

Analysis

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After crisis, Greek youth divided about EU

As she ponders her future abroad, Greek university graduate Alexandra is unsure she wants to vote on May 26 for an EU structure she holds responsible for ravaging her country after its debt crisis. Meanwhile, 20-year-old Erasmus student Thanassis suspects that Greece was a "testing ground" for EU austerity policies but still believes the bloc "has a lot to offer."

In a country where the minimum salary is 650 euros (\$728) and youth unemployment is around 40 percent, young Greeks have an ambivalent relationship with the European Union. "On the one hand, the connection (with Europe) is stronger, the exchanges and friendships more numerous. But on the other, young Greeks are living through a difficult situation that is directly linked to Europe", said Ioannis Kouzidis, a social policy professor at Athens' Panteion university.

"Some 350,000 Greeks emigrated during the crisis, including many youths who could not find adequate job opportunities here," Kouzidis said. Only 54 percent of Greeks believe their country has benefited from joining the European Union in 1981, according to an October 2018 survey by the European Parliament. The Greek crisis erupted in 2010 after its fiscal deficit was revealed to be several times over official figures.

To avert bankruptcy, successive Greek governments were forced to adopt a barrage of spending cuts and tax hikes in return for three European bailouts - two of them with additional funds from the International Monetary Fund. Greece exited its last bailout in August, but lost about a quarter of its national output amid countless layoffs and business closures over the past decade. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that in 2018, nearly 40 percent of Greeks aged 15 to 24 were unemployed, compared to a European average of 15.2 percent.

'More Europe, more solidarity'

The son of civil servants, Thanassis knows about job and salary cuts, growing up in Kozani, an industrial region hit hard by the crisis. But "despite the mistakes... more Europe and more solidarity (is needed) to stand up to the spectre of the extreme right," he said. Thanassis will spend the third year of his international relations degree program in Brussels, and considers the Erasmus program "the best of Europe's policies." But with Greeks being portrayed as lazy and wasteful in European coverage of the crisis, spending time abroad has not been easy for many.

Eliana, who left Athens in 2010 to study architecture in London, said she faced "a lot of racism" and decided to return after five years to launch a design brand. "You may feel more integrated than previous generations because (we) travel more and speak several languages, but you are bombarded with stereotypes about the laziness of Greeks," she said. As to whether she felt European, she replied: "Do the Europeans consider us European?"

Alexandra said she doesn't think decision-makers in Brussels are listening to people like her. "I'd like to be able to feel that I have the same opportunities as the rest of EU citizens in member states. But that's not the case," she said. Alexandra hopes to have more luck in Germany "to make a living and begin adult life." Though still the lowest in Europe, the sense of European citizenship in Greece has nevertheless made some progress. It stands at 51 percent according to a June 2018 report by the European Commission. — AFP



A young woman looks on as she attends an event of the Greek European Committee in Athens. In a country where the minimum salary is 650 euros (\$728) and youth unemployment is around 40 percent, young Greeks have an ambivalent relationship with the European Union. — AFP

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This handout picture shows an MH-60R Sea Hawk Helicopter, assigned to the 'Grandmasters' of Helicopter Maritime Strike Squadron 46 aboard the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Nitze (DDG 94) as it takes off from the ship's flight deck. Nitze is underway as part of Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group (ABCSG). — AFP

Could Gulf tensions lead to Iran-US war?

A surge of tensions in the Gulf has shown the risk of a military confrontation between arch-foes Iran and the United States, even if any conflict would likely be marked by guerrilla warfare rather than full-scale battles, analysts say. A series of mysterious attacks on ships off the coast of the United Arab Emirates, the key ally of Tehran's Gulf rival Saudi Arabia, prompted President Donald Trump to warn Iran would "suffer greatly" if it harmed US interests.

The United States and Iran have had no diplomatic relations since the seizure by Iranian radicals of American embassy staff in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution. The two sides have at times been close to conflict - in particular during a tense period under former US president George W Bush - but analysts see a series of factors as making the current moment particularly combustible.

Trump dismayed European allies by pulling out of the 2015 deal on Iran's nuclear program unilaterally and is now ratcheting up the rhetoric against Tehran. Iran and Saudi Arabia, a close ally of the United States for decades, are both enmeshed on opposing sides in the conflict in Yemen. And in US ally Israel, which Iran refuses to recognize, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is pushing for a hard line against Iran.

'High odds of clash'

"The Trump administration has significantly increased tensions in the region and has therefore increased the odds of some sort of inadvertent or even deliberate mili-

tary clash with Iran," said International Crisis Group (ICG) Iran project director Ali Vaez. "The odds of a clash occurring, even without provocation, are quite high," he said.

He said a belief on both sides that the other does not want a conflict "creates plenty of room for miscalculation" especially at a time when both sides have no direct communication channels. The war in Yemen also intensifies the risk of an incident between Iran and Saudi Arabia - such as an attack by Tehran-backed Houthi rebels on Saudi interests - being magnified and then pulling in the United States. Drone attacks on Tuesday, claimed by Iran-aligned Yemen rebels, shut down one of Saudi Arabia's main oil pipelines, further ratcheting up Gulf tensions.

There are "a lot of non-state actors in the region who could take steps that would push the two sides into a direct confrontation," said Vaez. But Washington and its Gulf allies have so far stopped short of blaming Tehran for damage to four ships, including two Saudi oil tankers, a Norwegian tanker and an Emirati ship. Iran has also distanced itself from the incidents, condemning "acts of sabotage" and a "criminal act".

Denis Bauchard, advisor for the Middle East at the French Institute of International Relations (IFRI), said there were elements on all sides who wanted no further escalation. "Looking at this rationally, this should not go any further as there are people who want to calm this down," he said, pointing to the US and Israeli military establishment. He said that Iran had so far kept a notably "low profile" in the current tensions but a risk came from

hawks on both sides such as US national security advisor John Bolton in the United States and the Revolutionary Guards in Iran.

'Guerrilla warfare'

Any escalation between the United States and Iran would likely be played out at sea and have immediate global implications for energy markets if it affected shipping in the key transit point of the Strait of Hormuz. Analysts say that in the event of a conflict, Iran would most likely resort to its tried and trusted strategy of asymmetric warfare which it has seen since the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war as the best way to outflank a more powerful enemy.

"A US-Iran war wouldn't be a naval war at all in the strict sense of the term," said James Holmes, from the Naval War College in the United States. "Guerrilla warfare, not the traditional sea fight, makes a better analogy for Iranian maritime strategy," he said, adding Iranian ships would concentrate firepower in narrow parts in the Strait of Hormuz.

Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, researcher at the Franco-Belgian think-tank Institut Thomas More, said Iran is well aware it has no match for the aircraft carriers of the United States. He said Iran would not aim to inflict a naval defeat on the United States, but make clear its engagement in the Gulf has a military and material cost. Such actions could include placing mines in the Strait of Hormuz, harassing US navy craft with smaller warships and also using anti-ship missiles, he said. — AFP



This file photograph shows the logo of WhatsApp, the popular messaging service, seen on a smartphone. A security flaw in WhatsApp, one of the most popular messaging apps in the world, allowed sophisticated attackers to install spyware on phones, the company said yesterday in the latest trouble for its parent Facebook. — AFP

Israel firm NSO operates in shadowy cyber world

An Israeli spyware company named in a Financial Times report on a WhatsApp security flaw prides itself on "rigorous, ethical standards" despite previous links to alleged espionage.

Pocket spy

Founded in 2010 by Israelis Shalev Hulio and Omri Lavie, NSO is based in the Israeli seaside hi-tech hub of Herzliya, near Tel Aviv. It produces Pegasus, a highly invasive tool that can reportedly switch on a target's cell phone camera and microphone, and access data on it, effectively turning the phone into a pocket spy.

Khashoggi denial

In a January interview with Israeli daily Maariv, Hulio was asked about reports that telephone spyware was used to bug Jamal Khashoggi prior to the Saudi journalist's killing last October in Istanbul. "As a human being and as an Israeli, what happened to Khashoggi was a shocking murder," the company's CEO said. "I can tell you on the record that Khashoggi was not targeted by any NSO product or technology, including listening, monitoring, location tracking and intelligence collection."

A hit in Mexico?

In Mexico, where investigative journalist Javier Valdez was shot dead on the street in broad daylight in 2017, prominent journalists and activists say the government of former president Enrique Pena Nieto targeted them using Pegasus. The New York Times reported at the time that at least three Mexican federal agencies had purchased some \$80 million of spyware from NSO Group since 2011.

In one case, international experts investigating the disappearance of 43 students in Mexico in 2014 were targeted with the spyware after it had been sold to the government, the experts said. In 2016, Apple rushed out a security update after researchers said prominent Emirati rights activist Ahmed Mansoor was targeted by UAE authorities using Pegasus spyware. The software has been pinpointed by independent experts as likely being used in a number of countries with poor human rights records.

Court challenge

NSO's website says the company has "a pioneering approach to applying rigorous, ethical standards to everything we do". It says it has a vetting process on sales which combines licensing by Israeli export-control authorities with an internal review by a business ethics committee. The firm said yesterday that it only licenses its software to governments for "fighting crime and terror". UK-based rights group Amnesty International, however, said its members and supporters in Israel would on Wednesday petition the Tel Aviv district court against continued government export approval for NSO software. — AFP

The missing of Brazzaville 'Beach', twenty years on

Twenty years ago, Congo-Brazzaville's new president urged conflict refugees to come home across the River Congo from Kinshasa. Then 353 returnees disappeared who were widely believed to have been murdered. "It's like it happened yesterday," said 75-year-old Marcel Touanga, grief-stricken for his son, one of those listed as missing in a troubling episode in the long career of President Denis Sassou Nguesso. In May 1999, the oil-rich central African nation was trying to turn the page on three successive civil wars since 1993.

Sassou Nguesso, a military man, took power back in 1997 from Pascal Lissouba, with the stated aim of achieving "national reconciliation" in the former French colony. He encouraged people who had fled over the broad river to the capital of the newly named Democratic Republic of Congo (the former Zaire) to return via the "Beach"-Brazzaville's port area. The two Congos on opposite shores jointly signed a repatriation agreement with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and people who were prepared to return did so during the week of May 5-14, 1999.

'Shot on the spot'

"Once on the Beach, a kind of sorting process took place, with women on one side and men on the other. The men were subjected to a full body search" for firearms, said Touanga, who heads the main support group for families of the missing. The authorities were at the time hunting members of the rebel Ninja militia loyal to former prime minister Bernard Kolelas, who were active in Brazzaville's Bacongo district and a forested region adjoining the capital known as The Pool.

Kolelas said that the Ninja insurgency had only been crushed when Angolan soldiers moved in to support Sassou-Nguesso and secure the city. Sentenced to death in his absence in May 2000 on charges of kidnapping, rape and illegal arrests by Ninjas, Kolelas was granted amnesty in

2005. He died after receiving medical treatment in Paris in 2009. "We have inventoried 353 missing youths, but there were many more because some bodies were burned," said Touanga, who now lives in France.

"There was brutality, there were executions. Some people were shot on the spot and their bodies were thrown into the water," he added. "They didn't even give me his body," Touanga said of his 28-year-old son, a paramilitary policeman. Some of the missing were executed on the premises of the security forces, including the General Directorate of Presidential Security, according to a 2012 UN report based on testimony by people claiming to be survivors.

'Truth and reconciliation'

Under pressure from families, Congo's parliament launched a probe in 2002, broadening the scope to cover all forced disappearances recorded in the country since 1992. A trial finally opened in Brazzaville three years later with 15 defendants in the dock, mostly serving officers in the security forces. They were all acquitted in August 2005. However, the court ordered the state to pay compensation to close kin of 86 of the 353 missing men, to the tune of 15,000 euros (\$16,850) for each victim. Separately in France, several human rights NGOs joined forces and went to court with a suit alleging "crimes against humanity, disappearances and torture."

The case, lodged in early 2002, targeted President Sassou-Nguesso and three senior officials in his regime. Congo asked the International Court of Justice in The Hague to freeze the French legal proceedings. In April 2004, Sassou-Nguesso's police chief, Colonel Jean-Francois Ndenguet, was jailed in France on a charge of crimes against humanity. But he was freed on the grounds that he held a diplomatic passport, which led rights activists to cry scandal.

"French justice for the moment remains the only hope for justice and truth," Tresor Nzila, executive director of the Congolese Organization of Human Rights (OCDH), said in Brazzaville. However investigations in France have ground to a standstill. "Twenty years on, the case remains unfortunately bogged down," said prominent French lawyer William Bourdon. "The pain is still there," said Vincent Niamankessi, the 70-year-old father of one of the missing. "We are finding that our missing children are simply victims with no perpetrators." — AFP