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The Greek decision to pursue a more active policy in the Middle East, 1955-56: Cyprus, the Baghdad Pact, and the need to counter Turkey

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Hellenic Observatory Centre
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Spyridon Bouzoukis¹

Abstract

After Konstantinos Karamanlis rose to power in February 1956, he sought to strengthen Greece's relations with the Arab world, sending Grigorios Kassimatis to Egypt, Syria and Lebanon in March. This article readdresses the factors that led to this 'opening' to the Arabs. It is argued that, besides the need to secure support over the Cyprus question in the United Nations, protect the Greek communities, and safeguard the status of the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchates of the East, Athens' decision to develop relations with the Arabs also stemmed from the need to balance Turkey's strengthened regional position within the British-led Baghdad Pact since February 1955. Based on several primary sources, including the archives of the Greek Foreign Ministry, this analysis enriches our understanding of Greek Middle Eastern policy and the importance of the wider regional balance to the security of Greek national interests in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Greece, Turkey, Cyprus question, Baghdad Pact, Middle East

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Introduction

In the second half of the 1950s, Greece, under the governance of the National Radical Union (ERE) of Konstantinos Karamanlis, sought to develop its relations with the Arabs for several reasons. Among others, Greek motives included the need to secure international support for the Greek demand that Great Britain grant and implement the right of self-determination to the Cypriots; the need to protect Greek communities in the Middle East (especially in Egypt), whose position was threatened by the radicalized Arab nationalism; and, finally, the necessity of safeguarding the status of Greek-Orthodox Patriarchates of the East against both the claims of their Arab-Orthodox flock and the ambitions of the Russian Church to expand its influence in the Middle East, thus facilitating the Soviet Union's broader penetration into the region (Hatzivassiliou, 1992; Koumas, 2017; Koumas, 2022; Koumas, 2026; Nachmani, 1987; Bouzoukis, 2025).

From 1956 until its final appeal to the United Nations on Cyprus in December 1958, the Greek government undertook a series of initiatives to cultivate Greece's relations with the Arabs. During the Suez crisis, from July to November 1956, Greece supported Egypt against Britain and France and their coordinated attack; during the Turco-Syrian crisis of 1957, it aligned itself with Syria; in mid-July 1958, after the overthrow of the pro-British monarchical regime in Iraq by the neutralist Brigadier-General, Abdul Karim Kasim, Athens moved swiftly to recognize the new regime and protect Greek economic interests in the country. During the same period, Arab leaders frequently visited Greece, and Greek officials frequently visited Arab states. Thus, in August 1957, the Greek Prime Minister, accompanied by Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, Minister of Foreign Affairs, travelled to Egypt (Dalachanis, 2016; Kitroeff, 2022). At the beginning of the same month, the Sudanese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohamed Ahmed Mahgoub, visited Athens,² while in November the Lebanese President, Camille Chamoun, also visited Greece (Hatzivassiliou, 1992). In the following year, in early January, the Greek Minister of Foreign Affairs visited Sudan.³ Under these circumstances, in November 1957, the American *Chargé d' Affaires* in Athens, James K. Penfield, noted Greece's 'disengagement' from the pro-American policy it had pursued since the end of World War II. This shift, he argued, was evident on three levels: domestically, with the rise of neutralist tendencies in Greek public opinion; in Greece's stance toward the Arabs; and in its relations with Eastern bloc countries.⁴

Nevertheless, Greek historians have not discussed extensively the influence that Turkish Middle Eastern policy exerted on the Greek one. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Turkey -the second, after Britain, principal adversary of Greece in the Cyprus question- constituted an important British ally and was, as such, of greater strategic utility to London in safeguarding its strategic priorities and influence in the region. As the British

² The National Archives, Public Record Office, Kew Gardens, London, (hereafter TNA)/Foreign Office (hereafter FO) 371/130024/1, Allen (Athens) to Lloyd (London), 20 August 1957; TNA/FO 371/130024/2, Walker (Khartoum) to Watson (London), 23 August 1957.

³ TNA/FO 371/136230/1, Chapman-Andrews (Khartoum) to Lloyd (London), 21 January 1958.

⁴ Foreign Relations of the United States (hereafter *FRUS*), 1955-1957, Vol. XXIV, Doc. 312, 'Greece's Disengagement from United States Policy', Penfield (Athens) to the Department of State, 4 November 1957.

Prime Minister, Sir Anthony Eden, observed in his memoirs, referring to the Cyprus question: 'I regarded our alliance with Turkey as the first consideration in our policy in that part of the world' (Crouzet, 2011). Within this framework, the Western Middle Eastern defence arrangement of the Baghdad Pact -established in February 1955 between Turkey and Iraq and consolidated later that same year with the accession of Britain (April), Pakistan (September), and Iran (October)- constituted the cornerstone of the British strategy in the Middle East, thereby enhancing the strategic significance of Cyprus (Yeşilbursa, 2005).

This analysis sets its starting point in October 1955, namely when the Baghdad Pact assumed its final form, and Turkey had significantly enhanced its strategic importance within the Western defence arrangement in the region. The endpoint of this article is March of the following year, 1956, for two reasons: first, because at that time the situation in Cyprus deteriorated sharply following the deportation of Archbishop Makarios, the Greek Cypriot leader, to Seychelles, after the collapse of his talks with the new British Governor of the island, Sir John Harding; and second, because in that same month, and more specifically on the 18th, the Greek government 'inaugurated' its 'opening' toward the Arab world by dispatching Grigorios Kassimatis, Minister without Portfolio, to Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon.

This article provides an illuminating example of a weaker state of the Western Alliance, seeking diplomatic flexibility when its interests did not fully align with the priorities and regional interests of its allies. In particular, the study explores the extent to which the Baghdad Pact and Turkey's strategic importance within it influenced Greece's decision to approach the Arabs. It will be argued that, apart from securing support at the United Nations on the Cyprus question and safeguarding Greek interests in the Arab world, Greece's opening toward it also stemmed from the need to counterbalance Turkey's enhanced regional position. Hence, this study intends to establish a closer connection between these developments by adding another yet neglected factor to the examination of Greece's Middle Eastern policy: the importance of the wider regional balance to the security of Greece's Eastern Mediterranean interests, mostly, but not exclusively, Cyprus.

Moreover, it will be argued that, although Greek policymakers regarded the Baghdad Pact as a factor contributing to the division of the Arab world, they did not exclude the possibility of its further expansion and the accession of additional powers -an eventuality that would bury Greece's hopes of securing their votes in the United Nations. As Spyros Theotokis, Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Konstantinos Karamanlis until 1956, characteristically observed, the Baghdad Pact, as the sole defensive system in the region, carried the risk of gradually becoming 'a pole of attraction for others' beyond the states already participating.⁵ In short, the article will argue that many of the initiatives undertaken by ERE's government in the Middle East during the second half of the 1950s were driven by the need to prevent the accession of more

⁵ Archive of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereafter AGMFA), Athens, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 1581, Theotokis (Athens) to the Embassies of Cairo and Beirut, 16 January 1956.

countries -such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria- to the Baghdad Pact, and to counter Turkey's actions, which in contrast sought the expansion of the number of Arab states within the Pact, starting with Jordan (Yeşilbursa, 2005).

Challenging Turkey: searching for a diplomatic counterweight in the Arab world

Even before the establishment of the Baghdad Pact between Turkey and Iraq on 24 February 1955, Athens, from the early 1950s, viewed with pronounced suspicion the prominent role accorded to Turkey by its senior Western partners in the Middle East against the 'Soviet threat' -a suspicion reinforced by Greece's simultaneous exclusion from the relevant discussions (Onozawa, 2005; Hahn, 1987; Athanassopoulou, 1999; Stefanidis, 2016). Specifically, regarding the efforts undertaken in 1952-53 to establish a Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO), which would have included Arab countries, Greece's participation -unlike that of Turkey, which was considered a founding member- was not desired either by Britain or by the United States;⁶ Greece was not a Middle Eastern country, despite the insistence of Greek officials that it should be regarded a 'state politically belonging to the Middle East', due to its claim over Cyprus;⁷ Greece could not contribute to military operations in the region; and, at the same time, its interest in Cyprus, in the event of Greece's inclusion, was expected to create obstacles to the smooth functioning of the Organization, which was intended to be headquartered on the island (Stefanidis, 1999). On the contrary, the Greek Ambassador in Washington, Athanasios Politis, believed that the 'transformation of the island into an inter-allied base would not only fail to harm the cause of the Union of Cyprus with Greece but would substantially facilitate it, by removing from the British their principal argument that they needed Cyprus as a defensive base'.⁸

In any case, following the failure of the negotiations in the summer of 1953 and Egypt's refusal to participate in creating MEDO before Britain withdrew from Suez, the United States and Britain promoted cooperation among the states of the 'Northern Tier'. This new British-American initiative began in April 1954 with the signing of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Turkey and Pakistan.⁹ Of course, Greece could not participate in such diplomatic deliberations. 'Noteworthy', emphasized a note from the Greek Foreign Ministry in early 1954 regarding the organization of the Middle East, 'is that Turkey's position in the new balance of power in the Near and Middle East has become even stronger. Indeed, being a) a member of NATO, b) an ally of Greece and Yugoslavia in the Balkan Pact, c) a western "pole" of the agreement with Pakistan, and d) the principal support of the American armed forces in the Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey [...] has become a significant actor in international politics, taking into account its

⁶ *FRUS*, 1952-1954, Vol. IX, Part I, Doc. 91, Editorial Note.

⁷ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, 'Memorandum on the Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Arab East', Chatzivasilioni (Athens), 3 November 1955.

⁸ AGMFA, File 30/3/2/1952, Doc. 3216, Politis (Washington) to Foreign Ministry, 12 August 1952.

⁹ AGMFA, File 61/5/1954, Doc. 6181, Melas (Cairo) to Foreign Ministry, 19 February 1954.

population, its territorial extent and geographical position, as well as its economic development potential'.¹⁰

In view of the enhanced role of Turkey in the Middle East, a strange Greek-Turkish competition evolved for the friendship of the Arab states. For instance, in January 1955, the Greek Ambassador in Beirut (who was also diplomatically accredited to Jordan, Iraq and Syria), Gheorgios Seferiades, estimated that certain Arab states, such as Iraq and Lebanon, aligned themselves with the British-Turkish positions, due to London's and Ankara's pressures. Furthermore, he expressed strong concerns about Turkey's further strengthening vis-à-vis Greece in the Arab world, with adverse consequences for Greece's position in its future appeals to the United Nations. He noted:

Without, of course, dwelling on the issue which undoubtedly ought to concern us chiefly -namely that, should the Turkish effort be completed, Turkey's arguments regarding the particular strategic importance of the island for itself, and through it for the Arabs, would be significantly strengthened- I must note that, at the very moment when we were recently striving to secure the votes of the Arab States, it was not only the British but also the Turks who exerted all kinds of pressure on the countries to which I am accredited in order to persuade them otherwise. Moreover, as I have been told repeatedly here, even by the Iraqi ambassador himself, it is not only the ties of the Iraqis to the British, but also their growing solidarity with the Turks that dictated their well-known unfavourable stance toward Greece.¹¹

The concerns of the Greek diplomat were further heightened by the establishment of the Baghdad Pact in February 1955. Comparing Turkey's and Greece's positions in the Middle East, Seferiades argued that Greece was at a disadvantage: Greece had only one embassy, in Lebanon, whereas Turkey maintained four embassies overall -in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. At the same time, the decision of the Syrian government to close its embassy in Greece and transfer it to Yugoslavia -arguing that Yugoslavia was represented diplomatically in Syria by an Ambassador, whereas Greece had assigned a single Ambassador to cover four Arab countries in total- provoked Seferiades' strong disappointment over Athens' inability to prevent this development. Furthermore, as evidenced by the Foreign Ministry's documents, the Greek Rally government under Alexandros Papagos was already aware, as of February 1954, of the Syrian government's intention to close its embassy in Greece and relocate it elsewhere. Although he did not overlook the country's limited financial resources, Seferiades drew Athens' attention to Greece's unfavourable position in comparison to Turkey's, due to Greece's lack of adequate resources to inform the international community -and, consequently, the Arab states- about its stance on the Cyprus issue. As he wrote:

¹⁰ AGMFA, File 60/8/1954, 'Memorandum on the Organization of Middle East Defence', 23 February 1954.

¹¹ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 69, 'On Arab-Turkish relations', Seferiades (Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 13 January 1955.

Of course, I do not ignore the country's financial difficulties, and I am fully aware of how thankless the work of the Ministry's services is in their effort to be understood by the Ministry of Finance. Yet I cannot help but ask, with concern, as anyone conscious of the national interests at stake, how the effects of these financial difficulties on our foreign policy can be ultimately determined exclusively by the State's accounting offices. The result of such a system is that, while *we are desperately trying to preserve a position vis-à-vis Turkey under the sun in this region*, we are not in a position to establish even a rudimentary service in Damascus, whereas the neighbouring and allied country maintains four fully organized and systematically staffed embassies in the states under my jurisdiction, two of which are first-class embassies.¹²

The views of the Greek Ambassador in Beirut found agreement within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On 3 November 1955, Nikolaos Chatzivasiliou, head of the Fourth Political Department of the Ministry, drafted a multi-page memorandum, in which he analyzed what Greece could achieve diplomatically in the Arab world, highlighting the urgent need to strengthen relations with the Arab states. At the time Chatzivasiliou prepared his memorandum, the position of the Greek government vis-à-vis Britain and Turkey on the Cyprus issue was truly dire. The Tripartite Conference in London, convened by the British government from 29 August to 6 September, had collapsed. The Turkish delegation participating in the conference rejected Greece's demand for a transitional liberal self-government in Cyprus, which would have led to the island's self-determination and eventual union with Greece. Instead, they insisted on the 'return' of Cyprus to Turkey in the event of a British withdrawal, even threatening military intervention, arguing the necessity of protecting the Turkish Cypriot minority living on the island (Crouzet, 2011). From their side, the British had succeeded, on the one hand, in demonstrating the disagreement between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus on the international level, and, on the other hand, in presenting themselves as mediators between the two states to impose their policy on the island more easily and grant a constitution providing for limited self-government (Crouzet, 2011). At the same time, the pogrom organized by the Turkish government against the Greeks in Istanbul on the night of 6-7 September, while the proceedings of the Tripartite Conference were still underway, caused a dramatic deterioration of the already tense Greek-Turkish relations (Svolopoulos, 2008). A few days later, on 23 September, Greece's second appeal to the United Nations ended in complete failure, when its request to include the Cyprus issue in the agenda of the 10th session of the General Assembly was rejected (Xydis, 1968). Finally, in September and October, the number of countries in the Baghdad Pact increased with the accession of Pakistan and Iran, respectively, thereby confirming Seferiades' earlier assessments and concerns regarding the expansion of Turkey's influence in the broader region.

In this context, Chatzivasiliou noted that the deterioration of relations with Turkey over the Cyprus question, the second failure at the United Nations, and developments tak-

¹² AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 1341, Seferiades (Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 18 May 1955. Italics by the author.

ing place in the Middle East made it urgent to formulate a policy for engaging the Arab countries. 'Precisely this', he observed, 'the peculiarity of our politically allied but psychologically, at the very least, mistrustful relations with Turkey, imposed the expansion of our horizontal foreign policy through the adoption of a specific stance toward the other countries of the Middle East region'.¹³ Yet, contrary to Seferiades, Chatzivasiliou appeared more optimistic about Greece's diplomatic potential in the Arab world. The Arabs constituted a numerous group of countries at the United Nations; despite their own differences, especially between Egypt and Iraq over the latter's participation in the Baghdad Pact and the leadership in the Arab world (Reid, 1988), they were organized in the Arab League; they aspired to their economic development (as did Greece); and they were also part of the anti-colonial bloc. Consequently, they seemed to have the potential to become a source of support, provided that Athens would lay the appropriate groundwork. On the other hand, Chatzivasiliou did not share Seferiades' concerns regarding Turkey's increasingly dominant influence in the broader region. He noted that, although Greece had not yet developed an active foreign policy in the Arab world, Turkey could not obtain the political and diplomatic benefits it sought. The Arab states were traditionally suspicious of Turkey and its ambitions, a mistrust that was further strengthened by Ankara's favourable stance toward Israel since its establishment in 1947, recognizing its existence *de jure* (Nachmani, 2003). Furthermore, Chatzivasiliou continued, the efforts to attract the Arab states to Western regional defence arrangements against Moscow, as well as the establishment of the Baghdad Pact, were perceived by the Arabs (especially Egypt) as instruments of their division and of perpetuating colonial influence and Western tutelage in the Middle East (Reid, 1988). From this perspective, Chatzivasiliou believed Greece could benefit from the division of the Arabs, which was strengthened in October, when Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia made defence arrangements among themselves as a counterweight to the Baghdad Pact (Reid, 1988). According to the Greek diplomat, Greece's importance to the Arab world and the wider regional balance could be increased, since 'the Arabs seek a diplomatic counterweight in a country close to them, of limited material power, free from any suspicion of expansionist designs, in other words, politically disinterested'. This role, as Chatzivasiliou further explained, could be assumed by Greece, which, he claimed, was viewed by the Arab states 'favourably' for various reasons:

- a) Greece had already demonstrated a shared understanding in this context; b) the Arabs regarded Greece as a natural political counterweight to Turkey, which until then had shown a favourable stance toward Israel; c) Greece was considered capable of exerting a beneficial influence on the Americans in favour of the Arabs, able to persuade them regarding their true interests in the Eastern Mediterranean; and d) Greece might and could serve as a mediator between Arabs and Jews if circumstances required such a role.¹⁴

¹³ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, 'Memorandum on the Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Arab East', Chatzivasiliou (Athens), 3 November 1955.

¹⁴ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, 'Memorandum on the Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Arab East', Chatzivasiliou (Athens), 3 November 1955.

Chatzivasiliou underlined the urgent need to pursue an active Middle Eastern policy, which would also benefit, among other things, the advocacy and advancement of the Cyprus problem. This was not only because, as he noted, 'Arab countries could contribute to the satisfaction of our national claims'; it was also because a more independent policy, while remaining in the Western Alliance, could provoke Greece's Western allies' strong fears that Greece was shifting to neutrality. Consequently, this would help weaken Turkey's assertiveness and the 'neutrality' of the United States toward Greece on the Cyprus matter. Thus, if Greece developed its relations with the Arab world, it would, on the one hand, offset Turkey's strengthened role in the Middle East; on the other hand, it would raise Turkish concerns about its geographical isolation from the other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as well as its encirclement by states that wanted to remain neutral in the Cold War. Noteworthy, the concern over the potential creation of an axis among Greece, Egypt, and Yugoslavia ultimately contributed to reducing Turkish intransigence on the Cyprus problem, especially after the overthrow of the pro-Western regime in Iraq in July 1958 (Hatzivasiliou, 1992). From this perspective, Chatzivasiliou's memorandum demonstrates that the development of Greek-Arab relations aimed not only at weakening American 'neutrality' on the Cyprus question, but also at activating Turkey's existential fears so that it would appear more conciliatory toward Greece. According to Chatzivasiliou:

It is natural that the Turks, currently enjoying a sense of security within their allied framework with respect to us, their western neighbour, are imbued with a sense of superiority over us due to their territorial extent, population, the invulnerability of their country from past military adventures, etc. However, if Greece, by adopting a certain neutral-leaning stance, were to give the impression of causing a solution that affects the horizontal link in NATO's defence chain in the Mediterranean, and if it created the fear of its being added as a link in the vertical line of neutral-leaning countries, thus connecting Yugoslavia with Egypt, then Turkey would recognize the diplomatic significance of Greek support under the more nightmarish prospect of the resurgence of Russian claims over the Dardanelles, Kars, Ardahan, etc., and possibly the reappearance of other threats against it.¹⁵

There were also other Greek diplomats who feared that, if Greece remained inactive in developing its relations with the Arab world, Turkey would benefit. In other words, if Greece did not counterbalance Turkey's actions, there was a danger that Turkey could succeed in expanding its influence in the Arab world, even in countries that supported Greek positions at the United Nations. Under these circumstances, Greece considered it imperative to participate as a full member in the Beirut Conference (17-27 December), which aimed to reinforce economic cooperation among the countries of the Middle East and Southern Asia. Noteworthy, Turkey also participated. Economic and political reasons had dictated Greek participation in the first multilateral conference, also in Beirut, a few months earlier, on 25th May. As explained by Dimitrios Bitsios, Director of

¹⁵ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, 'Memorandum on the Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Arab East', Chatzivasiliou (Athens), 3 November 1955.

the Department of International Economic Cooperation at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and one of the six-member Greek delegation sent to the second Beirut conference, the decision for Greece to participate in the conference was driven also by the urgent need not to 'leave Turkey alone and unopposed to extend its influence to our southern flank and among states very friendly to us'.¹⁶ Furthermore, at a time when the efforts of the British and the Turks to persuade Jordan to join the Baghdad Pact had failed in December 1955 (Thornhill, 2006), Bitsios noted that Greece's participation in the discussions in Beirut offered the country an ideal opportunity to contribute to the 'restoration of Arab unity', as all four countries of the Baghdad Pact -apart from Britain- would also take part, 'to the benefit of Egyptian influence and the members favourably disposed toward Greece'. However, Athens could not understand that the Arabs were divided first and foremost because of their own priorities and differences, which Western interference reinforced. In particular, Cairo and Baghdad were competing for leadership of the Arab world; hence, any Western initiative to strengthen the latter, as through the Baghdad Pact, was seen by the former as a hostile act that would contribute to its isolation (Reid, 1988). Consequently, Greece's capabilities to unite the Arabs were limited.

Nevertheless, Greek officials and diplomats believed that Greece could demonstrate to its allies that it was better suited for the role of the mediator between the Arabs themselves and between them and the West than Turkey. This would contribute, according to Ion Alexandros-Tziras, the Director of the Second Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'to the gradual weakening of the significance of the Baghdad Pact'. In this way, he continued, the British would lose their main argument for linking the occupation of Cyprus to the need to maintain Western influence in the Middle East to protect it from the Soviet threat.¹⁷ Again, however, this Greek ambition could not be very convincing to the British and the Americans, who wanted to attract Arab states into a defensive arrangement such as the Baghdad Pact. In other words, Greece's uneasiness with the Baghdad Pact could not be shared by its Western allies. Thus, the limits of this new Greek policy were visible.

This anti-Turkish disposition was not the only motive of the Greeks in pursuing this new policy. They also showed a strong interest in the successful outcome of the discussions in Beirut, which also aimed to establish an economic organization in the broader region with the participation of both Arab and non-Arab countries. On the one hand, there were concerns that, if the Baghdad Pact were to collapse, especially after it failed to win Beirut's inclusion, the resulting vacuum could be filled 'by powers clearly hostile to us'. These concerns were expressed by Seferiades.¹⁸ On the other hand, Spyros Theotokis, Minister of Foreign Affairs in Konstantinos Karamanlis's new government, argued that if the discussions on economic coordination in the region were unsuccessful,

¹⁶ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 2, 'Economic Conference of the States of the Middle and Near East', Bitsios (Athens), 31 December 1955.

¹⁷ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 37, Tziras (Athens) to Foreign Ministry, 9 January 1956.

¹⁸ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 79, 'On Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Middle East', Seferiades (Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 10 January 1956.

the Baghdad Pact would continue to remain the 'only international organization in the Middle East', with the risk of gradually becoming 'a focal point attracting others'.¹⁹ Under these circumstances, according to Theotokis, Greek strategy had to be directed toward the effort 'to prevent the Baghdad Pact from acquiring denser content',²⁰ leading to its gradual undermining. However, Greek efforts should not openly conflict with the Cold War priorities of Greece's Western allies in the Middle East against the communist threat –again an indication of the contradictory and difficult nature of Greek aims. Indicative of this strategy was the strong willingness demonstrated by the Greek government to host in Athens, in May, the third session on the establishment of the economic organization, since the Beirut discussions had failed because of disagreements between Egypt and the Baghdad Pact countries.²¹ 'The framework that is presented to us today', Theotokis remarked in mid-January to the embassies in Cairo and Beirut, 'is that of the effort to establish a regional economic organization of the states of the Near and Middle East, for which purpose two conferences have already been held in Beirut, and it has been decided that the third will take place in Athens, provisionally scheduled for the upcoming May'.²² And he continued, emphasizing that

[...] our national interests do not allow us to simply observe the actions of Turkish diplomacy in the Middle East, either in terms of the potential positive political prestige it might gain, or in terms of the negative disruption its presence causes within the Arab world. [...] We must therefore work to ensure that, at least in the initial economic sphere, we achieve the formation of a cohesive group of states, extending from Greece to India, which, even through its mere presence, will serve as undeniable proof of the limited significance of the Baghdad Pact consortium.²³

However, despite the optimism prevailing among various actors within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the role Greece could play at the third summit of the Near and Middle Eastern countries to be held in Athens, Egypt's unwillingness to cooperate with Iran within the framework of the economic initiative resulted in the summit not taking place, and finally in the frustration of the Greek ambitions (Koumas, 2026).

Conclusions

The demand for the implementation of the right of self-determination for Cyprus by the British was the principal aim of Greece at that time. Despite its failure to secure the necessary majority in the UN, five Arab countries (Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia) supported Greece in both of its appeals in 1954 and 1955. Iraq, in the first Greek appeal, had abstained from voting in the General Assembly, whereas in the

¹⁹ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 1581, Theotokis (Athens) to the Embassies of Cairo and Beirut, 16 January 1956.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 42, 'Economic Conference of the Near and Middle East', Seferiades (Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 2 January 1956.

²² AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 1581, Theotokis (Athens) to the Embassies of Cairo and Beirut, 16 January 1956.

²³ Ibid.

second, as a member of the Baghdad Pact, it sided with its new partners, voting against Greece. The emergence of the Baghdad Pact in early 1955 and its expansion by the fall of that year, combined with the increased strategic importance of Turkey for the British, hindered Athens' attempts to effectively advance the Cyprus issue. In the same context, at a time when the latter had become an international matter, and Greece required international support, the Baghdad Pact and the strengthened Turkish factor within it posed the risk of turning a part of the Arab world toward British-Turkish positions to the detriment of Greek interests. In late 1955, under continuous Turkish pressure, Britain invited Jordan to join the Pact, hoping that its further expansion would attract other Arab states (such as Syria and Lebanon), thereby encircling Nasser, who in September had reached an agreement with the communist bloc for the supply of weapons (Yeşilbursa, 2005). Furthermore, after the creation of the Baghdad Pact, the Greek Ambassador in Beirut noted that 'Lebanon was showing signs of weakening, and the situation in Syria had not yet stabilized', creating the risk that 'our positions might become insignificant'. For this reason, he emphasized that 'the neighbouring Arab region is of vital importance to us, and not only must we maintain its friendship with all our strength, but we must also protect it from influences hostile to us, regardless of the broader framework of our foreign policy'.²⁴

It therefore becomes clear that Greece's 'opening' toward the Arab world in the second half of the 1950s was significantly dictated by the need to counter Turkey's regional position and weaken the Baghdad Pact. Greece linked support over Cyprus to the wider regional balance and to Turkey's strategic importance within Western defence arrangements, indicating that the decision to reconstruct its Middle Eastern policy mattered beyond the immediate diplomatic episode. Thus, the first initiatives that Greece took to counter Turkey in the Middle East during this period were its participation in the Beirut conferences (in May and December 1955) and its willingness to host the third summit of the participating Arab and non-Arab states in Athens to create an economic organization. The latter, from the Greek side, could function as a counterweight to the Baghdad Pact, leading to its gradual dissolution. Yet, although the related discussions proved short-lived, and despite the ambitions of a weaker state of the Western Alliance, such as Greece, to play a leading role in such a vast geographical area, 'which stretches from Greece to India',²⁵ there emerged a trend in the country's Middle Eastern policy that would be pursued until the end of the decade: the cultivation of its relations with the Arab countries and the diplomatic isolation of Turkey in the region. This new policy began in March 1956 with Kassimatis' tour of Egypt, Syria and Lebanon and would be fully developed under the new Foreign Minister, Evangelos Averoff-Tossizza, from May 1956. Notably, under Averoff, Ambassador Seferiades, who had strongly argued for a new Middle Eastern policy, became the head of the Cyprus 'desk' in the Foreign Ministry. Nevertheless, it would be the Suez crisis, from summer 1956, that would force Greece to step forward and implement this new policy (Hatzivassiliou, 1989).

²⁴ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 79, 'On Diplomatic Capabilities of Greece in the Middle East', Seferiades (Beirut) to Foreign Ministry, 10 January 1956.

²⁵ AGMFA, File 81/1/1956, Doc. 2, 'Economic Conference of the States of the Middle and Near East', Bitsios (Athens), 31 December 1955.

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