

## **The strategic shift: How Turkey's approach in the Aegean has changed**

Exclusive interview with Prof. George Zombanakis from The American College of Greece

*Q. When airspace violations decline, does it mean tensions have eased or simply that pressure has taken a different form? This is one of the central questions explored in a recently published article in Security and Defence Quarterly, "Hellenic airspace violations: An updating note" by Vasileios Symeonidis and George Andrew Zombanakis. The authors revisit their earlier forecasts on Hellenic airspace violations and uncover a strategic shift in Turkey's behaviour.*

A. Indeed, the original paper (Symeonidis and Zombanakis 2020) forecasted that the pressure exercised by Turkey would continue. In fact, we argued that "Our models, based on historical data, assume that both Hellenic air space violations and engagement incidents will keep increasing but will inevitably reach a monthly maximum, constrained by the availability of property and human resources on the Turkish side. The conclusions drawn point to the fact that Turkey will at some point in the near future reach its capacity limits in terms of property and human resources used in such offensive exercises, and that there is very little that can be done to enhance the margins of such activities given the room provided by the Turkish economy, which seems to be prohibitive". The second paper (Symeonidis and Zombanakis 2025) shows how and why this form of pressure has changed.

*Q. Do you think the 2023 Athens Agreement represents a genuine turning point in Greek Turkish relations, or is it more symbolic in nature?*

A. Our second paper on the issue (Symeonidis and Zombanakis 2025) explains clearly in footnote 1 that "The Athens Declaration on Friendly Relations and Good-Neighbourliness, publicly known as Athens Agreement between Greece and Turkey, signed on December 7, 2023. does not constitute an international agreement binding upon them under international law, and none of its provisions

can be interpreted as creating legal rights or obligations for the two sides”. It continues by clarifying that “following sustained and continuous pressure by the NATO administration (...) mainly on the Greek side, both countries have agreed to (...) refrain from any act likely to endanger the maintenance of peace and stability in their region and will endeavour to resolve any dispute arising between them in an amicable manner through direct consultations between them”.

*Q. How would you describe the broader geopolitical implications of the shift from airspace violations to hybrid tactics?*

A. The shift of Turkey to employing hybrid warfare methods rather than orthodox offensive ones like FIR violations has been an ingenious move indeed, given the geopolitical as well as economic circumstances. To be more specific, we need to compare the cost incurred by Turkey in both alternative cases, as follows:

FIR Violations: During 2022 the monthly average FIR violations of the Hellenic Air Space by THK aircraft (Türk Hava Kuvvetleri) rose to 938<sup>1</sup>. With the hourly flying cost for an F-16 amounting to about 25,000\$<sup>2</sup>, the monthly bill for the FIR violations “sport” was no less than 23,500,000\$ per month. Given, in addition, the multiple constraints facing the Turkish side (ageing F-16s fleet, several additional fronts still open in 2022 and the lack of experienced pilots after the 2016 coup), the cost and additional consequences of such tactics were prohibitive<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This figure reached its maximum in September 2022 at 1802 per month costing about 45,000,000\$ to THK. The data source is the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The F-16 fuel consumption figures are reported in GAO (2022).

<sup>2</sup> These figures are provided by the General Accounting Office (GAO) of the US Congress (GAO, 2022). The paper by Katsaitis and Zombanakis (2021) mentions a much lower figure as it refers only to fuel consumption, excluding maintenance, support, training and other additional cost items.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek side can also use Mirage aircraft, the hourly cost of which is considerably lower (8,802€), as reported by the French. Thus, for an average figure of 938 FIR violations in 2022 the cost for the Hellenic Air Force (HAF)  $938 \times 8,802 = 8,256,276\text{€}$  with the €/ \$ rate being roughly one to one. This allowed the HAF the luxury of treating FIR violations as a drill for readiness.

## HYBRID WARFARE TACTICS (Weaponisation of Migration):

The use of migration as a tool of hybrid warfare, has recently gained significant traction in recent years, particularly in the context of the European migrant crisis and the Belarusian-EU border crisis in 2021.

Thus, given the analysis above, it has been a wise move on the part of Turkey to resort to hybrid tactics, in this case the smuggling of migrants, for the following reasons. It is much cheaper, and it has been “subsidized” by the EU<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the EU-Turkey deal, finalized in March 2016, aimed to curb irregular migration from Turkey to the EU via Greece by agreeing to return migrants and refugees arriving in Greece back to Turkey. In exchange, the EU pledged financial assistance to Turkey for supporting refugees, the resettlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU, and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens.

But the main advantage for Turkey of facilitating emigration to Greece is the slow yet decisive effect that such tactics have on the social cohesion of the recipient country. Such tactics aim at causing instability and disrupting border security. In fact, when migration is weaponized, it can lead to increased border security concerns, social tensions, and political instability in the target country. It can also strain the resources and capacity of border control agencies and humanitarian organizations.

This impact can be increasingly pronounced if the birth rate of the recipient country is declining, and has tended to assume negative values in recent years.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>4</sup> The EU committed to providing €6 billion to Turkey to support refugees living in the country, with €3 billion initially allocated and an additional €3 billion promised.

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