's findings, the status and orientations of Arab Studies in the Greek academia at present have been and

²⁵ Interview with Evina Dimitriadou-Badawi, 14 December 2024.

remain susceptible at various degrees to two parameters: historical ties to the Arab lands and peoples, and domestic and regional politics. In regard to the first, Greek Orientalism owes much to the *Egyptiōtes* whose experiences, knowledge and initiatives throughout most of the 20th century served as a stepping stone for introducing the Greek public and academia into the study of Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs; meanwhile, the Greek orientalists' "rediscovery" of the Graeco-Arab early intellectual contacts, notably the Abbasids' translation movement, not only redeemed the – erstwhile negative – public perceptions of the Arabs vis-à-vis Hellenism, especially in the national historiography and the school textbooks, but also represents the most prolific field of the domestic arabist literary production. As for the second, even if the academic footprint of the Greek pro-Arab policies until the late 1980s has been rather mediocre, that was not the case with the ramifications of the Arab Spring, as the relevant data from the Arabic classes of the Department of Balkan, Slavic and Oriental Studies have demonstrated. The same applies to the country's Islamic Studies, when questions of national interest in relation to the status of Islam in Greece were called upon by the program's founders. New political calculations corresponding to the changing geopolitical facts in Greece's Arab and Middle Eastern neighborhoods, would hopefully give the green light for the inception of Arab Studies in the country's academia.

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