

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Balkans Series

07/01



**The Cham Issue -
Where to Now?**

Miranda Vickers

January 2007

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

The Cham Issue – Where to Now?

Miranda Vickers

Key Points

* The ethnic Albanian and predominantly Muslim Chams from north western Greece are escalating their campaign for the restitution of their property and citizenship rights in Greece. Recently there have been some significant political and cultural initiatives to raise awareness of the Cham issue. These include the formation of a new political party, the Party for Justice and Integration (PJI), and moves to internationalise the Cham case in the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

* The Greek government refuses to discuss the matter publicly, claiming that the Cham issue does not exist. The Albanian government, however, cannot ignore the problem due to growing pressure from Cham organisations and sympathisers within the main Albanian political parties. Following last summer's large demonstration on the Greek border, which received widespread publicity, the Chams are co-ordinating and intensifying their activities with increasing support from the large Cham diaspora. Such actions have caused tensions between Athens and Tirana.

* The Chams will soon have exhausted all channels to find a peaceful solution to their demands. Dialogue between Tirana, Athens, Cham representatives and international mediators to resolve the issue is urgently needed in order to avoid further straining relations between Albania and Greece, and risking the issue being hijacked by radicals.

Contents

Introduction	1
Background	2
Political Developments	3
The Greek Response	9
The War Law	10
Conclusion	11

The Cham Issue – Where to Now?

Miranda Vickers

Introduction

The issue of the property rights of the predominantly Muslim ethnic Albanians (known as Chams), who were forcibly displaced from their homes in north-western Greece during World War II, has remained unresolved for over 60 years, and has the growing potential to become a major bone of contention between Albania and Greece – two otherwise friendly neighbours.¹ Although the majority of Muslim Chams fled Greece during the Second World War, other displacements occurred during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913, and during the dictatorship of General Metaxas in the 1930s when many Chams were violently driven from their homes.

Today there are approximately 250,000 Chams in Albania and an estimated 400,000 in the wider diaspora, mostly in the USA and Turkey. Despite being granted Albanian citizenship in 1953, many Chams still regard themselves as refugees deprived of their Greek citizenship and the right to return to their property in Greece. The Chams are campaigning for the Greek government to acknowledge the violence perpetrated against them, and for the return of their confiscated properties together with compensation for their use since their expulsion. They also want their Greek citizenship restored. Cham-owned properties in Greece are assessed at around US\$2.8 billion and include vineyards, forestry and grazing land, domestic and commercial property.²

In the spring of 2002 a report published by the Conflict Studies Research Centre discussed the historical background to the claims made by the Cham people regarding their property and citizenship rights in Greece.³ The report discussed the historical background to the Cham issue and attempts during the 1990s to internationalise the problem. Although this report initially generated a heated debate on the Cham issue amongst Albania's political class, little has been done since to address the matter. Over the past few years, the various Cham organisations and diaspora groups have gone to considerable lengths to get the Albanian and Greek governments to make a serious commitment to addressing their grievances, and to inform the international community of their wishes and objectives. Yet, although politicians from all Albania's main political parties have made numerous statements regarding the Cham issue, and have proposed several parliamentary resolutions, nothing tangible has resulted from these gestures and debates. Meanwhile, the Greek government consistently claims that the Cham issue does not exist and refuses to enter into a dialogue with Cham representatives. As a result, the Chams have taken their case to the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

The Cham issue is very much interlinked with that of the Greek minority in Albania and the large non-Cham Albanian population living in Greece. Although relations between Greece and Albania are good, they have been strained several times in recent years over the treatment of ethnic minorities and employment issues facing the several hundred thousand Albanian immigrants in Greece.

The last two years have witnessed a growing confidence and political sophistication amongst the Chams, which has recently expressed itself in the formation of a new cultural organisation, and a political party that wielded significant influence in the 2005 parliamentary elections. This paper outlines recent developments in the Cham issue, as efforts to internationalise the Chams' demands gathers momentum.⁴

Background

The Chams have a strong sense of tradition, identity and community which has united them over the past 62 years since their expulsion from Greece as suspected Nazi collaborators.⁵ This is in part due to the violence they suffered historically, but also to a collective prejudice against them on both sides of the border. Many Chams were persecuted by the Albanian Communist regime, which like the Greeks, believed that they had collaborated with the Italians and Germans during the Second World War. Whereas in Albania and the diaspora Cham communities have managed to preserve their dialect, traditions and folk songs, in Greece itself those Orthodox Chams, now numbering around 40,000, who were allowed to remain in Greece, have suffered from assimilation and the public suppression of their Albanian heritage and language. As a result, Albanian is only spoken privately in the home.

The mountain Chams were largely Orthodox Christians and the coastal and lowland Chams were mostly Muslim. By classifying the coastal Chams as "Turks" rather than Albanians, Greek historians have been able to justify the earlier confiscation of Cham-owned land, much of which was given to Greek refugees from Turkey during the population exchanges in 1923.⁶ Following their expulsion from Greece, most of the poorer Chams went to Albania, whilst the wealthier ones went to America and Turkey. Nevertheless, today the Chams are amongst the richest and most successful entrepreneurs in contemporary Albania.

Anyone now visiting north western Greece will notice the ever encroaching wilderness that has enveloped many villages once occupied by Chams. Cham domestic and administrative buildings, mosques and cultural monuments are slowly disappearing under overgrown vegetation. Land once used by Chams to graze their huge flocks is now reverting to forest due to the cycle of depopulation that has historically characterised this corner of south-eastern Europe. Thus the geographical and architectural legacy of Cham occupation in north western Greece is gradually vanishing.⁷ For those Chams living close to the Greek border it is especially frustrating being technically so close but politically so far from their ancient homeland. There are roughly 14,000 Chams or their descendants living in the southern Albanian town of Saranda and the villages north of the Albanian-Greek border. Many originally came from the Epirot coastal town of Sivota and the surrounding region, and none has ever been allowed a visa to go back to see their properties or the graves of their families.

Recently, however, a few intrepid Chams have managed to find their way back to their family's old homes, even trying to rebuild them. The Greek Foreign Office believes that some local Greek police are in the pay of Albanians and are thus turning a blind eye as a few Chams quietly re-establish themselves in long-abandoned property. At the same time, several hundred ethnic Greek minority families from Albania have settled in Epirot towns such as Filiates.⁸ This will have a long term political effect because it is gradually changing the demographic balance in the region, which could lead to social and economic tensions developing.⁹

In March 2004, the Institute of Cham Studies (ICS) was established with a board of 7 members. The Institute's primary aim is to attempt to "fill the huge gap in knowledge about the entire Cham issue".¹⁰ One of the first actions taken by the board of the ICS was to hold the first ever Cham Conference in Tirana in May 2004. This event was attended by Cham and other scholars, politicians and writers from both Albania and abroad, and was widely publicised in the media.¹¹ Meanwhile the Tirana-based Chameria Association is attempting to collect and record personal testimonies and accounts from Chams who left Greece in 1944-45 and are now living in Albania – personal archives, documents and other data - in a bid to preserve the historical memories that the older generation carry with them.¹²

Political Developments

Following the heated debates amongst Albanian politicians generated by the Conflict Studies Research Centre's report on the Cham issue in April 2002, there was an assumption that the report's conclusions would be acted upon and moves would begin to resolve the issue. Things looked promising when in May 2003 the then Prime Minister Fatos Nano declared in Parliament that he had reached an agreement with his Greek counterpart Costas Simitis on the establishment of a bipartisan working group to study the legal issues that would lead towards a final solution of the Cham issue. However, by September nothing more had been heard on the subject. This prompted a group of deputies from the National Front and Legality parties to draft a resolution on the Cham issue which was signed by over 40 other opposition MPs and lawyers.

The resolution expressed concern over the lack of commitment shown by both the Albanian and Greek governments in addressing the question of the property rights of the Cham people. It also stated that the government must ask for the abrogation of the War Law, the recognition of the properties of the Cham population, financial compensation for the loss of those properties, as well as freezing the law no 2664 (1998) regarding the registration of the Cham properties and their compensation. Initially, all political groups in the Albanian parliament declared that they would support the text and approve it on the basis of a consensus. However, after months of debate, with approval of the resolution being put off from one parliamentary session to another, the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee finally achieved a consensus and approved the Cham resolution, only to have it postponed yet again by parliament during the plenary session on 1 April 2004.

The resolution was sent back to the Foreign Affairs Committee to make corrections and improvements that were deemed necessary by the government. When informing shocked MPs of this decision, the Speaker of Parliament, Servet Pellumbi, said that it was necessary to alter some of the wording and phraseology of the text in order to assist Parliament in approving a more mature resolution. The opposition was furious at the government for not only continuously postponing approval of the resolution, but also drastically altering the text in order to appease the Greeks. Several fundamental points had been left out of the amended version, which included the abrogation of the War Law and the compensation that should be paid by the Greek authorities to the Cham people for the loss of their properties.

Albanian politicians were divided in their views on the reasons why the draft resolution needed to be so drastically amended. The opposition argued that the government was resisting approval of, and softening the demands of the resolution for fear that it would create tension in relations with Greece. The Socialists, on the

other hand, argued that their abstention that led to the rejection of the document was due to their fears about a new “broom” being used against Albanian emigrants in Greece, and subsequent fears for the economy should thousands of Albanians be sent back over the border if the Assembly were to approve the draft.¹³ Socialist Party deputy Spartak Braho said: “The main reason is that we cannot set the just demands of the Cham community against the primary interests of 600,000 Albanians in Greece.”¹⁴

This argument might have carried some weight several years before. In the spring of 2004, however, the position of Albanians living in Greece could not have appeared more secure due to the demand for Albanian workers to complete an enormous number of construction projects for the Olympic Games, which were to be held in Athens that summer. In fact this was the precise moment that the Albanian government could have exerted its greatest pressure on Athens to get some form of commitment to resolve the Cham issue. As one cynical Socialist MP, Sabit Brokaj, noted: “The rope that the Greeks keep around the neck of some Albanian politicians in relation to Albanian emigrants in Greece, is only a game of pressure. Only those Albanian politicians who are connected with the Greek monopolies, are involved in the informal economy, or have illegal revenues, bow to this pressure.”¹⁵

The very narrow defeat of the Cham motion in Parliament was almost certainly due to the pro-Greek wing in the Socialist Party, which backed away from the consensus achieved by the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee due to pressure being exerted by Greek diplomatic circles. There had been pressure on MPs to vote against the resolution, such as the chairman of the Union for Human Rights Party, Vangjel Dule, who demanded that MPs did not approve the draft as it could be a detrimental move for Albanian foreign policy.¹⁶ According to Dule: “This resolution comes at a time when the Balkan region is witnessing intensive events and a period of fragile balances, and the approval of such a resolution would damage those balances that could result in a high political cost for Albania’s foreign policy.”¹⁷

According to reports, the unexpected postponement of the draft resolution was seemingly the result of a confidential meeting between the then Greek Ambassador to Tirana, Pantelis Carcabassis, and officials from the Albanian Foreign Ministry. The Greek representative argued that “Greece considered approval of this resolution a non-friendly act by Albania.”¹⁸ There were also many accusations of Greek efforts to make sure the Albanian government kept silent on the Cham issue, which as one observer noted: “they do on the quiet by sponsoring the Albanian media, by buying journalists through free trips and other privileges, and through publicity campaigns, or by bribing Albanian politicians through enabling them to spend their time in Greek taverns”.¹⁹

The rejection of the draft resolution was a bitter blow to the Chams, who again took to the streets to demonstrate against the decision. On 15 March hundreds of Chams had waved placards baring the slogans “Chameria is ours” and “Return our properties” in front of the Parliament building demanding approval of the resolution.

Although the resolution had failed to be approved, it did succeed in highlighting the emotive, politically divisive and damaging nature of the Cham issue. Given the media allegations of Greek interference and bribery of Socialist MPs, it was clear that some form of damage limitation was urgently needed. Thus it was announced that official discussions on the Cham issue were to be convened. At a meeting in May 2004, the then Prime Ministers of Albania and Greece, Fatos Nano and Costas Karamanlis, agreed to start bilateral negotiations to find a “legal and fair solution to the question of Cham properties in Greece, and Greek assets in Albania”. Albania’s President, Alfred Moisiu, was clearly concerned at the damaging publicity regarding

Greece's "sponsorship" of certain government officials. He was also genuinely interested in the plight of the Chams and the need for an urgent resolution to the issue. In an interview, he explained that: "Past problems between Greece and Albania relating to the Chams, their property rights, the War Law and the Greek minority, did not affect actual day to day relations between the two countries, but nevertheless, these problems need to be urgently solved." ²⁰

The fact that the Albanian parliament had even considered passing a resolution requiring action to be taken on the Cham issue, and the sight of hundreds of angry Cham demonstrators was enough to galvanise Greece into defensive mode. The country embarked upon a series of military and diplomatic initiatives, which suggested a fear of Pan-Albanian expansion towards north-western Greece. Serbian and Macedonian media reports were claiming that new Pan-Albanian organisations were planning to expand their operations into north-western Greece to include Chameria in their plans for the unification of "all Albanian territories."²¹ Meanwhile, international observers were concerned that Kosovo politicians might start speculating with the Cham issue.

In September 2004 the Greek authorities announced the reinforcement of northern military areas near the borders with Albania and Macedonia. New infantry forces from eastern areas of the country were transferred close to the Greek border with Albania, and a unit of Patriot missiles was moved from Athens to a military air base near Thessaloniki, along with a new air force unit. These were permanent deployments that gave the distinct impression that Greece felt a possible threat from her northern borders, as opposed to the traditional threat from Turkey to the east. This fortress-like mentality was further enhanced by a giant ring of barbed wire reinforced with metal spikes, erected at the main southern border crossing at Kakavia.

Despite the Cham-induced controversy, during a visit to Albania in mid-October 2004, Greek President Konstantinos Stephanopoulos stated at a news conference that the Cham issue did not exist for Greece and that claims for the restoration of property presented by both the Cham people and the Greek minority in Albania belonged to a past historical period which he considered closed. "I don't know if it is necessary to find a solution to the Cham issue, as in my opinion it does not need to be solved," he said. "There have been claims from both sides, but we should not return to these matters. The question of the Cham properties does not exist," he told reporters.²² When speaking of claims from both sides, Stephanopolous was referring to the Greek claims on Vorio Epirus (Northern Epirus), which include a considerable part of southern Albania. The key difference, however, is that unlike Albania's ethnic Greek minority, who are allowed to own their own properties and have Albanian citizenship, the Chams are forbidden to return to their homes and are denied Greek citizenship. With the implementation of the property law adopted in 1992, Albania did not exclude the ethnic Greek minority from the right to own property.²³

During Stephanopoulos's visit, the Chameria Association was refused permission by police to hold a protest demonstration. Members of the Association explained that the Chams wanted to protest peacefully to show that they would not keep silent about their properties, and would continue to demonstrate until their legal position was restored and they were given back their assets. "We will never keep silent about our property, many of us have the land patents that prove our claims. They are our lands whether the Greeks like it or not," they explained.²⁴

By the beginning of 2005, the Chams had become disillusioned with both major

political parties' hollow and superficial gestures towards addressing their cause. They therefore decided to create their own political party – the Party for Justice and Integration (PJI) – to represent the Chams in the forthcoming parliamentary elections. The party declares in its statute that it belongs to the centre right, which is the political homeland for the vast majority of Chams marginalised by the Communist regime. Since the demise of the one-party state, the Chams have consistently put their faith in the centre right parties to pursue their rights with Greece. However, the Chams are fully aware that Tirana's politicians, whether Democrats or Socialists, only really focus on the Cham question during election time. Back in 1995, with an eye on the following year's parliamentary elections, the then Democratic Party government created a day of official remembrance on the anniversary of the massacre of Cham civilians at Paramithia on 25/7 June 1944, and also erected a monument to the Chams in the southern town of Konispol. In the run up to the local elections in October 2003 a street in central Tirana was renamed Chameria Street. These symbolic gestures were never followed up with any political initiatives.

During the June 2005 parliamentary elections, the Chams were scathing about Fatos Nano's attempts to woo them in Saranda. "He wanted to meet us because he wanted us to vote for him. He promised us jobs and good positions but he was not sincere about our problems," they said.²⁵ During the elections the support of the Chams helped re-elect Sali Berisha and the Democratic Party to power.²⁶ The largest demonstration during the election campaign was organised by the Vlora Chams, 90% of whom voted for the Democratic Party. There are 10,500 Chams in Vlora, the majority originating from the coast of Epirus. They had a very difficult time under communism because Enver Hoxha believed they had collaborated with the occupying forces during World War II. Due to their geographical proximity to Italy and the sensitivity of the Vlora coastal region, there was more pressure on the Vlora Chams under Communism, and consequently the most radical Chams in Albania are from Vlora.

There were now three centres of Cham activity: the political party – the PJI, the Cultural Institute of Chameria and the Chameria Association. Working closely together, these three groups were able to push forward the Cham agenda in the run up to the elections. Despite the PJI not being linked to a coalition of other parties, it succeeded in gaining tens of thousands of votes in the 2005 parliamentary elections, and was able to send an MP to parliament.

The month of November 2005 proved to be highly contentious as the deadline set by the Greek government for the Chams to officially register their property in Greece finally arrived. The law on property, which was passed and decreed by former Greek President Stefanopoulos, states that all unregistered Albanian-owned properties in Greece would be nationalised. The Act No 2664 "on Greek cadastral and other regulations", passed on 27 November 1998 by the Greek parliament, set 27 November 2005 as the final deadline for registering estate properties. Under the controversial War Law the property of the Chams is considered as property belonging to the "enemy" because of the Chams' alleged collaboration during the Second World War.

Despite being granted Albanian citizenship in 1953, the Chams still regard themselves as Greek as well as Albanian citizens, and therefore the legal owners of their properties in Greece. A lot of Chams have their property documentation, but the majority have not. Although November was the cut off date for the registration, almost no Chams could go to register their property because they were not allowed visas to enter Greece. The Greek government was aware that the Chams could not register their property, as they would have to travel to Ioannina to get copies of their

missing documents, which they could not do without visas to enter Greece.

As tensions rose with the approach of the registration deadline, Greek President Karolos Papoulias chose this inauspicious time to pay a visit to Albania. He was scheduled to meet for talks with Albania's President Alfred Moisiu in the southern town of Saranda. At the beginning of November, however, Papoulias suddenly cancelled his meeting with Moisiu because of a demonstration by a group of around 200 Chams. Papoulias was in the nearby city of Gjirokaster when the decision was announced. A Greek Foreign Ministry statement said that the meeting was cancelled because "the Albanian authorities had not taken adequate measures to protect President Papoulias by deterring known extremist elements, who are trying to hinder the smooth development of Greek-Albanian relations and present unacceptable, non-existent issues at a time when Albania is taking steps towards fulfilling its European ambitions". This was followed by a strongly-worded note of protest to the Albanian authorities delivered by the Greek Embassy in Tirana.

The annulment was an acute and humiliating snub to President Moisiu, who had initiated the visit. A spokesperson for the president said: "The President of the Republic expresses deep sorrow at this hurried and unexplainable decision by the Greek side which was based upon misinformation, regardless of the assurances from the Albanian side that this was a small, peaceful and well monitored demonstration."²⁷ The cancellation of the proposed talks between the two presidents was an over-reaction by the Greek authorities, as well as implied blackmail by inferring that "Albania's European ambitions" would in some way be damaged by the country encouraging extremist activity. Ever since Albania began negotiations to join the European Union, Greece, as the only regional EU member, has played the EU card to instil a sense of insecurity into Albania's political class, many of whom believe that if they step out of line, Greece will hamper Albania's EU aspirations. This is despite the fact that the minority rights orientation of modern Greece is currently incompatible with European and international law – a fact that needs to be examined by the EU Parliament.

The Greek decision was widely condemned by Chams and non-Cham Albanians alike, and unnecessarily damaged Greek-Albanian relations. The inability of the Chams to register their properties in Greece, and the manner in which Papoulias' visit was cancelled, infuriated the Chams. Representatives of the Chameria Association said the small protest was aimed at increasing awareness of the Cham issue. "It is better we demonstrate peacefully in a democratic manner, than take up arms to publicise our demands."²⁸

The beginning of 2006 saw the Chams with a heightened sense of frustration, and a renewed determination to internationalise their plight. On 8 February the Greek General Prosecution announced its decision to sell all unregistered property and land in Epirus, including Cham-owned land that was sequestered in 1945. According to the court the owners have not registered any interest in the land for over 20 years. The Chams considered the Greek decision as "open provocation" and called for an immediate response from the Albanian government and international institutions. No response was forthcoming.

In June around ten thousand Chams marched to the Greek border at Qafa e Bota to mark the anniversary of the massacre of Cham civilians which occurred on 27 June 1944 in the Epirot town of Paramithia. The event gained wide publicity within Albania and even the Greek media ventured up to the wilderness of this remote border crossing. Although the Chams commemorate this event every year, this protest was by far the biggest political action taken by the Chams in the 62 years

since they were driven from Greece. It was the first time in as many years that so many Cham people, of all ages and social classes, came together from every district of Albania. These were not “extremists” but ordinary people, taxi drivers, lawyers, shopkeepers, who regard themselves as Greek (and Albanian) citizens and wished to let the world know their desire for “a peaceful return to their homeland and to the graves of their forefathers”.²⁹

The demonstration was well coordinated, which represented a new level of cooperation amongst the various Cham regional groups. However, the protest was noticeably ignored in Albania by the ruling Democratic Party and the Socialist-led opposition. According to one observer, the demonstration actually contributed to the Albanian government’s negotiating power with Greece because in the light of recent events it could legitimately claim that it was obliged to raise the Cham question because of such strong pressure from the Cham community. The June protest also strengthened the position of the Albanian government because it provided additional arguments in the controversy over the graves of Greek soldiers on Albanian territory, with the Greek side asking to build several cemeteries for its soldiers killed in Albania, yet not allowing the Chams to pay homage at the graves of their forefathers in Greece.³⁰

Other initiatives followed, including sending letters outlining the Cham case to every major diplomatic mission in Tirana, and in May the PJI sent a memorandum to Prime Minister Sali Berisha and former Greek foreign minister Theodoros Pangalos, calling for their support for the rights of the Cham population.³¹ To date there has been no response from any foreign mission or from Dr. Berisha himself. With increasing frustration, the Cham leadership decided to take their case directly to Europe.

At the end of October, several members of the PJI went to the European Parliament in Strasbourg - the first direct presentation of their case to European parliamentarians. The PJI delegates stressed that they were visiting independently from the Permanent Albanian Delegation in Strasbourg. They had a successful meeting with Mrs Doris Pack, Chairperson of the European Parliamentary Delegation for South-Eastern Europe, who was presented with a dossier about the historical and political dimensions of the Cham issue, as well as proposals for non-violent and democratic solutions to the problem. Mrs Pack had an in-depth discussion with PJI Chairman Tahir Muhedini, during which she promised to investigate the possibility for the Chams to visit their homeland and their family graves in Greece. Mrs Pack also promised that the Cham issue would be discussed at the 13th round of the parliamentary session on Albania’s Association and Stabilisation Agreement with the European Parliament, and in particular she would discuss the matter with Greek Euro Deputies in the Parliament. The PJI delegates also met representatives of various European political parties, who promised to look at the possibility of proposing a Parliamentary Resolution which would seek to open a dialogue between Athens and Tirana, together with the participation of representatives of the Cham population in the presence of international mediators. It remains to be seen what comes from the visit to Strasbourg, but whatever the outcome this marked the first stage in the internationalisation of the Cham issue.

In a provocative move on 7 November 2006, the Greek government announced that it intended to grant dual citizenship to the ethnic Greek minority in Albania. Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis said the move was in response to long standing demands by members of the minority. She also pointed out that the Albanian constitution now guarantees its citizens the right to hold dual nationality as part of steps taken to harmonise its legal framework within European requirements and to fulfil EU criteria.³² Yet again the Greek authorities were playing the EU card. The

following day, Albanian Prime Minister Sali Berisha indicated that Albania would accept Greece's decision. Some 20,000 members of Albania's ethnic Greek minority are expected to be issued with Greek passports. The Chams responded to this announcement with a declaration of support for the notion, but also a call for Athens to return Greek citizenship to the Cham people. Tahir Muhedini called upon the Albanian and Greek governments to support the Chams' claims for Greek citizenship. He said that it would have been better if Greece had begun by giving passports to the Chams, and added that "Tirana and Athens still had time to react positively towards the Cham question".³³ An ominous warning perhaps that time was running out in efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Cham issue.

The Greek Response

The Greek authorities appear extremely reluctant to engage in any dialogue on the Cham issue. Aside from a minority of Greek academics, diplomats and human rights activists, most of the Greek population supports the authorities' view that such a topic does not exist.³⁴ This is clearly a case of missed opportunities. With the collapse of the Berisha government in 1997, Greece was in a unique position in its relations with the new Socialist-led government in Tirana, which started off on such a high note after the Socialist Party's victory in the 1997 elections. By constantly refusing to address the subject, the Greek authorities cannot find a unified response to the Cham issue, and remain divided as to how best to respond to what they consider the growing threat from their northern border. There are strong divisions in Greece between the Foreign Ministry, which knows it has to deal eventually with the issue, and the Ministry of Defence, which will not agree even to discuss the matter. Given the continued official pronouncements that "there is no Cham issue"; the Greek authorities appear to be burying their heads in the sand. As the June march to the border and the PJI visit to Strasbourg indicate, the Chams are becoming ever more unified and persistent in their quest.

Some Chams believe the Greek government is prolonging the delay in officially addressing the Cham issue in the hope that more of the original eyewitnesses to the atrocities that occurred in Chameria would die, and thus weaken the Chams' case. For example, one alleged such massacre of Cham people by the Greek government in the summer of 1953, which included the killing of women and children buried in a mass grave in Filiates/Filat, was witnessed by several Chams.³⁵

There is, nevertheless, a rational face to Greece, which acknowledges the massacres and large-scale displacement of the Muslim Chams, but argues that "in the chaos of war it wasn't really our fault".³⁶ Indeed,

"In the event of the Cham controversy developing internationally, there is likely to be some discussion of the British role in the events, as it is generally believed that the EDES royalist militia leader Col. Napoleon Zervas was acting on the orders of a member of the British mission (C. M. Woodhouse) in moving against the Chams in 1943-44. Woodhouse has defended his decisions by claiming that the interethnic conflict in Epirus, and also fighting between different wings of the Greek anti-Axis movement, meant that two divisions of the communist-controlled ELAS popular army were tied up in Epirus and this helped save the British force under General Scobie from defeat in the Battle of Athens in 1944."³⁷

To be fair to ordinary Greek people, it is quite understandable why they have little sympathy or any accurate knowledge of the Cham issue. They have been taught a

very simplistic historiography of the Epirus region – “those Albanians who left the coast and lowland areas of Epirus were really Turks, whereas those that remained in the hills were Christian, i.e. good, Albanians who were allowed to stay, and as the Muslim landowning ‘Turks’ left the Greeks were only getting their land back”.³⁸ There is also a genuine, if wholly irrational, fear amongst many older Greeks that to bring back the Muslim Chams is tantamount to asking the Turks to return. However understandable is this lack of accurate historical knowledge and fear of the returning Turk, there is also unfortunately a strongly nationalist element within Greece, spearheaded by the Greek Orthodox Church, which claims to own huge tracts of land within Albania. The Greek hard right and many people within the Orthodox world in Greece still harbour territorial designs on the ‘minority’ areas around Saranda, the coast north to Vlora and inland to Gjirokaster and Korca. For their part Albanians have never been taught about the terrible suffering of the Greek people during World War II, and the subsequent bloody Greek Civil War (1944-1949). It is clear that old prejudices need to be dispelled, and regional histories need to be re-evaluated and in most cases re-written.

The War Law

A significant problem that continues to hinder efforts to find an acceptable solution to the Cham question is that technically a state of war still exists between Greece and Albania. The so-called Law of War was adopted in 1940 by Greece when the country was invaded by Italian troops through Albania. Although this law was repealed by the Greek government in 1987, the decision has never been ratified by Greece’s parliament. Nevertheless, Greece argues that a state of war cannot be said to exist because it was lifted automatically in accordance with international law in 1987. The Chams argue that since their property was seized as a part of this controversial law, it is not enough for the Greek authorities to declare the law invalid - it should be abolished by Parliament.

The Law of War between Albania and Greece remains an obstacle to relations between the two Balkan countries, and is inextricably linked to resolving the Cham issue.³⁹ For a number of years now the Albanians have been pressing Athens to address this matter but to no avail. On 1 April 2003, the Albanian Democratic Party (DP), then in opposition, urged the Greek parliament to abrogate the War Law. Speaking at a news conference the DP secretary for foreign affairs, Besnik Mustafaj, said the Greek parliament had the power to abrogate the War Law with Albania. The following day, however, Greek Premier, Costas Simitis, told Prime Minister Fatos Nano that the War Law did not exist. That is as far as Greece appears prepared to publicly discuss the matter.

Despite containing numerous references to the Greek minority in Albania, the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Greece and Albania, signed on 21 March 1996 by the then Albanian Foreign Minister, Alfred Serreqi, and his Greek counterpart, Theodoros Pangalos, contains nothing about the State of War or the Cham issue. Clause 20 states that the Agreement shall remain valid for a period of 20 years. Therefore there are still 10 years to go before the Agreement needs to be reassessed, unless the issue is forced by either government. The Greek parliament has neither agreed to examine nor to abrogate the War Law, arguing that the existence of the Friendship Treaty between the two countries automatically abolishes it. A document dated 19 March 2004 on the official website of the Greek Foreign Ministry stated that the law that put the two countries at a “state of war” had been abrogated. “The Hellenic Republic, by a governmental decision of 28 August 1987, decided to abrogate the ‘state of war’ with Albania. The signing of the

Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Security by the foreign ministers of the two countries on 21 March, 1996 in Tirana, is considered an important basis upon which Albania and Greece have strengthened their bilateral relations and have turned the pages of the past.” According to the document, the treaty has been ratified by the two parliaments.

In May 1999, however, an Albanian lawyer, Mr Agim Tartari, wrote to a Greek colleague in a Thessaloniki law firm, Mr Constantine Hadjiyannakis, requesting information on the state of the Law of War between Greece and Albania. Having consulted the Ministry of External Affairs in Athens, the Greek lawyers confirmed that law no.2636/1940 and law no.4506/1966 is still in force. “The most recent International Treaties and the Treaty of Friendship, Collaboration and Security signed between the Republic of Albania and the Greek Republic in March 1996 have not affected the situation.”⁴⁰

In an interview in March 2004, former Foreign Minister Arta Dade confirmed that the Albanian government had asked the Greek government to fully abrogate the War Law as the primary step towards a solution to the Cham problem. According to Ms Dade, “frequent discussions took place on the War Law, but when the Albanian side demanded the Law’s abrogation at the time when I was Foreign Minister, the Greek government said that the interpretation made to the law in question was irrelevant”.⁴¹ This is obviously a very complex and ambiguous subject that needs to be conclusively settled, not only to assist in solving the Cham issue, but also in the interests of Albanian-Greek relations and Albania’s future EU membership.

Conclusion

The Cham issue has three main aspects: firstly there is the recognition of the problem by the Greek government, secondly there is the property issue, and then there is the question of citizenship. When discussing the Cham problem with Albanian politicians, they usually argue that it should not be seen as a political confrontation with the Greek government, because it is an economic issue and there is no point transforming it into a political issue.⁴² However this is too simplistic and also incorrect, because the Chams see financial compensation as just one factor in their demands.

The top priorities for the Cham people remain: the right to return to their properties in Greece and to regain legal title to their properties; the right to obtain Greek citizenship, whilst retaining the citizenship of the country in which they currently reside; and the right to live, work and travel freely in Greece without having to obtain visas. It is probable, however, that many upland Chams would settle for visas and passports but the lowland Chams would also expect their valuable land back, as well as compensation for its use since their expulsion. They would then be able to decide themselves whether to sell their property or not. They also want dual citizenship – Albanian and Greek, and want to be recognised as Greek citizens of Albanian nationality. According to most Chams, money is not as important as citizenship. “We have been refugees for a long time. We want our identity back,” they claim.⁴³

The Chams, despite constant setbacks and broken promises, are still unanimous in their insistence that the matter be solved through dialogue and not violence. Their wishes should be respected and their efforts to find a peaceful solution should be encouraged. In the light of recent developments, it is no longer possible for Greece to continue to claim that there is no Cham issue, and that the 1996 Treaty of

Friendship somehow abolished the need for the Greek parliament to ratify the abolition of the War Law. With their Party for Justice and Integration, the Chams have put themselves firmly on the political map. Committed activists are working hard to build the party in every city with a Cham community, and the party could take tens of thousands votes away from the ruling Democratic Party in forthcoming elections.

This is an historical legacy that requires new political initiatives to resolve. The Albanian government needs to be very clear and specific in its discussions regarding the Chams' demands. The War Law must certainly be included in any talks and resolutions because it constitutes a real obstacle to achieving a lasting solution to the Chams' property claims. Future relations between Greece and Albania will most certainly be held hostage by the Cham issue, therefore talks should be held as soon as possible and they should be held under international auspices. The human rights issues of the Chams cannot be resolved solely between Albania, Greece and institutions representing the Cham population. A fair and lasting solution should be achieved with international mediation and support from EU institutions and the United States.

In the coming years, it is going to become increasingly difficult for the Albanian and Greek governments, and indeed the EU institutions, to continue to ignore the Cham issue, which risks being hijacked by radical elements in Albania and elsewhere. There is already a split between moderate and radical Chams, with the former still by far the majority, but soon the Chams will have exhausted all reasonable democratic channels in which to call attention to their case.

Both sides should try to understand each other's perspective on this complex issue. The Greeks must accept the historical truth about the confiscation of Cham-owned land, and the intimidation and persecution the Chams suffered under the dictatorship of General Metaxas during the late 1930s. For their part, the Chams must understand the truly dreadful horrors suffered by the Greek people at the hands of the Nazis in World War II, and their subsequent intolerance towards those believed to have collaborated with the occupying forces.

There is some recent speculation that Greece may now be considering doing a deal with the Chams, which could see some receiving compensation in exchange for the renewal of the leases on Greek-owned property in Albania. If true, this is a useful step that could become the cornerstone of positive dialogue aimed at finding a lasting solution to the Cham issue. This would encourage a marked improvement in Greek-Albanian relations, and remove one of the more straightforward, yet most emotive cornerstones of the Albanian national question, and contribute to the development of peace and stability in the Southern Balkans.

Endnotes

¹ Chameria is an area in north-western Greece, centred on the Tsamis River, stretching from the Pindus Mountains in the northeast down to Preveza at the Gulf of Arta. It is the southern part of the ancient region of Epirus, and is sometimes referred to as Southern Epirus.

² For an authoritative account of the settlement, geography, demography and economy of Chameria see: Selman Sheme, *Chameria – vendi, popullsia dhe jeta ekonomike*, Tirane, 2005

³ The Cham Issue: Albanian National and Property Claims in Greece, Miranda Vickers, Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2002. <http://www.defac.ac.uk/csrc>

⁴ For a scholarly account of the background to the Cham issue see: Beqir Meta, *Tensioni Greko-Shqiptar (1939-1949)*, GEER, Tirana, 2002. See also Sali Bollati, *Gjurme Came, Shkupi Tirana*, 2004, and for historical perspectives from a generally more pro-Greek

- viewpoint see: T.J. Winnifrith, *Badlands-Borderlands – A History of Southern Albania/Northern Epirus*, London, 2002, and William Bowden, *Epirus Vetus*, London, 2003.
- ⁵ This paper does not discuss Cham history, a summarised account of which can be found in: *The Cham Issue: Albanian National and Property Claims in Greece*, Miranda Vickers, Conflict Studies Research Centre, April 2002. <http://www.defac.ac.uk/csrc>
- ⁶ For a useful recent historical study of the Cham issue see: Hasan Minga, *Chameria – veshtrim historic*, Tirane, 2006
- ⁷ See the *Challenge to Preserve the Cham Heritage*, by James Pettifer and Miranda Vickers, Shekulli, Tirana, 22 November, 2004
- ⁸ For an historical account of Cham social development see: Dr. Ramiz Zekaj, *The Development of Islamic Culture amongst Albanians during the 20th Century*, Tirane, 2002.
- ⁹ Prior to 1939, ownership of land in Epirus was very uncertain. Post-war, the main beneficiary of the Cham expulsions was the Greek Orthodox Church, which gained much land due to the Church's strong links to the victory of the Right in the Greek Civil War.
- ¹⁰ Interview with an ICS founder member, Gazmend Haxhiu, Tirana, April 2004.
- ¹¹ The ICS has published a book – in Albanian and English - containing all the papers presented at the conference entitled: *Ceshtja Cam dhe Integrimi Evropian*, Arberia, 2005.
- ¹² See: Eleftheria Manda, *The Muslim Chams of Epirus (1923-2000)*. Thessaloniki, 2004, p342. *Oi Mousoulmanoï Tsamthes tis Iperou*. The Chameria Association was formed on 10 January 1991, just prior to Albania's first multiparty elections.
- ¹³ There were many Socialist MPs who supported the draft resolution, but there were enough within the government itself to cause it to be rejected.
- ¹⁴ Korrieri, 10 April 2004
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ The Union of Human Rights Party largely represents the interests of Albania's ethnic Greek minority.
- ¹⁷ Albania Daily News, 2 April 2004
- ¹⁸ Shekulli 2 April 2004
- ¹⁹ Mentor Nazarko, Shekulli, 26 June 2006
- ²⁰ Author's interview with President Alfred Moisiu, Tirana, September 2004
- ²¹ See http://news.serbianunity.net/bydate/2002/October_31/3.html
- ²² Albanian Telegraphic Agency, 19 October 2004
- ²³ For an analysis of President Berisha's 1992-93 land privatisation programme, and its effect upon the ethnic Greek minority see: Miranda Vickers and James Pettifer, *Albania – From Anarchy to a Balkan Identity*, London, 1999, pp195-196
- ²⁴ Discussion with members of the Chameria Association, Tirana, October, 2004
- ²⁵ Interview with Chams in Saranda, April 2006
- ²⁶ See James Pettifer, *Chameria – Time For action? Illyria*, 28 November – 4 December 2006
- ²⁷ Albania Telegraphic Agency, 2 November, 2005
- ²⁸ Discussion with Cham leaders, Tirana, November 2005.
- ²⁹ Interview with participants who had been on the march to the border, Tirana, October 2006
- ³⁰ Mentor Nazarko, Shekulli, 26 June, 2006
- ³¹ Berisha and Pangalos were the protagonists of the historic Treaty of Friendship between the two countries signed in 1996.
- ³² Albanian Telegraphic Agency, 8 November 2006
- ³³ PJI Press release, 11 November 2006
- ³⁴ The Greek Ministry of Defence has an extensive budget which is sometimes called upon by Northern (Vorio) Epirus extremist groups to influence important leaders of opinion in Albania, and has even targeted prominent individual activists and community leaders in the Albanian community in the United States. The US Greek lobby is very active, and often dominated by the Greek Orthodox Church centred in the city of Chicago, which is the headquarters of most Northern Epirus lobby groups in the US.
- ³⁵ Discussion with Cham representatives, Saranda, April 2006
- ³⁶ Discussion with Greek academics in Thessaloniki, April 2004
- ³⁷ James Pettifer, *The Greek Minority in Albania in the Aftermath of Communism*, CSRC, July 2001, G97, note 39.
- ³⁸ For a (typically distorted) account of a previously Cham-occupied coastal town, see the current tourist guide to the Epirot coastal town of Sivota.

³⁹ There are several ongoing studies of the State of War between Greece and Albania. See for example the forthcoming doctoral thesis by Mentor Nazarko entitled: *La Questione del Sequestro dei Beni Private Albanesi in Territorio Greco Durante la Seconda Guerra Mondiale*.

⁴⁰ Reply by Mr Constantine Hadjiyannakis to letter dated 18 May 1999 from Mr Agim Tartari to the Thessaloniki Law Firm, *Nomos*, 27 May 1999.

⁴¹ Interview with Arta Dade, *Panorama*, 26 March 2004

⁴² Interviews with various Albanian politicians, Tirana, 2002-2006

⁴³ Discussions with Cham leaders in Vlora, April 2005.

Want to Know More ...?

See:

Miranda Vickers, "The Cham Issue - Albanian National & Property Claims in Greece", *Conflict Studies Research Centre*, Eastern Europe Series, G109, April 2002.

Eleftheria Manda, *The Muslim Chams of Epirus (1923-2000)*. Thessaloniki, 2004

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect official thinking and policy either of Her Majesty's Government or of the Ministry of Defence.

ISBN 978-1-905962-01-3

Published By:

**Defence Academy of the
United Kingdom**

Conflict Studies Research Centre

Defence Academy of the UK

Watchfield

Swindon

SN6 8TS

England

Telephone: (44) 1793 788856

Fax: (44) 1793 788841

Email: csrc@da.mod.uk

<http://www.defac.ac.uk/csrc>

ISBN 978-1-905962-01-3