News



The Esphigmenou Monastery on Mount Athos.

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Monks are preparing for a major raid on Mount Athos, the Greek mountain considered a sacred site for Eastern Orthodox Christians, after Greek police sent a letter on July 16 asking for increased resources to evict scores of brothers who have been living there without authorization for more than two decades.

The 130-square-mile peninsula houses 20 monasteries and about 2,000 monks from across the Orthodox world. It is a special jurisdiction under Greek law and the European Union, placing it directly under the purview of the Ecumenical Patriarchate — which is based in Istanbul — and allowing local traditions to continue, such as the complete barring of women and even female animals from the mountain.

"With this letter we request the organizational and wider support for the entry, accommodation and movement throughout the Athonian peninsula for a long period of time of a sufficient number of police officers and heavy vehicles, in order for our service to respond immediately and with operational precision to a request submitted by bailiff for the execution of evictions in areas of the Athonian State," stated the letter sent to the Holy Community of Mount Athos, which administers the peninsula.

The letter's language referring to evictions is understood to refer to the 118 monks of the Esphigmenou Monastery who are openly in conflict with the Ecumenical Patriarchate and illegally occupying the monastery since 2002, according to Greek courts. The dissident monks have racked up multiple criminal convictions after past attempts to evict them.

"Greek police should have acted long ago. It's their constitutional duty to protect Mount Athos, which is part of Greece," said Father Bartolomeos, the abbot of the New Esphigmenou Brotherhood, which the Ecumenical Patriarch set up in 2005. Bartolomeos and his brotherhood plan to move into the space currently occupied by the dissident monks.

"The police have the means to conduct a smooth evacuation, but the real threat comes from the occupiers, who possess explosives and guns inside the monastery," he added.

The Esphigmenou monks residing on Mount Athos have rebranded as Genuine Orthodox Christians, to distinguish themselves from mainstream churches. Independent communities around the world have adopted the same moniker.

The Genuine Orthodox Christians, also called the Church of the True Orthodox Christians of Greece, have cultivated a fierce fundamentalism. They have broken with the Orthodox mainstream by not recognizing some Eastern Orthodox saints and by rebaptizing Orthodox Christians who wish to join the church. Archimandrite Methodios, the leader of the Esphigmenou monks on Mount Athos, has expressed favor for Russian ultranationalism and praised the idea of a Greek Hitler.

The Genuine Orthodox Christians have also not accepted the Greek Orthodox Church's 1924 adoption of the Revised Julian liturgical calendar, which the majority of Eastern Orthodox jurisdictions follow today but the Russian, Serbian, Jerusalem and other patriarchates do not. The calendar revision is seen by many of those preferring the Old Calendar as an act of unacceptable ecumenism with Catholics and the Western world.

The break between the monastery and the Greek Orthodox mainstream stretches back over half a century to 1972, when Athenagoras I, a predecessor of the current Ecumenical Patriarch, began the slow process of repairing relations with the Vatican. As the decades went on, the gulf between Esphigmenou and the Patriarchate widened as the leadership of the Ecumenical Patriarchate became the liberal side of the Orthodox world, putting heavy focus on matters such as environmentalism and interfaith dialogue.

Refusing to commemorate the Patriarchs and joining the Old Calendarists took the monks out of communion with the wider Greek church and caused the Ecumenical Patriarchate to deem them "schismatics" in 2002. According to the Greek Constitution, heterodox or schismatic monasteries (as well as Roman Catholics) are not permitted on the mountain. In 2005, the Ecumenical Patriarch called for their removal and established a new monastic order to replace them.

Archimandrite Methodios has asserted that any attempt to remove the brothers is religious persecution and his monastery has also claimed that police intervention

would create new martyrs.

"Methodios has effectively introduced a new doctrine by claiming that he should practice his faith only in one particular place, the occupied monastery," Bartolomeos said.

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The attempts and failures of Greek courts and police to remove them from the 10th-century monastery have provided a repeated spectacle for Greek media.

Over the years, the ships that supply the other monasteries on the peninsula have ceased to supply Esphigmenou, and its monks have become an increasingly isolated enclave on the already remote mountain, refusing much communication with the other 19 monasteries.

"So there they see themselves as very much barricaded, because they have to do their own thing to be able to continue to get supplies in a way that the other monasteries aren't," said Samuel Noble, a scholar of Orthodox Christianity at Aga Khan University in London. "There's an enormous siege mentality that has built up over the years."

In a recent statement, the Genuine Orthodox Christians compared police action against the monks to the blockade of Gaza.

"The reference to a sufficient number of policemen for a long period of time, foreshadows an attempt to block the Monastery for many years with the aim of handing over the Fathers from the threat of starvation," the group said. "This plan would constitute a grave violation of basic human rights. After the global outcry over the blockade of Gaza, to which international humanitarian aid is sent, the possible creation of a blockade center in Greece is going to discredit the country worldwide."

Atop the gate to Esphigmenou hangs a banner that reads "Orthodoxy or death." The monastery coined the phrase in 1972 as it cut ties with the Ecumenical Patriarch. Since then, it grew in popularity in the Russian Orthodox Church and has been associated with fundamentalist and Russian nationalist organizations, including monarchists opposed by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow. The phrase has been banned as extremist material in Russia since 2010.

It’s a motto the Esphigmenou monks seem to have lived up to in their decades-long struggle.

After one attempt to remove them in 2006, pictures of bloodied monks being dragged out of the monastery by police scandalized the overwhelmingly Orthodox Greek public. During another attempt in 2013, the monks met Greek police with Molotov cocktails and other weapons.

Now, with a third attempt on the horizon, the monks are showing no signs of backing down.

"We’re ready to defend the monastery to the death; this is our spiritual homeland. Here we were born spiritually, and here we will die," Archimandrite Methodios said, according to the Greek City Times. "If the fathers of the monasteries and the police come here to make Greeks fight against Greek monks, they should reconsider. Regardless of the outcome, let them come. Will the monks simply stand by if an officer assaults one of us?"

Methodios was sentenced by a Thessaloniki court to 20 years in prison for throwing a Molotov cocktail at police during the 2013 eviction attempt, but the sentence has subsequently been reduced to less than six years. Several other monks were also convicted and received prison sentences of varying lengths over the incident.

However, the monks of Esphigmenou aren’t entirely on their own. At a soccer match between Thessaloniki and a team from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Thessalonikan fans raised a banner expressing their support for the monks.

While the current situation is being closely followed in Greece, the police have yet to make any move on the monastery. Any kind of state action on the peninsula risks upsetting a delicate status quo.

"Athos is super autonomous in two ways. It’s autonomous relative to the Greek state in that the Greek state touches it very, very gently," Noble said. "And then there’s a degree of autonomy relative to the rest of the Ecumenical Patriarchate."

Beyond Esphigmenou, the other monasteries of Mount Athos tend to practice far more conservative strains of Eastern Orthodoxy than other churches under the purview of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, he noted.

"So anything that touches on Athos touches on this sort of double autonomy that they have. And so trying to do something is really difficult, because you don’t want to upset either their special relationship with the Greek state, or their special relationship with Ecumenical Patriarchate," Noble said.