

# Responding to Hysteria: Anti-Refugee Sentiment on Greece's Samos Island

By [Chris Jones](#)

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*Recently on Samos we have been experiencing one of those periodic spasms of anti-refugee sentiment. These spasms feel orchestrated and even if not coordinated involve a diverse range of actors. This particular spasm has been sparked by both the high number of new arrivals especially in September and the lack of any preparation to meet the autumn weather. All the refugee authorities use these moments to demand additional resources and powers; local business interests demand VAT reductions and other economic interventions because as 'we all know' the refugees have been devastating for tourism, the Mayor calls for meetings with government ministers and on it goes. And at the same time beyond Samos, we see the head of UNCHR warning of the calamity unfolding on the frontier islands as winter approaches as well as other reports highlighting the agony of the refugees on the islands. Add to this mix, Samos SOS, an anti-refugee group which has been intermittently active for many years and which relishes moments such as these as a means of mobilizing support.*

Over the past few months Samos SOS has been taking its message of cleaning the island of refugees because of the threat they pose to the essential way of life on Samos out to the villages and small towns and not just simply staying in Samos town. It is necessary to understand that the refugees on Samos are located in just one small part of the island around the main town. Leave the town and it is rare to see any refugee. In the overwhelming part of Samos the refugees have no presence at all. Sadly it seems, Samos SOS have had some success in whipping up anti-refugee sentiment in places with no contact or awareness of the refugees.

Even so a major problem remains for Samos SOS namely that there is simply no evidence to support their hysterical claims such that Samos is in danger of being 'islamicized' or on the brink of widespread social unrest. It is a joke. Even in those villages where Samos SOS succeeded in gaining support it would be highly unlikely that any felt that their way of life was under threat or that they were about to become Muslim. Moreover, walk any day around Samos town and you will see refugees and locals go about their business in utter peace. The refugees don't walk around as though they are in imminent danger neither does anyone else. You can even eat felafel in the main square now!

Samos SOS never acknowledges that the 'refugee business' is now probably the biggest single economic activity on the island sustaining in Samos town a diverse collection of hotels, bars, eating places, local mini markets, hire car companies, apartment rentals and so forth. Unlike tourism which lasts for 5 months in the year refugee monies flow throughout the year.

But this has not stopped Samos SOS which recently held a high profile public meeting in the central square of Samos town on Sunday October 22<sup>nd</sup>. From the photographs published a fair number of refugees were also present. Like Samos SOS they would love to leave the island at the earliest opportunity.



Samos SOS Meeting 22.10.2017 photo from My Samos Blog

One consequence of the meeting has been the publication of an Appeal to the islanders by a group of 23 ex mayors, prefects and councilors from across the island. This Appeal was published by *My Samos Blog* on October 29, 2017. Samos SOS delights in claiming that it speaks for the silent majority and that its truth is what is real. Appeals like this suggest otherwise.

We have translated it from the Greek as best we can.

#### *An Appeal for Calmness and Soberness in Dealing with the Refugee-Immigrant Problem*

Our public intervention is happening today, because we find that in the local community of Samos with the excuse of the refugee crisis, some by their actions or by their omissions are driving things to uncontrollable situations, which trouble us and in addition will discredit and tarnish our island.

The refugee-migration issue is a major international problem that, if its causes are not addressed at world and international level (wars, poverty, exploitation, authoritarian regimes, climate change) it will not stop. Greece and especially the islands of the east Aegean, places in the passage from the East to the West will always be under pressure from migratory flows, as was the case in every other century.

The Joint Statement European Union -Turkey (March 2016) to address the refugee and immigration crisis, unfortunately has not been adequately met by Turkey (which is obliged to take any necessary measures to prevent illegal immigration from its territories to the EU),

but neither by most EU countries who closed their borders and failed to meet the obligations they had assumed for proportionate participation in the management of the refugees.

So the islands of the Eastern Aegean were turned into a peculiar warehouse-zone on the border of Europe which sends the message that no refugee and migrant will go to the “Promised Land”, central and northern Europe, consolidating the image of an EU of xenophobia, extreme right radicalization and racist attitudes

Within this negative climate the Greek state with its services was called upon to face unprecedented situations and showed its inability to manage the refugee migratory wave in an effective manner, both with regard to identification and asylum procedures and to infrastructure hospitality and organized temporary residence with human and dignified conditions. All this has resulted in the presence of a large number of immigrant refugees on the islands as well as their particularly troublesome and miserable living conditions inside and outside of hotspots.

In the small communities of our islands this long-term stay of such a large number of refugees

-immigrants has logically created disruption and concern, despite the high degree of understanding and solidarity, which the islanders inexorably maintain and offer.

Here in Samos, from the great lessons in solidarity and humanity that Samos men and women gave in the summer of 2015 with the supporting of more than 120 thousand refugees-immigrants who were hosted for a while on our island, we passed last autumn with a small number of arrivals but also with numerous worrying SOS voices (‘Samos clean from refugees’).

However in the last period we have an overt attempt to create another, particularly negative and, in our opinion, worrying, climate. Samos SOS exploits the ineffective management by the EU, the government and the UN, of the refugee-immigrant with the encroaching on our island of several thousand uprooted people and the general economic hardship and fears about the Islamization of Samos, with mosques and plans with controlled “Turkish” minorities when none of the refugees in question are either Turks or want to stay in Samos.

Unfortunately, Samos SOS, operating systematically by exaggeration, misinterpret intentionally or unintentionally the real problems, they construct imaginative scenarios and spread conspiracy about Islamization of the islands and their gradual occupation by foreigners and heathens, resulting in creating and enhancing a climate of insecurity for citizens of an imminent gradual loss of national territories, with our race and religion at risk. In addition to their tours and gatherings in the capital and in villages with inflammatory reasons based largely on their political delirium they create conditions of polarization and social confrontation, which sometimes go beyond the limits and become insults, abuse and even assaults against every fellow citizen who dares to express a different or opposing view.

They are the ones who consciously or unconsciously rushed to choose “partners” in the ceaseless war, which regrettably rages for a long time between the two ranks of self-government of our country. In this civil war, beyond any wisdom and rationality, instead of reconciliation, they preferred polarization, and on the pretext of the “salvation” of our island, they prepare the ground and the connections for the next elections, with the support of dishonest means and the willingness of the system. Their wages are worthy.

Instead of putting the real problems facing the society of Samos, they are targeting the hapless refugee, as the one who brings all the suffering to the island and with stale arguments cause division of our fellow citizens and tarnish the image of a place where every home has experienced and has memories of refugees and immigration.

Fellow citizens

We appeal to all of you and especially to the citizens of the capital who raise the full burden of the crisis to calmly address the situation with the humanity, the logic, the measured sense and the solidarity that characterize us over time.

The real cause of poverty and our problems is not the refugee-immigrant, who crosses Samos with a destination in Europe, but the respective government policies, imposed by the European Union and the powerful of the earth.

We call on the government and personally the Prime Minister, Mr. Alexis Tsipras

For the immediate and continuous evacuation on a permanent basis of supernumerary refugees-immigrants from the islands of the eastern Aegean, under the responsibility of the competent services of the country, moving them to mainland Greece and with a final destination in accordance with European and international treaties.

For immediate and complete staffing of all necessary support structures and asylum services to ensure the dignified and healthy living of refugees-migrants (for as long as they stay on our island) and fast processing of identification and asylum requests, so as to move as soon as possible to the mainland.

For the immediate activation of a permanent inter-party committee of the Parliament, including MEPs, for management planning of the refugee-immigration issue under European and international law and UN principles, to monitor developments at local and supra-regional levels taking the necessary initiatives to further improve the existing agreements and the positive overall enlargement of the relevant institutional framework as well as for political and economic control of all bodies, public and private (NGOs etc), where they are involved in any way in this problem and its treatment.

For the freedom of our country and from war and for cooperation with all the peoples of the earth for world peace, solidarity and democracy.”

The text is signed by Apostolos Dimitrios, former president City Council of Pythagorio and 22 others.

Post Script

Coincidentally on the same day (29<sup>th</sup> October) *Ekathimerini* published an interview with Frans Timmermans one of the key figures in the EU Turkey Pact in which he praises the people of the frontier islands for their heroic efforts in helping refugees and yet condemns them and the refugees to remaining trapped on what are in effect prison islands.

“Migrants, he said, must stay on the islands, despite the difficulties, because their transfer to the mainland would send a wrong message and create a new wave of arrivals.”

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