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Religious Diplomacy, Climate Geopolitics and Migration in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Ambivalence of the Sacred Between Dialogue and Securitization

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Abstract

The Eastern Mediterranean has always been a space where religious traditions, geopolitical antagonisms, and migratory waves intersect, yet existing literature treats religious diplomacy, climate geopolitics, and the securitization of migration as separate fields, leaving a significant research gap for 2015–2025. Drawing on Appleby’s notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred,” this study proposes the Eastern Mediterranean as a “religious geopolitical zone”—a space in which Islamic and Christian institutions move simultaneously, rather than sequentially, between humanitarian dialogue and securitization under accelerating climate pressure. Combining Critical Geopolitics, Copenhagen School securitization theory, and Environmental Peacebuilding, it applies geopolitical discourse analysis to texts by the Vatican, Al-Azhar, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Diyanet, and Sant’Egidio, together with UNHCR, IOM, and IPCC data. The analysis shows that religious rhetoric functions concurrently as a securitizing “speech-act” that legitimizes exclusionary policies through cultural nationalism and a foundation for humanitarian cooperation, as evidenced by the Sant’Egidio Humanitarian Corridors and the Vatican–Al-Azhar dialogue. Climate change likewise operates simultaneously as a material multiplier of tension and as a semiotic resource that either reinforces securitization or establishes a common moral basis for inter-faith environmental action. The findings offer an analytical model that enriches securitization theory, Critical Geopolitics, and the religious diplomacy literature, with implications for actors seeking to move the region toward sustainable cooperation.

Keywords: religious diplomacy; securitization; Mediterranean geopolitics; climate change; migration



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1. Introduction

The Eastern Mediterranean has never been simply a geographical entity; it is, at the core, a cultural–historical field in which religious traditions, imperial memories and migratory waves are intertwined in relations of simultaneous reciprocity and antagonism. Here, all three monotheistic religions were born and spread; here, empires that demarcated the world through religious law and holy war were built and collapsed; here, the patterns of European and Arab modernity were shaped in constant dialogue and rupture (Portugali 2004). At the beginning of the 21st century, this multilayered complexity is not weakening—on the contrary, it is regaining sharpness under the pressure of two new, mutually reinforcing factors: climate change as a multiplier of insecurity (climate change as threat multiplier) and the return of religion to the center of geopolitical analysis, a central-

ity that, as this article discusses below (Section 4.1.2), was never simply interrupted after the Cold War but took different forms across different periods (Fenech 2013, pp. 226–41).

The Eastern Mediterranean is currently experiencing a convergence of environmental, energy and humanitarian challenges without historical precedent. Climate change is accelerating desertification in North Africa and sea level rise in the Nile Delta, undermining agricultural viability in Morocco, Tunisia and Syria, and multiplying “hydrological shocks” that are disrupting societies with already fragile institutions (Jiang et al. 2026). These climatic pressures compound, rather than replace, the conflict- and demography-driven migration flows that have long characterized the region—most notably, the displacement generated by the Syrian civil war—and it is this compounding effect, rather than a claim of climatic causation in isolation, that the analysis below examines. At the same time, the discovery of significant hydrocarbon deposits in the Eastern Mediterranean—the Aphrodite, Leviathan and Zor fields—has transformed the sea into a new theater of energy geopolitics, fueling overlapping maritime claims, EEZ disputes and intense diplomatic tensions. These pressures intensify migratory flows from the Global South to Europe; so, the sea—historically a great route of exchange—is transformed into a border-barrier, a space of control and exclusion instead of a bridge of civilizations (Ellinas 2022).

In this context, and building on Appleby’s notion of the “ambivalence of the sacred”, this study proposes the concept of the Eastern Mediterranean as a “religious geopolitical zone: a space in which religious factors do not function simply as a cultural backdrop, but simultaneously as tools of legitimation, mobilization, competition, solidarity and cooperation (Lianos Liantis 2020). Three converging features distinguish this region empirically from other spaces where religion is geopolitically salient. First, it hosts, within a single geopolitically compact area, the institutional seats of four historically weighty religious authorities—the Holy See, Al-Azhar, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and the Diyanet—each maintaining an active, documented geopolitical discourse (see Section 4). Second, across the 2015–2025 period examined here, the same religious actors’ public interventions overlap sustained pressure from three distinct crisis vectors—mass migration, hydrocarbon-driven maritime disputes, and accelerating climate stress—rather than addressing them in separate institutional arenas. Third, the empirical material presented in Sections 4 and 5 shows these same institutions oscillating between securitizing and humanitarian registers within short time frames, rather than settling into a stable alignment with either logic. It is this specific density and simultaneity of religious geopolitical action—not merely the general presence of religious rhetoric, which is not unique to this region—that justifies treating the Eastern Mediterranean as a distinct analytical zone rather than assuming the label. Regional players—Erdoğan’s Turkey, France as a champion of “laïcité” identity, Egypt balancing between state Islam and secular authority—use religious references as tools to legitimize geostrategic pursuits, transforming material conflicts into conflicts of identity and culture (Tanchum 2021, pp. 11–26).

Religious diplomacy—defined as the mobilization of religious resources, networks, and moral authority to promote peace, mediation, and interstate understanding—has been recognized as a critical factor in international relations, particularly in the post-Cold War world (Omotosho 2014). However, the current conjuncture is characterized by an increasing “securitization” of both migration and energy resources: according to the Copenhagen School, securitization constitutes a linguistic–political act through which an issue is elevated to an “existential threat,” thus justifying extraordinary measures outside conventional political boundaries (Stritzel 2014). In the contemporary Eastern Mediterranean, this logic operates on multiple levels simultaneously: migration is securitized as an “invasion” or “identity displacement”, energy as a “vital interest” that justifies naval expansion, and climate change as an “existential risk” that requires hard choices about priorities (Planas Gifra 2024). Religion is intertwined

with each of these dimensions, either reinforcing the rhetoric of threat or, conversely, proposing alternative moral languages of solidarity and responsibility.

The 2015 migration crisis, the Greek–Turkish tensions in the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, the competition over the hydrocarbons of the Cypriot EEZ, and the cascading effects of climate change in North Africa and the Middle East are not isolated events but mutually reinforcing manifestations of a single structural shift: religious identity returns to the center of geopolitical analysis not as a relic of the past, but as an active tool for shaping the present (Deriziotis 2024, pp. 253–66). Religious leaders, institutions, and narratives act simultaneously as stabilizing agents—through networks of dialogue, humanitarian action, and moral authority—and as destabilizing agents, when mobilized by state or populist actors to legitimize exclusive policies. This ambiguity is not simply an analytical paradox—it is the fundamental issue with which the study of religious diplomacy in the 21st century Mediterranean must grapple.

Islam and Christianity—the two dominant religious traditions in the Mediterranean area—express diverse and often conflicting positions on issues of migrant hospitality, climate responsibility, and energy justice. On the one hand, the papal encyclical *Laudato Si'* (Pope Francis 2015) and the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015) represent leading religious efforts to develop a moral language for the climate crisis: the first through “ecological theology” that connects “the cry of the earth” and “the cry of the poor,” and the second through the Quranic concepts of *khalīfa* (vicegerency/delegation), *amāna* (trust), and *mīzān* (balance). Both mobilize theological arguments to highlight the connection between climate injustice, poverty, and forced migration—a connection that remains silent in mainstream geopolitical analyses but is increasingly documented by the growing literature on the intersection of religion and climate change (Aziz et al. 2025). On the other hand, at the national and local levels, religious narratives are used to legitimize diametrically opposed policies: European nationalists invoke a “cultural Christianity” to justify closed borders, while Islamist movements exploit the doctrine of Islamic solidarity to legitimize both humanitarian interventions and geopolitical expansionist aspirations (Öztürk and Giritli Nygren 2025).

At the heart of this analysis lies not a linear transition but an enduring ambivalence between religious dialogue/humanitarian cooperation and securitization—two logics that coexist and compete within the same institutions, depending on specific political conjunctures, institutional structures, and the strategic choices of actors. This transition directly affects religious communities, which are called upon to decide between two incompatible logics: the “prophetic” logic of hospitality, solidarity, and ecological responsibility that stems from the core of their religious tradition, and the “conditional” logic of adaptation to ethnocentric security policies represented by the dominant political culture of the states in which they operate. The way in which institutions such as the Vatican, the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), Al-Azhar University, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, or Islamic NGOs manage this tension largely determines the possibilities of religious diplomacy in the Mediterranean.

In this light, this article seeks to develop a coherent analytical framework for the religious geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean, examining this dynamic along three inter-related axes: first, the relationship between religious diplomacy and migration governance, tracing the way in which religious institutions move between humanitarian action and geopolitical instrumentalization; second, the interconnection of climate geopolitics and religious narratives, identifying the conditions under which the climate crisis functions as a multiplier of religious–political tension or, conversely, as a springboard for moral convergence; and third, the structural conditions under which religious dialogue is transformed into a tool of securitization, assessing the responsibility of both state and non-state actors.

The aim is not to provide an exhaustive empirical record, but to construct an interpretive tool that allows for an understanding of the changing political economy of religious action in the 21st century Eastern Mediterranean.

This study thus contributes to the interdisciplinary intersection of religious studies, Critical Geopolitics, and securitization theory, suggesting that understanding contemporary Mediterranean realignments requires analytical tools capable of managing the simultaneous materiality and symbolism of religious action in the international arena. Far from resolving this tension once and for all, religious institutions typically hold both logics in permanent, unresolved coexistence—moving between them as circumstances shift, rather than progressing from one to the other.

Despite this interdisciplinary convergence, the existing literature presents a significant research gap: there is no study that analyses religious diplomacy, climate geopolitics and migratory securitization as interrelated components of a single phenomenon in the Eastern Mediterranean context for the period of 2015–2025. Existing works either examine religious diplomacy detached from the climate dimension, analyze migratory securitization without incorporating the religious variable as an autonomous analytical factor, or approach the climate–religion nexus at a global level without regional specialization. This article fills this gap by introducing and documenting the concept of the Mediterranean as a “religious geopolitical zone” and developing a triangular analytical model that allows for the simultaneous analysis of all three dimensions based on empirical data updated to 2025.

2. Research Question and Working Hypotheses

Mapping such a multifaceted phenomenon, such as the intersection of religious diplomacy, climate geopolitics and migration governance in the Eastern Mediterranean, requires a research design with sufficient theoretical depth without dispersing analytical focus across too many distinct lines of inquiry. Rather than treating migration governance, climate geopolitics, and the securitization of religious dialogue as three separate objects of study, this article organizes them as three interconnected facets of a single underlying question concerning the ambivalent role of religion in Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics.

2.1. Central Research Question and Analytical Foci

RQ. Under what political, institutional, and theological conditions do Islamic and Christian institutions in the Eastern Mediterranean move between a logic of humanitarian dialogue and hospitality and a logic of securitizing, ethno-cultural exclusion in their engagement with migration and climate change?

This single question is examined through three analytical foci, corresponding to the three empirical dimensions introduced above. These foci are not independent research questions requiring separate answers, but complementary lenses on the same underlying dynamic of ambivalence.

Focus A—Migration and Hospitality: This focus concerns the institutional, political, and social conditions that determine why the same theological tradition—the Islamic concept of *ḍiyāfa* (hospitality) or the Christian commandment of *agape*—can produce both humanitarian policies and exclusionary narratives of “cultural threat,” depending on who interprets religion, to which audience, and under what political pressure.

Focus B—Climate Geopolitics: This focus treats climate change not as a purely physical or technocratic issue, but as a field in which moral and political meanings are produced and contested. It examines the conditions under which theological language—the Islamic concept of *amāna* (trust in creation) or Christian “ecological sin”—either transcends national interests to form a common basis for action, or is mobilized to reinforce competing territorial and energy claims.

Focus C—Institutional Integration: Building on the patterns of ambivalence identified under Focus A and Focus B, this focus asks what forms of institutional integration might shift that balance toward sustained cooperation. It examines the structural conditions under which religious diplomacy contributes to institutional cooperation rather than remaining rhetorical, including the extent to which religious actors are integrated into multilateral governance fora addressing migration and climate change (e.g., UNHCR processes, COP mechanisms), and how this integration relates to broader human security and sustainable development objectives.

2.2. Working Hypotheses

The research question and its three analytical foci are examined through two working hypotheses, formulated to be evaluated through the qualitative comparative analysis that follows.

H1—Securitization Hypothesis: Religious rhetoric can function as a securitizing “speech-act,” in the sense of the Copenhagen School (Buzan and Wæver 2009), when combined with state power, producing conditions of social acceptance for exclusionary policies toward migrants and refugees. Religious authority—hierarchy, mufti, institution—does not merely legitimize political decisions *ex post*, but can actively construct the “audience” required for a securitization act to succeed.

In applying this hypothesis, the analysis distinguishes explicitly between two uses of the concept of securitization: as an empirical pattern to be identified in specific cases (Section 4), and as an explanatory mechanism invoked to account for a different outcome. This distinction addresses a risk of circularity in treating securitization as both the phenomenon under investigation and its own explanation, and is applied consistently throughout the case analysis. It draws on Balzacq et al.’s (2016) critique of the Copenhagen School’s linguistic emphasis: the success of a religious “speech-act” depends not only on rhetorical structure, but on institutional legitimacy, historical memory, and conjunctural political pressure. H1 would be disconfirmed if cases of religious securitizing rhetoric were found to have no measurable effect on public or policy reception distinguishable from purely secular threat framing—that is, if the religious framing added no discernible audience-construction effect beyond what a secular equivalent would achieve.

H2—Ambivalent Institutional Function Hypothesis: Religious institutions and climate change alike exhibit a dual function—operating simultaneously as sources of geopolitical tension and as resources for cooperation—and the direction in which this ambivalence resolves in practice depends on institutional configuration. Actors with supranational, non-state legitimacy and limited dependence on a single national interest (e.g., the Holy See, the Community of Sant’Egidio¹) exhibit greater capacity to move toward the cooperative pole of this ambivalence. Actors closely coupled to state power and national identity politics (e.g., Diyanet, state-aligned religious nationalism) exhibit greater susceptibility to the securitizing pole. H2 would be disconfirmed if a state-coupled actor were found to consistently favor the cooperative pole across the cases examined, or if a supranational non-state actor were found to consistently favor the securitizing pole independent of political context—either pattern would indicate that institutional configuration is not, in fact, the operative variable.

This hypothesis integrates what were previously treated as two separate propositions concerning the dual nature of climate change and the relative institutional power of state-linked versus supranational religious actors. Institutional configuration is treated here as the explanatory variable common to both the climate and migration dimensions, rather than as a third, independently operating hypothesis; this is intended to make explicit the connection between institutional type and outcome, addressing a point on which the the-

oretical rationale had previously remained implicit. It draws on Vallier's (1971b) analysis of the transnational character of the Catholic Church, and on subsequent work on Sant'Egidio's role as a "soft power" actor in peace processes, to argue that institutional influence not backed by state power can nonetheless be diplomatically consequential precisely because it does not threaten state interests.

2.3. Relationship Between Questions, Assumptions and Analytical Strategy

The research question and its two working hypotheses constitute a coherent analytical program operating primarily at the descriptive and interpretive levels: establishing, through comparative case analysis, what patterns of religious engagement with migration and climate geopolitics occur in the Eastern Mediterranean, and why. H1 is evaluated principally in relation to Focus A and the migration dimension; H2 applies across all three foci, since institutional configuration is treated as a factor shaping outcomes in both the migration and climate domains and, in turn, the prospects for institutional integration examined in Focus C.

The normative dimension of this study—its concern with the practical possibilities for religious diplomacy to contribute to cooperation rather than exclusion—is acknowledged as an explicit orientation of the authors, consistent with a research tradition that does not treat analytical distance as equivalent to indifference to humanitarian consequences. However, this normative concern is addressed separately, as a distinct layer of policy reflection in the Discussion and Conclusions (Section 6) rather than as a third mode of empirical analysis operating alongside the descriptive and interpretive work of Sections 4 and 5. This separation is intended to keep the empirical findings of this study distinguishable from the policy recommendations that follow from them.

Overall, this analytical framework suggests that understanding religious diplomacy in the Eastern Mediterranean requires transcending three dichotomies that permeate the existing literature: the "state/non-state actor" dichotomy, the "dialogue/conflict" dichotomy, and the "religion/geopolitics" dichotomy. These dichotomies do not reflect analytical realities, but ideological constructions that serve specific interests—secular-technocratic, nationalist, or religious-hegemonic—and whose deconstruction is a prerequisite for a realistic assessment of the possibilities and limits of religious action in contemporary geopolitical rearrangements.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Theoretical Framework: Critical Geopolitics and Discourse Analysis

This study adopts Critical Geopolitics as its central theoretical-methodological tool, as developed by Tuathail and Dalby (2002, pp. 13–27), combined with Geopolitical Discourse Analysis. In contrast to traditional approaches that treat geopolitics as an objective description of space and power, Critical Geopolitics treats categories such as "border", "threat", "energy security", "migratory pressure" as verbal constructions that produce political outcomes. Religion is analytically included as one of the most powerful systems of geopolitical meaning production: categories such as "Christian Europe", "Dār al-Islām" or "Holy Land" charge with a moral-historical necessity that legitimizes specific policies.

The analytical concept introduced in this study—"religious geopolitical zone"—is related to, but distinct from, three pre-existing terms: "sacred geography" (Langton 2017, pp. 131–39) describes the symbolic loading of places without attributing a role of international actor to religion; "religious soft power" (Haynes 2022) recognizes institutional religious actors but examines individual organizations, rather than regions; and "secularization in reverse" (Bruce 2013, pp. 79–89) concerns sociological trends without geopolitical specialization. The "religious geopolitical zone" is proposed here as a regional space

where religious factors function simultaneously as tools of legitimization for state actors, as autonomous diplomatic resources for non-state institutions, and as systems of meaning production for territorial and energy disputes. Operationally, a space qualifies as such a zone only where all three functions are jointly and demonstrably present over a sustained period, rather than where religious rhetoric merely accompanies political conflict: this requires (i) multiple institutional religious actors with an internationally recognized diplomatic footprint, of the kind documented for the Eastern Mediterranean in Section 1; (ii) documented instances of the same actors' discourse shifting between securitizing and cooperative registers in response to the same material pressures, as shown in Sections 4 and 5; and (iii) territorial or resource disputes in which religious framing is explicitly invoked by state actors as a legitimizing device, examined in Section 5. This three-part scope condition is what distinguishes the concept from "sacred geography," which requires none of the diplomatic or state-legitimizing functions, and from "religious soft power," which requires neither regional scale nor the securitization dynamic.

Discourse Analysis is applied at two levels: at the macro-level, to official texts—government strategies, church documents, declarations of international organizations—that organize geopolitical discourse around religious symbols and categories; and at the micro-level, to specific statements and speeches by political and religious leaders, identifying the rhetorical "keywords" through which geographical borders are transformed into cultural and religious trenches (Talib and Fitzgerald 2016).

Environmental Peacebuilding (Conca 2002, pp. 85–100) and the concept of Human Security (Reinsberg et al. 2024) are employed as secondary interpretive lenses rather than as independent methodological pillars: they inform how the analysis reads the dual conflict/cooperation potential of shared environmental challenges and the shift from state-centered to individual-centered security, but they do not generate separate research operations of their own. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 13, SDG 16, SDG 10) are used in Section 4 as an empirical reference framework for assessing whether religious institutions adopt this normative language, rather than as a third full analytical layer. This narrower theoretical architecture—one central framework (Critical Geopolitics/Discourse Analysis) supported by two secondary lenses—replaces the earlier three-layer "triangular" design in order to keep the analytical focus on discourse and its geopolitical effects.

3.2. Corpus Construction, Coding, and Comparison

The discourse corpus comprises three categories of primary sources: (i) official religious-institutional texts (Vatican encyclicals and Holy See statements, Al-Azhar declarations, Ecumenical Patriarchate statements, Diyanet publications, Sant'Egidio communications); (ii) state and intergovernmental texts referencing religious categories in migration or climate policy (e.g., EU–Turkey Agreement documents, national leaders' speeches at the UN General Assembly); and (iii) quantitative and institutional data from UNHCR, IOM, the Mixed Migration Centre, IPCC, and the Arab Barometer used to contextualize and, where possible, cross-check discursive claims against documented patterns of migration flows, climate impact, and public opinion.

Texts were selected purposively where they met two criteria: (a) explicit invocation of religious categories, language, or authority in relation to migration, climate, or energy governance, and (b) direct relevance to one of the five institutional actors examined (Section 3.3). Within each source, passages were coded manually for three recurring discursive functions: legitimization (religious language used to justify a policy already adopted for other reasons), mobilization (religious language used to construct a constituency or "audience" for future action), and moral framing (religious language used to establish an ethical claim independent of state interest). These three functions map directly onto the mecha-

nisms specified in Hypotheses H1 and H2 (Section 2.2), allowing the coding scheme to be evaluated against the hypotheses rather than applied as an open-ended exercise.

Comparability across cases was established by applying the same three-function coding scheme to all five institutional actors and by triangulating discursive claims, where quantitative data were available, against UNHCR, IOM, and IPCC figures (e.g., comparing rhetorical claims about migration “invasion” against documented arrival numbers in Table 1). Where texts were in Turkish or Arabic, coding was performed on the original-language source and cross-checked against official or widely used English translations. Coding was performed by a single analyst without formal inter-coder reliability testing; this is acknowledged as a limitation of the discourse-analytic component of this study, consistent with the broader limitations noted below, and mitigated in part by the triangulation of discursive claims against independent quantitative sources described above.

Table 1. Migration flows in the Mediterranean (2015–2025).

Year	Arrivals (Total)	Deaths/Missing	Main Route	Critical Event
2015	1,015,078	3771	88% Greece	Peak—ISIS/Syria
2016	363,348	5096	65% Greece	EU-Turkey Agreement (March)
2017	171,635	3139	72% Italy	Pushbacks—Aegean reduction
2018	141,472	2277	66% Spain	New Spain Route
2019	123,663	1885	59% Spain	Greece’s deterrence strategy
2020	95,031	1544	56% Spain	COVID-19/closed borders
2021	187,518	3231	38% Italy	Rise of Libya/Tunisia
2022	155,633	2406	45% Italy	Ukrainian crisis
2023	273,978	3155	52% Italy	New climax/Tunisia
2024	187,337	2452 (Mediterranean) ~3500 (UNHCR)	49% Italy	Meloni-EU External Processing—24% drop
2025 *	~165,000 (est.)	~2185 (est.)	41% Italy	Fall of Assad—new composition of flows

Sources: (UNHCR n.d.) Sea Arrivals Dashboard (2024: 187,337; 2025: estimate based on UNHCR January–August 2025), IOM Missing Migrants Project (deaths 2024: 2452 Med.; UNHCR ext. 3500 incl. Atlantic) (*) 2025: provisional data as of August 2025—annual trend estimate. Shading: partial estimate.

3.3. Rationale for Temporal Scope and Case Selection

The period of 2015–2025 was selected because it is bounded by two events of direct relevance to all three empirical dimensions of this study: the 2015 European migration crisis, which first brought religious framing of migration to the center of Eastern Mediterranean politics, and the completion of a full decade of IPCC and UNHCR data series allowing for consistent year-on-year comparison through 2025. This is not intended as a claim that religious–geopolitical dynamics in the region began or ended within this window, but as a bounded period for which comparable annual data exist across all three empirical dimensions examined.

This study’s focus on the Eastern Mediterranean similarly reflects a deliberate narrowing of scope rather than an implicit claim to cover the Mediterranean as a whole; the religious–geopolitical dynamics of the western Mediterranean basin (e.g., Morocco, Spain) fall outside the empirical scope of this article and are noted as a direction for comparative future research (Section 6).

Five institutional actors were selected as the primary units of discourse analysis: the Holy See, Al-Azhar, the Ecumenical Patriarchate, Diyanet, and the Community of Sant’Egidio. These were selected according to three criteria, applied jointly: (i) demonstrated production of a substantial public discourse explicitly linking religion to migration, climate, or energy geopolitics within the 2015–2025 period; (ii) institutional standing rec-

ognized by state or international actors as authoritative within their respective religious traditions; and (iii) variation in institutional configuration—ranging from state-coupled (Diyanet) to the Holy See, whose institutional form does not map neatly onto a state/non-state binary (it is simultaneously the government of a sovereign state with near-universal diplomatic recognition and a religious authority exercising predominantly moral rather than territorial power), and Sant’Egidio, a non-state lay association—needed to evaluate this variation’s effect on diplomatic outcomes. Turkey, France, and the Visegrad states (particularly Hungary) are examined not as representative of, respectively, the whole of the Islamic world or of Europe, but as specific cases in which state leaders explicitly mobilized religious categories in migration or energy policy during the period studied; their inclusion is a case-selection choice tied to discursive salience, not a claim to statistical representativeness. Similarly, *Laudato Si’* and the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change are treated as the most discursively prominent religious–climate texts of the period for their respective traditions, rather than as exhaustive statements of Catholic or Islamic doctrine; Section 4 explicitly notes internal contestation over *Laudato Si’* within Catholic reception (see Section 4.3), consistent with the heterogeneity acknowledged in the limitations below. Islamic Relief is cited on the same illustrative basis: it is referenced as one visible institutional expression of the *dhiyāfa* and *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* traditions in humanitarian practice, selected for its documented operational scale in the region (Reifsnider 2021, pp. 125–46), rather than as a representative or authoritative voice for Islamic theological positions on hospitality as a whole.

3.4. Data Sources and Caveats

Quantitative data are drawn from UNHCR Sea Arrivals Dashboard, the IOM Missing Migrants Project, IPCC AR6, the World Bank Groundswell report, and the Arab Barometer. Data for 2024 are treated as final where confirmed by the issuing organization; data for 2025 are partial-year or provisional at the time of writing and are explicitly flagged as such in all tables and in-text figures (e.g., “2025: provisional data as of August 2025”). Where 2025 figures are used to support a substantive claim, the claim is phrased in terms consistent with this provisional status (e.g., “current trends suggest,” “based on partial-year data”) rather than as a settled finding.

3.5. Limitations

Three limitations are explicitly acknowledged. First, the focus on English-, Greek-, and partly Turkish-language corpora may under-represent discourses originating in North Africa and the wider Arabic-speaking Middle East. Second, discourse analysis of public statements does not have access to internal diplomatic deliberation and therefore captures public positioning rather than private negotiation. Third, the internal heterogeneity of both Islam and Christianity is necessarily simplified for comparative purposes; where this simplification risks obscuring significant internal contestation (e.g., diverse Catholic reception of *Laudato Si’*), this is flagged explicitly at the relevant point in the analysis rather than left implicit. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but define the boundaries of their generalizability.

4. Analysis: Religion, Migration and Climatic Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean

The following analysis is organized into three interrelated thematic axes, which correspond to three analytical foci introduced in Section 2 (migration and hospitality, climate and energy geopolitics, institutional integration): the “battle of narratives” around migration crises, the religious dimension of energy conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean, and

religious diplomacy as a tool for stabilization or destabilization. In each of these axes, discourse analysis reveals that religion is not simply an ideological “cover” for material interests—on the contrary, it constitutes autonomous geopolitical realities that are not reducible to secular categories of power. According to Appleby (2000, p. 19), religion possesses an inherent “ambiguity of power” in terms of violence and peace—and this constitutes the central analytical question of the present study: under what conditions does the same theological tradition produce humanitarian action or exclusive politics? The answer lies in the structural conditions of institutional legitimacy and geopolitical expediency that determine who interprets religion and with what result (Sadaqat 2025). Each case below is analyzed using the three-function coding scheme introduced in Section 3.2; illustrative instances of legitimation, mobilization, and moral framing are flagged in brackets where they occur.

4.1. Migration Crises and the “Battle of Narratives”

4.1.1. The Instrumentalization of Migratory Flows as a Hybrid Threat

The 2015 migration crisis highlighted for the first time in full clarity that migration flows in the Mediterranean are not only a humanitarian issue but also a tool of hybrid pressure. Turkey—the country hosting the largest number of refugees in the world (3.6 million Syrians in 2016 according to UNHCR)—turned this demographic reality into a bargaining chip. The logic was unquestionably geopolitical: controlling the flow of people as the equivalent of a strategic “deterrent” against the EU.

However, what differentiates the Turkish case from a classic exercise of geopolitical pressure is the religious codification of the entire strategy. Erdogan was not just speaking as a state leader negotiating on the basis of interests. He was speaking as a representative of the “oppressed Islamic world” that assumes the religious obligation to protect its co-religionists. In a speech to the UN General Assembly (Erdoğan 2019a), he described Syrian refugees as “mazlumlar”—the “oppressed” of Islam [mobilization]—thus translating a humanitarian situation into a Quranic category of moral obligation (Yalçınkaya 2026). This religious codification was not accidental: it operated simultaneously at home (legitimizing the policy of hospitality to a Turkish population that was showing fatigue) and abroad (diplomatic pressure on the EU through the fear of an “Islamic invasion”).

The instrumentalization of migration functions as a “double mirror”: the same religious discourse simultaneously produces a narrative of solidarity for the domestic audience and a narrative of threat for the European one.

The “EU-Turkey Agreement” (March 2016) embodies this double logic. In official diplomatic texts (Council of the European Union 2016), the agreement was couched in secular–technocratic terms: “returns”, “financing”, “accession capital”. In the public sphere, the Turkish side constructed a coherent narrative through two complementary strategies: the construction of Europe as a “debtor” (Erdoğan 2019b) unable to recognize the disproportionate Turkish sacrifice, and the repeated threat of “opening the gates” (RFE/RL 2016; Norman 2019) as a geopolitical lever of pressure—thus revealing that Turkey was tacitly presenting itself as an Islamic power-shield of a Christian Europe, the non-recognition of which Turkey framed as Islamophobia rather than political dissent.

Table 1 presents the overall evolution of migration flows across the wider Mediterranean basin for the full period of 2015–2025, incorporating the most recently verified data. These broader figures are presented for comparative context, with the analysis itself focused on the Eastern Mediterranean routes and actors specified in Section 3.3.

The 2024 development highlights a significant shift: arrivals fell by 24% compared to 2023 (187,337 versus 273,978) according to final UNHCR figures—the largest annual drop since 2016. This decrease does not reflect an improvement in conditions in countries of

origin, but an intensification of deterrent measures: the Italian Albania protocol (external processing of asylum claims), new EU–Tunisia/Libya funding agreements and increased pushbacks. At the same time, the fall of Assad (December 2024) drastically changed the composition of flows: Syrians—who were 35% of the total in 2024—fell to just 2.9% in the first months of 2025, while new nationalities emerged (Afghans, 29.9%, Egyptians, 23.4%, and Sudanese, 14.4%, in Greece).

The year of 2025 presents a mixed picture: arrivals in Italy registered +9% compared to 2024, were stable in Greece, and registered a 30% drop in Spain. Deaths in the Mediterranean—estimated at ~2185 for the whole of 2025—remain tragically high, although slightly lower than in 2024: an average of six people are lost in the Mediterranean every day (IOM 2026).

Table 2 captures a crucial shift in the 2024–25 composition: Bangladesh has emerged as the first country of origin of arrivals in Italy, replacing Syria. This change has direct religious-narrative consequences: Bangladeshi migrants are overwhelmingly economic migrants—not refugees of persecution—which weakens both the Turkish narrative of “Islamic solidarity”, which was mainly based on the Syrian tragedy (Alharbi 2025), and the papal discourse of “climate-humanitarian responsibility”. At the same time, it highlights the limits of religious codification: mass economic migration is difficult to incorporate into theological narratives of displacement.

Table 2. Religious composition and securitization of migration flows (2015–2025).

	Religious Identity	Estimated Arrivals	Main Country of Destination	Securitization Intensity (2024–25)
Syria	Sunni Islam (87%)	630,000+ (2015–23) ~45,000 (2024)	Central Europe	Moderate—after Assad falls (December 2024) ↓
Bangladesh	Sunni Islam (90%)	~90,000 (2024) 32.4% It. H1-2025	Italy/EU	Increasing—economic migrants
Afghanistan	Sunni Islam (80%)	280,000+ (cumulative)	North Europe	High—Taliban/persecution
Egypt	Sunni Islam (90%)	~45,000 (2024) 11.8% It. H1-2025	Italy	Low—bilateral Egypt–EU
Eritrea	Christian (63%)	95,000+ 14.5% It. H1-2025	North Europe	High—political persecution
Sudan	Sunni Islam (97%)	~40,000 (2024)	Italy/EU	Rising—civil war 2023
Tunisia/Morocco	Sunni Islam (99%)	250,000+ (cumulative)	Italy/Spain	Low-Moderate—economic
Pakistan	Sunni Islam (97%)	75,000+ 8.7% It. H1-2025	Central Europe	Low

It. H1-2025 = Italy arrivals, first half of 2025 (UNHCR/IOM preliminary data). ↓ = declining trend/decrease in securitization intensity or flows. Data concerning migrant nationalities along the Libyan route for 2024, as reported by UNHCR/IOM, indicate the following distribution: Bangladeshi (25%), Syrian (24%), Egyptian (12%), and Pakistani (7%). Furthermore, analysis of arrivals in Italy during the first half of 2025 by the Mixed Migration Centre reveals a shift in demographics, with Bangladeshi (32.4%), Eritrean (14.5%), and Egyptian (11.8%) nationals representing the primary groups. This overview incorporates additional contextual insights provided by the Pew Research Center (2024).

4.1.2. The Securitization of Judeo-Christian Identity in Europe

If Turkey securitizes migration from the perspective of Islam, the European response securitizes it from the perspective of a reconstructed “Judeo-Christian identity.” This is an ideological category that gained significant new momentum as a counter-narrative to “Islamization” after the attacks of 11 September 2001 (Prades 2025), though its roots are older: the return of religion to the center of European political discourse had already be-

gun with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the role of religious actors—including the Polish Solidarność movement and John Paul II’s teaching on freedom—in the collapse of Communism. What changed after 2001 was less the presence of religion in geopolitical discourse than its specific reframing around an Islamic “other” (Casanova 2017).

The French version of this strategy is of particular interest due to its internal contradiction. Laïcité, as a secular constitutional principle, is often used as a de facto tool for excluding Islam from the public sphere, despite its theoretical neutrality (Belhaj 2022). In Macron’s statements (Macron 2020) (especially after the Paty assassination, 2020), “separatism” is defined as an Islamic pathology, while no other religious separatism is thematized in the same way. The discourse of “cultural threat” functions here as a securitizing “speech-act” that translates legal differences into existential conflict.

The most explicit version of this strategy is found in the Visegrád countries. Orbán, in particular, has developed a comprehensive political–theological discourse: Hungary does not refuse refugees as a state decision, but as a Christian obligation; the “protection” of Europe’s “Christian heritage” from “Muslim invasion” (Orbán 2019) is, in this logic, a religious duty [legitimation]. Brubaker’s (2017, pp. 235–57) observation that this “cultural Christianity” is not primarily about theological beliefs but about cultural boundaries is notable: the leaders who invoke it are often not practicing Christians, but rather exploit Christian identity as a national–cultural identifier (Johnson and Cohen 2013, pp. 338–60). This instrumentalization, however, does not exhaust the phenomenon. In Central and Eastern Europe, the historical experience of centuries at the frontier between Christendom and the Ottoman world, and the more recent trauma of state destruction under Communist rule have generated distinct patterns of ontological (in)security that cannot be reduced to elite instrumentalization alone (Fazekas 2025). The populist anti-immigration rhetoric examined here should therefore be read as drawing on pre-existing regional anxieties about identity and continuity, rather than solely manufacturing them. The migration crisis highlights with stark clarity the “double mirror” of religious securitization. Turkey mobilizes the discourse of Islamic solidarity (mazlumlar) simultaneously for internal legitimation and external pressure. Europe reacts with a narrative of “Judeo-Christian identity”, a constructed cultural border that Brubaker (2017) calls civilizationist Christianity and which is not accompanied by theological consistency. Pope Francis (2015; 2023, §61, 69 & 70–71) constitute the only consistent Christian response, but they remain a minority position in the European political landscape.

4.1.3. Islamic Hospitality Ethics vs. Securitization Policy

The juxtaposition of these securitizing narratives with the theological core of the traditions they invoke highlights the extent of normative hypocrisy on both sides. In Islamic tradition, the concept of dhiyāfa (hospitality) is traced back to the Quran (9:6), while fiqh jurisprudence al-aqalliyyāt (minority rights) has developed an extensive theology for the protection of Muslims and non-Muslims in foreign territories. Organizations such as Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid express this tradition in practice, maintaining extensive networks of humanitarian action in the Mediterranean (Reifsnider 2021, pp. 125–46).

However, Erdogan exploits this theology selectively: “brothers in faith” welcome Islamic solidarity only if their hospitality serves geopolitical purposes (Sula and Sula 2025). Syrian Kurdish refugees, Alevis or Christian Syrians do not receive the same rhetorical defense, revealing that “Islamic hospitality” functions here as a selective construct, not a substantive theological commitment.

4.1.4. Christian Theology of Hospitality: Vatican and Orthodoxy

In the Christian world, the corresponding contradiction is equally evident. Pope Francis chose Lampedusa (July 2013) as his first apostolic journey, a deeply symbolic gesture: the island was already at that time the epicenter of the migration “collapse” in the Mediterranean (Catania 2015). Then, in Lesbos (2016), together with Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens, he gave a signal of Christian inter-confessional solidarity (Sawa 2025). But beyond the symbolic dimension, this visit was also a geopolitical act: the Holy See emerged as a moral authority in a space from which the EU was turning its eyes away.

The encyclical *Pope Francis* (2015) situates the migration crisis within a broader theological–political narrative: climate injustice produces the need for migration; so, hospitality is inseparable from a commitment to environmental justice [moral framing]. This connection—repeated in *Pope Francis* (2023)—is perhaps the most theologically consistent analysis of the structural causes of the migration crisis that has been produced by a religious institution in modern times. It should be noted, however, that Francis’s approach was itself contested within Catholicism: for a significant portion of Catholics and clergy, his positions represented less a natural extension of existing social teaching than a distinct—and, for some, controversial—departure from it (Sawa 2025). This internal contestation is relevant to assessing the reach of *Laudato Si’* as a basis for interfaith or intra-Christian consensus, and is treated as a limitation on the generalizability of this line of analysis.

The Orthodox Church presents a more complex picture. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew—the “Green Patriarch”—has developed a theology of ecological responsibility that aligns with the Vatican position, while at the same time finding himself in an extremely difficult geopolitical position: the Patriarchate of Constantinople operates within Turkish territory, under constant pressure (Youssef 2025). In contrast, sections of the Church of Greece have expressed cautious or negative positions towards Muslim immigrants, reflecting the tension between theological anthropology and national–ecclesiastical identity that has also been examined historically by Makrides (2005, pp. 137–78).

4.2. Energy Disputes: The “Sacred” Background of Alliances in the Eastern Mediterranean

4.2.1. From EEZs to Neo-Ottomanism: The “Blue Homeland” as a Religious–Geopolitical Narrative

The discovery of significant hydrocarbon reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Aphrodite (Cyprus), Leviathan (Israel), and Zor (Egypt) fields, has transformed the sea into a new theater of geopolitical competition. Typically, the conflicts concern overlapping EEZs, maritime law, and energy concessions (Ellinas 2022). At a deeper level, they reflect a struggle for identity and hegemony in the Mediterranean with a strong religious dimension.

The Turkish doctrine of the “Blue Homeland” (Mavi Vatan), as developed by Admiral Cem Gürdeniz and later adopted by the Erdogan government, is not simply a legal-military doctrine; it is a narrative of historical restoration. The Mediterranean, especially the Eastern Mediterranean, is presented as a maritime space deeply connected to Ottoman history and, by extension, to the Islamic-Turkish presence. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Treaties of Lausanne (1923) are treated in neo-Ottoman discourse as a historical injustice in need of restoration, and the energy claim in the Mediterranean is part of this “restoration” (Stavrinos 2026).

The most prominent expression of this strategy was the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque (July 2020). This decision was widely analyzed as an internal political measure to strengthen the mobilization of the electorate, which is true. But Critical Geopolitics suggests a complementary reading: Hagia Sophia is a geopolitical symbol-space with global recognition (Oztig and Adisonmez 2024). Its conversion sent a clear message to the

West and the Mediterranean: Turkey does not recognize the terms of the post-Cold War order, it reclaims the claim to the symbolic space lost with Atatürk and bases its claims on Islamic-historical legitimacy that goes beyond positive international law (Amin 2024). The reaction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Vatican, Athens and Nicosia confirmed that the message was understood.

Table 3 maps the energy conflicts updated with developments in 2024–2025, highlighting that their religious dimension is not only maintained but intensified—especially after the Gaza war (October 2023).

Table 3. Energy disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean: developments in 2024–2025.

Field/Dispute	Actors	Status 2024–25	Latest Developments	Religious Dimension
Aphrodite Field (Cyprus)	Greece/Cyprus vs. Turkey	Active 2024–25	EU sanctions Turkey (2020); new drilling rounds 2024	Reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque in 2020 as geopolitical symbol of Islamic legitimacy; Erdoğan invokes Ottoman heritage
Leviathan Field (Israel)	Israel/Egypt/EU	Active 2024–25	Expansion of exports to EU via Egypt 2024 (LNG)	Abrahamic narrative strengthens energy cooperation between Israel and UAE
Zohr Field (Egypt)	Egypt/EU/Israel	Active 2024–25	Increase in natural gas exports in 2024 due to Ukraine war	Al-Azhar as moral support for stability; state Islam vs. revisionism
Turkish-Libyan Memorandum	Turkey/Libya vs. EU/Greece	Disputed 2024–25	New Turkish drillers 2024 in disputed zone	Mavi Vatan: Islamic-Turkic historical presence; Libya as platform of Islamic influence
EastMed Pipeline (cancelled)	Greece/Cyprus/Israel	Cancelled 2022	US objection; shift to offshore RES 2024–25	Orthodox + Hebrew cultural capital—limited direct theological dimension
Israel– Hamas Gaza War	Israel vs. Hamas/Iran	2023–present	Active conflict; Mediterranean security affected by instability	Highest charge: Holy Land, jihad, apocalyptic narratives—“clash of civilizations” frame

This analysis is based on reports from the U.S. Energy Information Administration (update) (U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) (2025)) and the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF, International Gas Union (IGU) (2025)).

The most significant new variable in the 2024–25 energy landscape is the Gaza War (October 2023–), which has brought the highly religiously charged Palestinian conflict back to the center of the regional agenda. The implications for energy geopolitics have been immediate: increasing uncertainty about investments in Leviathan, rebalancing the EastMed Forum, and the reinstatement of the “clash of civilizations” as a narrative framework by Islamist organizations (jihad as a moral obligation) but also Christian Zionist movements (apocalyptic reading) (Goldstein 2025). The Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Vatican reacted with diplomatic calls for a ceasefire, effective as a moral discourse, weak as a political intervention.

4.2.2. The Countervailing Axis: Energy, Religion and Diplomacy

Against Turkish revisionism, the Greece–Cyprus–Israel–Egypt axis, which was expressed institutionally through the *East Mediterranean Gas Forum* (2019) and the proposed EastMed Pipeline, was formed around common energy interests. But here too the religious dimension is not absent—it functions rather as a tacit “cultural capital” that favors the creation of trust.

The Greek–Israeli bilateral relationship—historically cold—transformed into a close strategic alliance during the decade 2010–2020. At the level of energy geopolitics, the convergence was self-evident: both face Turkish claims. But at the level of narrative, diplomatic cooperation was invested with references to “shared values,” “Mediterranean civilization,” and “respect for international law”, categories that, in this discourse, function as an implicit opposition to “Islamic revisionism” (Lindenstrauss and Gavrielides 2019).

The Greek–Egyptian relationship presents even more interesting analytical material. The EEZ delimitation (2020) was the first in the Eastern Mediterranean and was a diplomatic defeat for Turkey. On the explicit level, the agreement was purely legal–technical. On the implicit level, religious–cultural backgrounds operated: the deep historical presence of the Greek Orthodox community in Alexandria, the role of the Patriarchate of Alexandria, and the importance of the Coptic Church as an internal political factor in Egypt (McCallum 2024) created a network of “unofficial diplomatic capital” that underpinned mutual trust.

Climatically, these energy disputes carry an additional moral charge: hydrocarbon extraction in the Eastern Mediterranean is intensifying at a time when climate science is calling for rapid defossilization. Islamic environmental theology, with its concepts of *khalifa*, *amāna* and *mizān*, would provide powerful arguments against fossil fuel expansion (Rahmat 2025). However, none of the actors involved choose to mobilize this theological tradition in the energy competition—revealing the inherent contradiction between religious environmental ethics and national energy interests.

4.3. Religious Diplomacy and Regional Stability

4.3.1. “Faith as a Tool for Peace”: Non-State Religious Actors

Faith-based diplomacy, the use of religious resources, networks, and moral authority for peace purposes, is a field that developed theoretically and empirically mainly after the Cold War (Johnston and Sampson 1995). In the Eastern Mediterranean, three actors stand out as examples of this approach, with different models and results.

The Community of Sant’ Egidio represents the most extensive example of religious peace diplomacy in the region. Starting from the peace processes in Mozambique (1990–1992) and Algeria (1994–1995), the Community has developed a unique model: it acts as a confidential mediator outside state structures, leveraging its religious–social networks. In the contemporary migration crisis, the “Humanitarian Corridors” are perhaps the only successful initiative for the safe and legal transport of refugees to Italy and France, without state funding at first, based solely on religious mobilization (Martinelli 1998).

Cairo’s Al-Azhar constitutes a completely different type of religious diplomacy: a state–religious institution used as a counterweight to Turkish Islamism. The Egyptian Sisi government has invested in the international prestige of Al-Azhar, already respected as a center of Sunni theological authority, to oppose a “moderate Islam” (*Wasatiyya*) to the “political Islam” of the Brotherhood supported by Turkey and Qatar [legitimation] (Mohamed 2025). Pope Francis’s visit to Cairo (2017) and his historic meeting with Secretary General Ahmed Al-Tayeb sent a clear message: Christian–Islamic dialogue is feasible and geopolitically useful when it is based on institutions that are not identified with revisionist forces (Catalano 2022).

The Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople occupies a position of unique symbolic and geopolitical importance: as the “First in Honor” of global Orthodoxy, based on Turkish soil, Patriarch Bartholomew functions simultaneously as a religious leader, as a diplomatic agent, and as a “living symbol” of the Greek Orthodox presence in Constantinople. His persistent presence in the climate change dialogue—for decades, even before it became a major issue—has given him a role of “moral authority” that goes beyond the typical norm of religious political influence (Stamelos 2026).

4.3.2. The Abraham Accords and Religion as a Security Architecture

A particularly illuminating case of faith-based diplomacy is the Abraham Accords (2020), through which Israel normalized its relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. The reference to “Abraham”, the common patriarch of Judaism, Christianity,

and Islam, was not just a rhetorical flourish: it was a deliberate religious narrative that sidestepped political backlash by framing the agreement in a framework of “Abrahamic brotherhood” (Kaminer 2024).

The Abraham Accords are a prime example of both the potential and the inherent limitations of religious diplomacy. On the one hand, the use of shared religious references contributed to the creation of a relatively neutral negotiating framework, facilitating rapprochement between states that had been mired in political deadlock for decades. On the other hand, the failure to substantively address the Palestinian issue—the most complex and religiously sensitive conflict in the region—highlighted the limits of this approach. In this light, the Abraham Accords appear to have functioned primarily as a framework for selective normalization of interstate relations, rather than a comprehensive mechanism for building lasting regional peace.

Table 4 reveals a finding that worsens year by year: the religious response remains structurally inadequate in relation to climate pressures. As with Table 1, the climate and displacement indicators below are drawn from Mediterranean-wide sources and are presented as contextual background; the religious–institutional responses analyzed remain focused on Eastern Mediterranean actors. In 2025, “record-breaking” global heat (year 2024: +1.55 °C above pre-industrial baseline), the extension of drought in the Sahel, and fires in Southern Europe (summer 2023, 2024) do not correspond to stronger religious diplomatic intervention at COPs or in multilateral climate governance fora. An exception is Pope Francis (2023) by Pope Francis and the leading presence of the Holy See at COP28 (Dubai 2023)—but these too remain narrative interventions without binding political outcomes.

Table 4. Climate impacts, migration pressures and religious responses (updated 2025).

Region	Climate Impact (IPCC 2022/2024)	Impact on Immigration	Religious Response (2023–2025)	Effectiveness Assessment
North Africa (Morocco/Tunisia/Algeria)	Drought +15%; 30% loss agricultural production; temp. +2 °C by 2050	40% increase (2018–2025)	Islamic Declaration on Climate Change (2015); OIC Climate Agenda 2023	Theological resources (amāna) weak political footprint; no binding political framework
Syria/Iraq (Euphrates Basin)	Drought 2006–10 → civil war; river flow −40% (Euphrates 2024)	Displacement 7.2 million (2024)	No religious institution systematically active	Theological silence; after fall of Assad (2024) a new vacuum of moral leadership
Egypt (Nile Delta)	Sea level rise 30–50 cm by 2050; risk for 8 million displaced	Internal displacement 6–8 million by 2050	Coptic Church/Al-Azhar sporadically	Al-Azhar: climate statements without political binding; Coptic Church: near silence
Libya/Sahel	Desertification +22% over 30 years; temp. +3 °C in Sahel 2050	Migration growth +60% (2015–2025)	OIC reports (2022–2024)	OIC: reference to SDGs without theological depth; weak regional influence
Greece/Cyprus (Southern Europe)	Temp. +1.5 °C (2024 record); fires 2023 (Rhodes, Evros) at MAX	Reception pressure + internal climate displacement	Ecumenical Patriarchate (leadership role)	Patriarch Bartholomew: developed environmental theology; encyclical “Ecological Crisis” 2024
Maghreb/West Africa (Atlantic Route)	Drought + Sahel desertification + fires Morocco 2023	Canary Islands +60% (2022–2024)	No institutional religious actor actively engaged	Diplomatic vacuum; opportunity for Sant’Egidio/Caritas Internationalis

Sources: IPCC AR6/Mediterranean Regional Factsheet (2022), Clement et al. (2021), IOM Climate-Mobility Data 2024, UNHCR Climate & Displacement Report (2024), author’s analysis.

4.4. Climatic Geopolitics and the Religious Economy of Meaning

Climate change operates in the Mediterranean at two simultaneous levels that are in productive contradiction. At the material–geopolitical level, it is a multiplier of insecurity: the drought in Syria (2006–2010) is estimated to have contributed to the internal instability

that preceded the civil war (Zaouaq 2024), desertification in the Sahel is fueling waves of migration to North Africa and ultimately to Europe, and sea level rise is threatening deltas and coastal communities across the Southern Mediterranean (Soukharev 2025).

At the semiological–religious level, climate change is a field for the production of theological meaning: who is responsible, who is entitled to compensation, and what sacrifices are just. The Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change (Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) 2020) uses the theological concept of *mīzān* (balance) to demonstrate the injustice inherent in the climate crisis. The Declaration emphasizes that poorer nations—particularly Muslim-majority nations—bear a disproportionate burden of environmental impacts, despite their minimal contribution to the phenomenon.

A similar ethical framework is developed by Pope Francis in his encyclical *Pope Francis* (2015). By inextricably linking ecological degradation with social injustice, the Pope constructs a moral argument that addresses the reality of modern refugee flows: the “ecological debt” (§51) of powerful states leads to the systemic poverty of vulnerable populations (§11, 25, 27, 28, 90, 109, 134, 139, 149, 172, 175, 198), which, in turn, becomes a primary driver of forced migration (§25, 35, 175). As noted, the reception of this framework within Catholicism itself is not uniform, a fact that qualifies its status as a settled Christian consensus rather than one influential current within it.

This connection has immediate political implications that remain largely unexploited: if climate change is a driver of migration, then anti-migration policies enacted without corresponding climate action are both theologically incoherent and politically ineffective. No European leader who invokes “Christian heritage” to justify closing borders has publicly addressed this contradiction, revealing that the “cultural Christianity” used to securitize migration is not bound by the theological consistency of the tradition it claims to invoke

The deepest contradiction of Mediterranean religious geopolitics: the same actors who invoke religion to close borders refuse to apply the theology of the same tradition to uncover the causes that produce migration.

This contradiction is not merely superficial; it is structural. It reveals that the instrumentalization of religion in the Mediterranean operates selectively: it draws from religious traditions what serves immediate geopolitical interests, and silences what would require normative consistency. Religious diplomacy, in order to prove effective, is called upon to transcend this selectivity by exploiting the entire theological richness of each tradition, especially at the level of climate responsibility and environmental justice.

Table 5 confirms and enriches the findings for H2 (Ambivalent Institutional Function) with data from 2023 to 2025, specifically its prediction that supranational, non-state-coupled actors exhibit greater capacity for the cooperative pole of religious institutional engagement. The most notable finding is the upgrade of Sant’Egidio. The Community had transferred approximately 7000 refugees legally to the EU through Humanitarian Corridors by 2025, expanding the program to new countries (Belgium, Portugal). This constitutes perhaps the only demonstrably effective religious diplomatic intervention in the migration crisis and precisely because it operates outside state structures, it has avoided geopolitical instrumentalization.

Diyanet is following the opposite path: now present in 45 countries, it has significantly expanded its networks, but its increasingly close identification with the Turkish geopolitical agenda (especially after the Gaza war, where Erdogan used Diyanet to mobilize solidarity as an object of domestic policy) further weakens its credibility as an autonomous religious diplomatic agent.

The deepest contradiction: the same actors who invoke religion to close borders refuse to apply the theology of the same tradition to address the climatic causes that produce migration.

Overall, the comparative analysis of the five tables—with data updated up to 2025—highlights a structural pattern that remains consistent: the instrumentalization of religion operates selectively and asymmetrically. It draws from traditions what serves immediate interests and silences what would require normative consistency. Religious diplomacy, to prove effective, is called upon to overcome this selectivity, especially in the face of the climate crisis that is emerging as the greatest multiplier of migratory pressure for the coming decades.

Table 5. Comparative assessment of religious actors—developments in 2023–2025.

Religious Actor	Institutional Power	Type	International Legal	Result (2024–25)	Latest Developments (2023–2025)
Holy See (Vatican)	Very High	State	Very High	High	Laudato Si’ 2023; Lesbos 2022 visit; COP28 (Dubai 2023) leadership presence; Pope: climate + migration single agenda
Diyanet (Turkey)	High	State	Low	Moderate	Strong expansion: 45 countries in 2025; but identification with Erdogan agenda weakens autonomy; mosques in Balkans/Africa
Al-Azhar (Egypt)	High	Semi-state	High	Moderate	Dialogue Pope–Al-Tayeb 2019 (Morocco); Counterweight Turkish Islam; political dependence on Sisi limits autonomy
Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople	Moderate	Non-state	High	High	New environmental encyclical 2024; geopolitical vulnerability in Istanbul remains
Sant’Egidio	Moderate	Non-state	Very High	Very High	Humanitarian Corridors 2016–2025: ~7000 refugees legally transferred to EU; Mozambique 2.0 negotiations (2024)
OIC	Low	Intergovernmental	Low	Low	COP28 (2023) Declaration without commitments; internal frictions (Turkey–UAE–S. Arabia); inefficacy in the migration crisis

Assessment based on: Vallier (1971a, pp. 203–6)², Marshall (2013)³, Haynes (2007)⁴, Holy See (Pope Francis 2023) (COP28 2023), Nordic Monitor (2025), Community of Sant’Egidio (2022, 2026), Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (2024), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (2023). Scale: Low/Moderate/High/Very High, author’s analysis.

5. Discussion

The preceding analysis—supported by empirical data from 2015 to 2025 and theoretically framed by Critical Geopolitics, securitization theory and Environmental Peacebuilding—highlights a central dialectical trend: this very nexus between religion and climate change in the Eastern Mediterranean can function simultaneously as a multiplier of geopolitical tension and as a catalyst for transnational cooperation and reconciliation. Understanding this dialectic has both analytical value and practical implications for the architecture of Mediterranean governance.

This discussion is structured around three interrelated questions: first, under what precise conditions do religion and the climate crisis amplify geopolitical tensions; second, what mechanisms allow the same connection to be transformed into an opportunity for cooperation; and third, what institutional architecture could help shift the region’s ambivalent balance further toward reconciliation, without presupposing that this shift is linear or complete.

5.1. Religion and Climate Change as Intensity Multipliers

5.1.1. The Mechanism of Religious Geopolitical Tension

The central finding of the analysis, that religion functions as a geopolitical system of meaning production and not just as an ideological phenomenon, allows for the identification of three distinct mechanisms through which it intensifies geopolitical conflicts.

The first mechanism is religious spatialization: the reduction in geographical spaces to religious–historical symbols that do not lend themselves to compromise solutions. The “Blue Homeland” (Mavi Vatan) exploits precisely this logic: maritime space is not treated as an object of legal regulation (EEZ, UNCLOS) but as a heritage—a narrative that excludes compromise because “historical justice” is not negotiable. Correspondingly, the Holy Land of the Palestinian conflict is inscribed in Quranic, biblical and Torah categories of territorial sanctity that transcend positive international law.

The second mechanism is religious identification and securitization: the transformation of religious difference into an “existential threat” through political discourse. It is important to distinguish this mechanism from the research question itself: while the central research question asks whether and when religion functions as a securitizing resource, this section identifies the specific discursive sub-mechanism—the coupling of What the Copenhagen School (Bagge Laustsen and Wæver 2000) “speech-acts” with theologically loaded categories such as “infidel” or “invader”—through which that securitization is accomplished in practice, rather than restating the research question as if it were itself the finding. The Western European version of this logic—Orbán’s “cultural Christianity”, and laïcité as an instrument of anti-Islamic exclusion in France—structurally reproduces the same securitization logic from an opposing religious perspective.

The third mechanism is the one identified by this study’s H2 (Ambivalent Institutional Function Hypothesis): climate-induced tension. Climate change does not create new religious–geopolitical conflicts but accelerates and deepens existing ones. The mechanism operates on two levels: on the material level, climate change increases migratory pressures and the competition for resources (water, energy, land) (Burrows and Kinney 2016) that form the background of religious–geopolitical conflicts; on the semiotic level, the climate crisis provides new “threat opportunities” for securitizing actors. Climate migrants are more easily transformed into “invaders”, especially if they carry religious–cultural differences, providing securitizers with new narrative material.

Climate change is not just a natural phenomenon that intensifies social tensions. It is a “semiological multiplier” that provides new narrative material to religious securitizes: the climate migrant is more easily transformed into an “invader” when he brings religious–cultural difference.

5.1.2. The Contradiction of “Cultural Religiosity”

The analysis highlights a structural contradiction that permeates all levels of religious geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean: actors who invoke religious identity to justify exclusionary policies systematically bypass the normative core of the tradition they invoke. Brubaker (2017, pp. 235–57) describes this as civilizationist populism—religion is used as a cultural group identifier, not as a binding moral tradition.

This contradiction has three particular manifestations in the region. First, European leaders who invoke “Christian heritage” to close borders are not applying the Christian principle of agape or the encyclical *Laudato Si’*, which explicitly links climate injustice and the obligation of hospitality. Second, the Turkish government invokes Islamic solidarity selectively, towards Syrian Sunnis but not towards Kurds or Alevis. Third, Al-Azhar develops a theology of “moderate Islam” (Wasatiyya) at the rhetorical level, but fails to

translate this into binding political commitments, owing to its institutional dependence on the Egyptian government.

This triple contradiction empirically confirms the central thesis of this study: the instrumentalization of religion does not constitute progress in religious diplomacy. It is its exact opposite. Effective religious diplomacy requires a commitment to the normative core of tradition, not to its use as cultural nationalism.

5.2. Religion and Climate Change as Opportunities for Collaboration

5.2.1. The Theological Basis of Cooperation

Despite the logic of securitization, the three major monotheistic traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean possess rich theological resources that not only allow for but also require cooperation on issues of climate justice, migration protection, and peace mediation.

In Islamic tradition, the *khalīfa*–*amāna*–*mīzān* synthesis provides a comprehensive theological ecology: man is a representative (*khalīfa*) of a God who has entrusted him with the trust (*amāna*) of a creation organized in balance (*mīzān*). The violation of this balance through climate destruction (Hillman et al. 2026) is, theologically, a transgression (*sin*). The Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences (IFEES) (2020) develops these categories in a way that could establish an institutional basis for Islamic climate action, if it finds the political will to implement.

In Catholicism, Pope Francis (2015, 2023) go far beyond a simple “green agenda”: they establish a structural link between climate injustice, economic exploitation and the need for migration. The phrase “cry of the earth and cry of the poor” (Pope Francis 2023, §49) is a theological–political proposition with an explicit geopolitical dimension: if climate injustice produces the need for migration, then rejecting migrants is at the same time a violation of ecological and moral obligation. This connection, which Pope Francis constantly reiterates, provides the theological foundation for a holistic religious diplomacy that unites the climate and migration agendas, although, as noted, this connection is more accurately described as an influential current within Catholic social teaching than as its uncontested consensus position.

Orthodoxy, through the theology of Patriarch Bartholomew, is developing an “ecological spirituality” deeply rooted in the patristic tradition of *theoria* (contemplating) creation as a revelation of God. Creation is not “raw material” but a gift that bears the image of the Giver, a position that makes climate catastrophe sacrilegious. This theology, developed in decades of ecumenical contacts and symposia, constitutes a potentially powerful bridge between Christian and Islamic environmental theology.

The theological convergence of Islam and Christianity on the issue of climate responsibility is not coincidental—it reflects shared monotheistic principles: creation belongs to God, man is the custodian, its destruction is a sin. This convergence constitutes the most powerful untapped basis for interfaith geopolitical cooperation.

5.2.2. Empirical Cases of Successful Collaboration

Despite these securitization trends, the analysis identifies four empirical cases in which religion and the climate-migration agenda acted as catalysts for cooperation, providing analytical clues to the conditions for success.

Sant’ Egidio and the Humanitarian Corridors (2016–2025) are the most indisputable example: a religious community without state support developed a model of legal migration route that brings refugees safely and legally to Europe. The success is due precisely to independence from state interests: Sant’ Egidio does not bear the burden of geopolitical dependence that weakens Diyanet and the OIC. This case empirically supports H2: supranational institutional legitimacy is associated with a greater capacity to occupy the cooperative pole of the ambivalence documented throughout this study.

The Pope Francis–Al-Azhar dialogue (2016, 2019) produced three landmark texts of interfaith cooperation, from the “Declaration on Human Fraternity” to joint statements on refugees. This dialogue is different from previous Christian–Islamic contacts because it proclaims political commitments, not just theological principles. The “Common Word between You and Us” (Goma’a 2010) had already established shared moral foundations; the Pope–Al-Tayeb axis translated them into a geopolitical reference.

The Abraham Accords (2020), despite the undeniable reservations raised by the exception of the Palestinian conflict, demonstrate that religious language can function as a diplomatic space for bypassing impasses. The Abrahamic narrative overturned decades of Islamic–Jewish hostility by providing a common sacred ancestor as a starting point. This finding has practical implications for the Eastern Mediterranean agenda: if the Abrahamic narrative was able to “unfreeze” Arab–Israeli relations (Fakhar 2026), could it be similarly applied in a Greek–Turkish, Islamic–Orthodox, or Euro–Islamic context?

The Greek–Egyptian EEZ agreement (2020) is a typical example of implicit religious diplomacy: although it does not contain any explicit religious reference, the religious–cultural background of the relationship between the two countries functioned as an invisible but decisive condition of possibility. The Patriarchate of Alexandria, as a pre-national institution of Greek Orthodox presence on Egyptian soil, the ecumenical ties of the Coptic Church with the Greek Orthodox thrones, and the theology of open interreligious dialogue represented by Al-Azhar (Scott 2023), constitute a multifaceted religious–cultural capital that lowered the threshold of mutual trust and provided historical depth to the bilateral relationship, without ever becoming the subject of explicit negotiation.

The conclusion that emerges from this specific case is that religious diplomacy operates on multiple levels—here illustrated by a historical–institutional dimension (the Patriarchate of Alexandria’s long-standing presence), a symbolic–cultural dimension (Coptic–Orthodox ecclesiastical ties), and a normative dimension (Al-Azhar’s discourse of interreligious openness)—and in its most sophisticated version appears not as rhetoric but as an inherited structural legacy. This three-level distinction is offered as an interpretive reading of the Greek–Egyptian case rather than as a generalized, independently validated typology of religious diplomacy across all cases examined in this study. The dominant driving force of the agreement remained geopolitical, yet the religious–cultural background functioned as an enabling factor that allowed an Orthodox and a Muslim country to reach an agreement without explicitly negotiating their religious difference.

5.3. The Dialectical Table: Tensions and Opportunities

To make the structure of this dialectic clear, the table below systematically synthesizes the two opposing functions of the religion–climate change connection.

Table 6 shows that every example of tension has a corresponding example of cooperation, often with the same actors, the same theological tools, or the same geopolitical contexts. This is not an equilibrium: mechanisms of tension are structurally stronger in the present phase, because they receive the support of state power, media, and populist politics. Mechanisms of cooperation are potentially stronger in the long term, because they draw on the normative core of theological traditions and the structural need to jointly address climate pressures.

Table 6. Religion & climate change in the mediterranean: tensions vs. opportunities.

Religion & Climate as Intensity Multipliers	Religion & Climate as Opportunities for Collaboration
Blue Vatan doctrine, reinforced by claims of Islamic historical legitimacy, underpins Turkey’s territorial claims in energy disputes	EastMThe EastMed Gas Forum, combined with an Abrahamic narrative, offers a model of transnational energy cooperation

Table 6. Cont.

Religion & Climate as Intensity Multipliers	Religion & Climate as Opportunities for Collaboration
Civilizationist Christian rhetoric (Orbán/Salvini) contributes to the securitization of Muslim immigration	Laudato Si' and Laudate Deum provide theological legitimization for climate justice and hospitality
The Gaza War (2023–) has reintroduced a “clash of civilizations” narrative across the Mediterranean	The Al-Azhar Dialogue (2016) established an Abrahamic model of Islamic-Christian cooperation
The 2006–2010 climatic drought in Syria contributed to destabilization, civil war, and mass displacement	Sant’Egidio’s Humanitarian Corridors (7000+ refugees, 2016–2025) demonstrate a viable legal migration model
Diyanet’s presence in 45 countries functions as a vehicle for the geopolitical expansion of Turkish influence through religion	The Ecumenical Patriarchate’s “Green Patriarch” initiative exemplifies interfaith ecological leadership
Rising climate migration fuels the rise of populist parties, which in turn drives greater securitization, producing a self-reinforcing cycle of exclusio	The Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, aligned with the SDGs, constitutes a platform for interfaith climate responsibility
The rivalry between Civil Islam (Muslim Brotherhood/Turkey) and State Islam (Egypt/UAE) produces intra-Islamic division	Abrahamic Covenants offer a model for overcoming religious-political boundaries, albeit with limitations
Theological silence on climate change by the OIC and the Church of Greece represents a missed opportunity for moral leadership	Environmental peacebuilding treats shared water resources as a field of mediation

Composition based on author’s analysis, data from Tables 1–5 and theoretical framework of Critical Geopolitics/Environmental Peacebuilding.

5.4. Toward Institutional Integration: An Architecture for Managing Ambivalence

5.4.1. The Analytical Framework

Read together, the empirical findings and theoretical analysis point to three recurring conditions under which the cooperative pole of the ambivalence documented above becomes more likely to prevail over the securitizing one. These conditions are presented here as an analytical pattern derived from the comparative cases examined in Sections 4 and 5, not as a set of prescriptions; consistent with the separation of empirical and normative levels stated in Section 2.3, their status as policy recommendations is addressed separately in Section 6.

The first condition concerns institutional integration: in the cases examined, religious actors’ influence on outcomes was greatest where they held a recognized seat within multilateral governance fora—climate, migration, or energy—rather than remaining external commentators on decisions taken elsewhere. This pattern does not imply that religious institutions should hold a veto over such fora; it reflects, rather, that agreements reached without the participation of communities representing large constituencies tended, in the cases studied, to remain effective mainly on paper.

The second condition concerns the methodology of dialogue: declarations of general “fraternity”, were, in the cases examined, markedly less consequential than joint action programs capable of establishing trust through demonstrated results. The Humanitarian Corridors of Sant’ Egidio illustrate this pattern: a cooperation program that produced measurable outcomes (7000 refugees legally in the EU) and, in doing so, built trust between religious communities, states, and the EU in a way that general statements of goodwill did not.

The third condition concerns religious literacy of state diplomacy. The analysis suggests that European external services, in particular, tend to treat religion as a purely private or cultural matter, a pattern consistent with what Marshall (2013) describes as a “religious literacy deficit” in diplomatic corps. In the cases examined here, this deficit appears associated with a reduced capacity to anticipate both the mechanisms of religious–political tension and the opportunities for cooperation documented in this study; the practical implications of this pattern are developed further, as a concrete recommendation, in Section 6.

5.4.2. Climate Justice as a Common Theological Agenda

The most promising and most untapped opportunity for religious cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean is climate justice as a shared interfaith agenda. Three factors, documented empirically in the preceding sections rather than assumed at the outset, help explain why this convergence has proven possible in specific instances even as climate change simultaneously fuels tension elsewhere in the region.

First, theological convergence: evidenced in the shared conceptual vocabulary already discussed in Section 5.2.1: Islam's khalīfa/adl, Christianity's Laudato Si' and Orthodoxy's ecological spirituality, and Judaism's tikkun olam—repair of the world (Watkins and Shulman 2008).

Second, common geopolitical exposure: as Table 4 shows, drought-driven migratory pressure from North Africa affects Greece, Italy, Tunisia and Egypt in comparable ways. This shared exposure is a structural condition that, in the cases reviewed in Section 5.2.2, has created incentives for cooperation—though the same exposure has, in other cases reviewed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2, instead been mobilized toward securitization; which outcome prevails is treated here as an open, institutionally contingent question rather than a foregone conclusion.

Third, institutional capacity: there are already institutional infrastructures on which this common agenda can be anchored. The Vatican–Al-Azhar axis, the ecological symposia of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Islamic Relief networks and the presence of religious NGOs in COP processes are nuclei that need institutional reinforcement and political recognition, not reconstruction.

5.4.3. Reconciliation Through Environmental Peacebuilding

The Environmental Peacebuilding literature (Conca 2002; Dresse et al. 2019; Balinskaia 2025) suggests a counterintuitive but empirically documented finding: jointly addressing environmental challenges can act as a starting point for peacemaking, even among adversaries. The reasons are structural: climate change imposes shared vulnerability, creates incentives for technical cooperation, and provides a “neutral” field of action that does not directly bear the burden of historical grievances.

In the Eastern Mediterranean case, Environmental Peacebuilding has specific areas of application: the management of shared water resources (e.g., Nile, Euphrates basins), cooperation to address marine pollution, joint renewable energy programs (wind and solar energy) that could replace disputes over hydrocarbons, and joint early-warning systems for extreme weather events and migratory displacements. In each of these areas, religious institutions can function as “trust guarantors”, providing moral legitimacy to agreements that the state apparatus is unable to guarantee on its own.

A promising, still largely untapped opportunity of Eastern Mediterranean religious geopolitics: the shared climate vulnerability of the countries of the region provides a structural incentive for cooperation that transcends religious divisions—where there is the political will to exploit it through religious diplomacy.

5.5. Hypothesis Testing and Theoretical Implications

The discussion allows for the final evaluation of this study's two working hypotheses.

H1 (securitization) is confirmed, with a crucial addition: religious securitizing actors not only legitimize decisions ex post but actively construct a collective audience receptive to the threat narrative, theologically charging the perception of “threat”. This goes beyond the linguistic approach of the Copenhagen School and confirms Balzacq et al.'s (2016) argument for incorporating “contextual” variables. H2 (ambivalent institutional function) is confirmed by modification and extension: climate change is not only a “tension multiplier”

but also an opportunity multiplier; shared vulnerability creates incentives for cooperation alongside tensions, and which of the two prevails depends on institutional configuration and political choices rather than on the structure of the phenomenon itself. The 2024–25 data further confirm the institutional dimension of this hypothesis: Sant’Egidio, the “weakest” actor in terms of standard power indicators, produces the most effective religious diplomacy results, while Diyanet, with resources dozens of times greater, produces geopolitical expansion but not peace diplomacy. The pattern of limited integration of religious expertise into COP, UNHCR and EEAS processes, discussed in Section 5.4.1, is consistent with this hypothesis, and is developed further as a concrete policy recommendation rather than as a third tested hypothesis in Section 6.

At a theoretical level, the analysis argues that understanding 21st century Eastern Mediterranean geopolitics requires transcending the “religion/geopolitics” dichotomy. Religion is neither a “superstructure” of socio-economic relations (Marxist reduction) nor an “independent variable” parallel to state powers (liberal approach); it is a constituent element of geopolitics itself: it constructs space, legitimizes or decomposes claims to power, and provides moral languages for framing humanitarian and climate issues.

6. Conclusions

This article set out from a single central research question: under what political, institutional, and theological conditions do Islamic and Christian institutions in the Eastern Mediterranean move between a logic of humanitarian dialogue and a logic of securitizing exclusion in their engagement with migration and climate change, examined through three analytical foci—migration and hospitality, climate geopolitics, and institutional integration. The analysis, grounded in empirical data from 2015 to 2025 and theoretically framed by Critical Geopolitics, and geopolitical discourse analysis, with Environmental Peacebuilding and Human Security as secondary interpretive lenses, supports the view that the Eastern Mediterranean can usefully be understood as a “religious geopolitical zone” in which religion and the climate crisis function simultaneously as multipliers of tension and as—still largely untapped—opportunities for transnational cooperation and reconciliation. This conclusion satisfies, rather than assumes, the three scope conditions set out in Section 3.1: the region hosts multiple institutionally embedded religious actors with recognized international standing (Sections 1 and 4); these same actors were shown to shift between securitizing and cooperative registers in response to shared material pressures (Sections 4 and 5); and religious framing was repeatedly and explicitly mobilized by state actors around concrete territorial and resource disputes (Section 5). This coexistence does not resolve, in the cases examined, into a one-directional shift from dialogue to securitization or back: it is better described as a persistent ambivalence, whose outcome in specific cases depends on the selective instrumentalization—or, conversely, the normative consistency—of the theological traditions being invoked. Where religious institutions have acted with normative consistency and institutional autonomy, as with the Community of Sant’ Egidio and its Humanitarian Corridors or the Vatican–Al-Azhar axis, the results have been measurable and substantial. Climate change, in turn, operates not only materially as a multiplier of migratory pressure and energy competition, but also semiotically: it is re-framed in religious languages that either intensify securitization or, as in *Laudato Si’* and the Islamic Declaration on Climate Change, help establish a common moral basis for inter-faith environmental action.

At a theoretical level, this study offers two principal contributions. First, it extends the Copenhagen School theory of securitization (Buzan and Wæver 2009) by treating the religious dimension as an autonomous mechanism for constructing an “audience”: a religious “speech-act” does not merely rely on the rhetorical legitimization of threat but

activates deeply rooted identity schemas that endogenously shape the conditions of acceptance of securitization, an element in Balzacq et al.'s (2016) contextual critique but not previously empirically applied to the religious field. Second, it proposes and empirically illustrates the analytical concept of the “religious geopolitical zone” as a tool for understanding spaces where religious worldviews constitute, rather than simply overlay geopolitical realities—complementing Critical Geopolitics (Tuathail and Dalby 2002) with a religious dimension that remains underdeveloped in the literature. This study's institutional-configuration hypothesis (H2) further suggests that the effectiveness of religious diplomacy depends substantially on supranational institutional legitimacy and normative consistency rather than on state power as such; this finding is offered as a pattern documented across the cases examined here, and its generalizability beyond the Eastern Mediterranean remains, as noted below, a question for future comparative research rather than a settled claim.

At a practical level, the findings speak to three categories of actors. For European governments and the EEAS, the analysis points to the potential value of integrating religious literacy into diplomatic training and into multilateral climate and migration governance fora, given the recurring pattern, documented in Section 5.4, of religious factors shaping outcomes that secular–technocratic frameworks alone did not anticipate. For religious institutions, the analysis suggests that coherence between theological principle and diplomatic practice functions as a condition for credibility, and credibility as a condition for diplomatic effectiveness; where religious discourse becomes detached from the normative core of a tradition, the cases examined here suggest it risks losing precisely the resource that gives it geopolitical relevance. For international organizations (UNHCR, UNDP, COP), the analysis suggests that the limited participation of religious actors in climate and migration governance processes represents a missed opportunity rather than a neutral omission given the scale of the constituencies such actors represent. These practical implications are offered as recommendations consistent with this study's findings, not as claims independently verified against alternative institutional arrangements; readers who weigh the trade-offs of religious involvement in multilateral governance differently may reasonably draw different conclusions from the same evidence.

This study recognizes limitations that constrain the generalizability of its findings. First, its geographic focus on the Eastern Mediterranean, adopted to allow for a manageable and empirically grounded scope (Section 3.3), leaves the religious–geopolitical dynamics of the western Mediterranean basin—including Morocco and Spain—outside its empirical reach; extending the analysis westward is a natural direction for comparative future research rather than a claim already covered here. Second, linguistic reliance on English-, Greek-, and Turkish-language sources may underrepresent religious–political discourses from North Africa, the wider Middle East, and the Sahel—regions significantly affected by climate pressures and migration flows. Third, the analytical focus on Islam and Christianity leaves out of scope other religious traditions present in the region, such as Judaism, Alevism, Sufism, and Coptic Christianity, whose inclusion would substantially enrich the analysis. Fourth, the qualitative comparative strategy adopted here provides interpretive depth but does not support systematic causal inference regarding the effects of religious diplomacy on geopolitical outcomes.

These limitations suggest three directions for future research. An immediate priority is to quantify the relationship between climate change and religious–political radicalization in the Eastern Mediterranean, using Arab Barometer and Eurobarometer data alongside extreme-weather indicators, in order to test H2 more systematically than the qualitative comparative strategy adopted here allows for. A second direction is the comparative evaluation of religious–climate governance dynamics in other regions—Southeast

Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa—to assess whether the patterns identified here, including the institutional-configuration logic of H2, extend beyond the Eastern Mediterranean or reflect features specific to it. A third direction is the empirical investigation of “invisible” religious–diplomatic mechanisms—those not explicitly expressed in official texts but functioning as implicit “cultural capital” in interstate relations, as illustrated by the Greek–Egyptian case (Section 5.2.2), which would require the kind of dedicated, systematically coded corpus analysis outlined in Section 3.2.

The period in which this research was conducted—marked by the Gaza war (2023–), rising sea levels in the Mediterranean, the collapse of the Syrian regime (2024), and renewed tension involving Iran (2026–)—has brought geopolitical and humanitarian pressures that state mechanisms alone appear ill-equipped to fully manage. In this context, the analysis presented here suggests that religious diplomacy is not merely a secondary form of “soft power,” but a resource whose deployment—toward cooperation or toward exclusion—depends on the political choices of the institutions, states, and communities that invoke it, rather than on any fixed property of religion itself. This is offered as the author’s assessment based on the evidence examined, and, consistent with the ambivalence documented throughout this study, it is an assessment open to legitimate disagreement. Concretely, this article’s original contribution is threefold: (i) the “religious geopolitical zone” concept and its operational scope conditions (Sections 1 and 2); (ii) a coding scheme linking discursive functions directly to testable hypotheses about institutional configuration (Section 3.2); and (iii) empirical documentation, updated through 2025, of how the same institutional actors move between securitizing and cooperative registers under shared climate and migration pressures—rather than a claim to have settled the normative question of how religious actors ought to act. The Eastern Mediterranean has long been a place where dialogue between cultures and faiths served not merely an ideal but as a practical necessity. In the 21st century, as climate change reshapes the region’s constraints and religion re-emerges as a factor of geopolitical power, this historical pattern is, on the evidence presented here, worth taking seriously as a basis for policy—even as reasonable observers may continue to disagree on how far, and how quickly, it can be acted upon.

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Abbreviations

EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
IFEES	International Federation of Environmental Health/Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Notes

- ¹ It is an internationally recognized Christian movement of lay people, which was founded in Rome in 1968 and today operates in more than seventy countries. Its operation is based on three fundamental axes: prayer, practical solidarity with the vulnerable, and the promotion of peace. In this context, the community undertakes initiatives to support people experiencing social exclusion, such as the homeless, the elderly, refugees, and children in need, through various social and humanitarian programs. At the same time, it has developed a significant presence in the field of informal diplomacy and interreligious dialogue, contributing to conflict de-escalation and the promotion of peaceful coexistence among peoples and religious communities. In doing so, it seeks to foster values of mutual understanding, fraternity, and social cohesion at an international level (Sant'Egidio n.d.).
- ² Theoretical framework underpinning the typology (Type: non-state/state/semi-state/intergovernmental/NGO) and the concept of institutional power of religious organizations as transnational actors. Vallier was among the first scholars to analyze the Catholic Church as a transnational actor.
- ³ Her work primarily informs the Transnational Legitimacy column—that is, whether each actor holds recognized standing within international organizations (e.g., Holy See: Very High; OIC: Low). Marshall examines the role of religious actors in global governance.
- ⁴ Informs the overall analytical structure of the table—the assessment of religious actors' influence in international politics, particularly with regard to the distinction between formal and informal power. His framework informs the Result (2024–25) column.

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