

# Still Here: Samos Refugees from Turkey. Humanitarian Crisis Triggered by Frontex, the EU Border Force

By [Chris Jones](#)

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## *Lunacy and Profits*

*It is difficult to describe adequately the cruelties and inhumanities embedded in the reception and detention systems based on the frontier islands. The fact that refugees have to risk their lives and spend vast amounts to make the short journey from Turkey is simply outrageous when there are regular daily ferry crossings at around 30 -50 Euros per head. For the authorities safe passage is a total non starter. As far as they are concerned safe passage would open the gates to waves of refugees. Their stated objective as exemplified by the ever expanding European border force, Frontex, is about hardening and patrolling borders making it ever more difficult and expensive for refugees to get out of Turkey and into Europe. In 2015 Frontex had 300 guards which has risen to 1500 guards in 2015. In May this year the EU Commission announced its plan to create a standing corps of 10,000 guards which is to be up and running by 2027. In 2006 the Frontex annual budget was 19 million Euros. By 2011 it was 118 millions and in 2016, 232 million Euros. And on it goes with seemingly no limit. The EU Commission announced in May that it will increase the budget on 'external borders, migrant and refugee flows from 13 to 34 billion Euros by 2027 which is the biggest proposed spending increase within the entire EU.*

And for the refugees? What can they expect?

Not much when out of the total of EU resources for refugee policy, 46% goes on securing borders, 16% to send them back and just 17% on the refugees themselves (2014 figures).



All of this makes for joyous times to those who profit from surveillance and the hard ware from ships to drones and who can confidently predict a rosy future. They will never succeed in stopping the flow any more than the EU/Turkey pact of 2016 has stopped the refugees from getting to the frontier islands. They might be effective in reducing the numbers and in

closing some routes, but hell will freeze over before they can prevent entry into Europe. But what the hell. The ever shifting relationship between the refugees and the European authorities simply justifies ever more costly inappropriate and ultimately ineffective strategies.

*The big players in Europe's border security complex include arms companies Airbus, Finmeccanica,*

*Thales and Safran, as well as technology giant Indra. Finmeccanica and Airbus have been particularly prominent winners of EU contracts aimed at strengthening borders. Airbus is also the number one winner of EU security research funding contracts*

*Finmecannica, Thales and Airbus, prominent players in the EU security business are also three of the top four European arms traders, all active selling to countries in the Middle East and North Africa.*

*Their total revenues in 2015 amounted to 95 billion euros*

([Source](#))

### Deliberate Cruelties

“Virtually all of the top five asylum producing countries for the EU are on the visa black list (the exception is Albania). These are: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Albania and Pakistan (according to FRONTEX 20 January 2015). There are EU and/or national sanctions on carriers such as airlines and ferry companies of €5,000 at least for each passenger they bring to the EU without proper documentation (including a valid passport and visa). There are no EU delegations open in Syria which issue visas. So instead of paying the €30 which EU citizens hand over for a day trip from the Turkish coast to the Greek islands or the other way around, Syrians have to pay smugglers according to latest calculations more than US\$ 1,000 per person for a dangerous and sometimes fatal trip. This is simply because no authorised carrier will accept refugees without passports or visas or both. ” ([Source](#))

From the very beginning of their contact with Europe the refugees arriving on the frontier islands are not welcome arrivals. They have not come ‘legally’. The tone is set. The island hotspots look like and are open prison camps.

The problem for the refugees on Samos and on all the frontier islands is that such barbarity is deliberate. It is a key element of the European deterrence objective. The Hotspots/Camps they argue should minimally sustain but no more, or they would attract more unwanted arrivals. The consequences are well known as countless reports from countless bodies have made clear. But nothing changes fundamentally. No one bears any consequence or is held to account for the shortcomings and abuses such reports reveal. There are no refugee champions amongst those who have any say in determining policy or practice. Although there are some individual police and other officials well down the pecking order of power who try to make a difference. But this is becoming less common as police are drafted in from both Greece and other EU countries on short rotations which inhibit any meaningful relationships with the refugees.

Until the 2016 EU/Turkey pact, camps on the frontier islands were primarily transit points. The refugees were moved on to the mainland, many within weeks of their arrival and the majority after 3 months. During 2014/15 when arrivals were at their hight refugees were being moved on within 24-72 hours. Now many are detained for 2 years or more on the

island. They are not allowed to move on. Tourists can now forget their dreamy ideas of Greek islands as being laid-back, with music and welcoming locals at the ports greeting them. On Samos at least, ferry departures are distasteful events involving armed and tooled up ninja turtle like police checking lorries and vans and plain clothes police mingling with the departing passengers pulling out those who remotely look like a refugee. Samos is a prison island for refugees.

And this is set to continue. On April 17<sup>th</sup> 2018 the Council of State (the supreme court of Greece) declared that the detention of refugees on the islands of Lesbos, Rhodes, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos is void. In its majority ruling it said that “the practice of indiscriminate imposition of the geographical restriction, initially by the Police and then by the Asylum Service, against every newly arrived person on the islands since the launch of the EU-Turkey Statement has led to a significant overcrowding, whereby people have been obliged to reside for prolonged periods in overcrowded facilities, where food and water supply is insufficient, sanitation is poor and security highly problematic”. ([Source](#))

The EU response was immediate. This was not acceptable. Refugees had to be kept on the islands and processed there. Onward passage to the mainland was to be dependent on a successful asylum application. Otherwise deportation. On no account do the EU authorities want them on the mainland where some of the refugees have more opportunities to move clandestinely, on into Europe. In contrast to almost any other area of policy the Syriza Government took almost immediate action to restore the restrictions by issuing on April 20<sup>th</sup> an administrative order which annulled the Council of State decision. Even by Greek standards such a decision to ignore the supreme court’s ruling is of massive significance in terms of the relationship between the legislature and the judiciary. Moreover, it was not achieved by new legislation debated in parliament but but through an administrative order. But then of course the subject is refugees which might explain the muted response to such an important and dangerous development.

### A New and Bigger Camp

In a further consolidation of this policy the Greek government announced at the end of May 2018 that the camps on the islands are to be expanded, and in the case of Samos, moved from its present location near the main town. In addition a new prison would be built for those who have been unsuccessful in their asylum bid and are to be deported.

Nothing is ever certain in Greece so whether these decisions will result in any action remains to be seen. But what is certain is that there are no plans to change the policy of island detention.

Not surprisingly the recent announcements about expanding and re-developing the camps on the frontier islands has met with immediate opposition from the local authorities. Singularly and collectively the respective mayors of the islands affected have condemned the decision which flies directly in the face of their demands that the islands must be de-congested (of refugees). The response by the mayor of Samos on June 4<sup>th</sup> 2018 is shared by all the frontier islands and unlike in the past he draws on the suffering of the refugees in the existing facilities as a significant reason for de-congestion and, for good reason thinks that there is every possibility that any new expanded camps would continue to be places of hardship and inhumanity for the refugees. Given the long standing antagonism towards

refugees by Michalis Angelopoulos, the mayor of Samos, this is just the latest example of his unprincipled exploitation of any issue which he believes will strengthen his case.

These factors now sit alongside their longer standing arguments that the presence of refugees has damaged tourism – their biggest source of income – and adversely affected the local population whose tolerance has been pushed to its limit. Ironically, the Samos mayor acknowledged the government's decision to move the existing camp away from its close proximity to the centre of the island's capital as at least giving legitimacy to his long-standing and untrue claim that the camp has placed an intolerable strain on the residents of Samos town. The irony lies in the fact that the 'refugee business' is the biggest single year round economic activity in Samos town. It accounts for the employment of hundreds of people. Who in turn spend money in the town including hotel accommodation and the like. Then there is the far more limited spending power of the refugees, but when numbered in thousands bring considerable returns to local shops and supermarkets. The majority of refugees are buying basic food stuffs to supplement and transform the meals provided in the camp. Spices and fresh vegetables can and do make the unpalatable edible. The possibility that the camp will be removed to some remote spot on the island is going to have a profound negative impact on the economic well being of Samos town. And as for the refugees where will they shop, where will they be able to wander around a town like any normal human being, how will they access the money transfer businesses vital to so many and so on?

As is common here the idea to move and enlarge the camp in a more remote area has simply not been thought through and such thoughtlessness will bear down hard on the refugees. For example, the refugees get their medical care from the only hospital on the island. It is one and half kilometres from the camp. It will be disastrous for the refugees to be moved further away from such a vital resource especially on an island which at the moment has just 2 working ambulances.

### Islanders and Refugees

Whatever the mayor claims about the stresses on the local population as a result of the refugee presence, it is the case on Samos at least, there is no evidence to support the notion that there is such a problem. Unlike Chios and Lesbos there has been no noticeable growth in racist or fascist responses against the refugees. There is Samos SOS, of which we wrote about earlier, which does it best to foretell doom and despair as the islanders are islamised but such claims are more likely to invoke laughter rather than anger. Instead what is daily evident is that refugees are just another aspect of life in the town who like others do their shopping, walk by the sea, play with their children on the swings and roundabouts, sit in the platias and town garden with their friends, swim and fish. There is no evident tension. Neither refugees nor locals display any unease by the others presence. And as for the tourists from northern Europe there is nothing unusual about seeing the kind of ethnic diversity which is both common and more extensive in their cities than on Samos.



Refugees arriving in

Samos

Refugees have been easy targets for blaming the problems confronting tourism on Samos. There has been no focus on the multi-national tour operators who determine the flights and destinations. Without any local consultation or any accountability, they decided that refugees would make islands such as Samos unattractive to their customers and so reduced their charter flights and hotel bookings. There have never been refugees on the south side of the island where many of the biggest tourist facilities are located. Even in 2014/15 many tourists would never have encountered a single refugee. The refugees are concentrated overwhelmingly in Samos town and are rarely seen in Kokari or Pythagorio the 2 principal tourist centres on the island.

That relationships between the locals and refugees in Samos town are neither fraught nor tense owes much to the refugees. Now that the refugees are here for such long periods increasingly locals recognise that they bring to the town a vitality that was not there before, especially outside the summer season. Laughing children in the playgrounds draw smiles and bring joy. Eating falafel and hummus in the town square is celebrated rather than condemned as some underhand cultural challenge. Of course it is not all sunshine and light and the refugees can tell you of the bars, shops, hairdressers and gyms which will not serve them.

Without question many islanders are suffering badly. But this has nothing to do with the presence of refugees. It is the never ending economic and social crises which have and continue to devastate the lives of so many islanders. This is as much a humanitarian disaster as that of the refugees. Needless to say the multi national tour operators who turn the tap on and off with respect to tourism have exploited this by paying wages which can not sustain a worker and demand working hours in excess of 50 hours per week. At the end of May 2018, *Keep Talking Greece*, reported that 30% of workers in the private sector were paid below 365 Euros a month (which is the level of unemployment benefit for the minority who are eligible).

## Children

As we have written before, the big story that never gets attention is why the Samos camp has not exploded. The presence of so many police and guards of all kinds in the town; the parked up buses with riot police regularly seen near the camp all indicate the authorities'



awareness that they are managing and sustaining a powder keg. Of course there is no short or simple answer to why apart from some relatively minor disturbances that the camp has not descended into chaos and protest.

The following observations provide some clues. Go to the camp and one is immediately aware of the very large numbers of children running around and playing with their friends.

They are everywhere and those under 12 years old now account for around 30% of the camp's inhabitants. Despite the grim conditions in and around the camp the sight and sounds of so many children playing have an uplifting effect. For many refugees their concern over their children's safety and future drove them from their homes. They thirst to see their children safe and happy and turn away from actions which might threaten them. And the fact that women account for 21% of the refugees here is also a factor in the avoidance of violent and destructive actions. There must be times when some of the young men might want to burn the camp down but the presence of so many children and babies makes such a prospect appalling. Of course, that is not to say that such desperate actions will never happen.



As noted earlier, easy access into the town functions as an important safety valve. The camp is open and there is no reason to stay inside the camp 24/7. In the town and on the beaches they can pass their time. Many make use of the Alpha Centre which is run by the Samos Volunteers for the refugees.

In a large building near to the bottom gate to the camp refugees can meet together to drink tea, use the wi fi and attend a wide range of classes and activities. It is amazing to see the fluency in English that some have achieved through these classes. And importantly, a number of these activities and lessons draw on the talents and experiences of the refugees themselves who now lead or assist with their delivery.

Many of the refugees are busy. Some are incredibly busy! They play a huge role in sustaining life and morale in the camp. Those who are fluent (enough) in English are in great demand to accompany refugees to the hospital which has no translator. Most of the doctors speak English so they can manage. Very few refugees learn Greek as they have no intention

of staying in this country once they get their papers. Virtually every interaction with the camp authorities needs an interpreter and refugees have learnt it is better for them to have someone doing this who they trust and who knows them.

But as much as we laud the resilience and creativity of the refugees we cannot ignore the pain and depression which damages so many refugees. Deep depression is ever present with all its painful consequences. To survive as a human being in these conditions is a huge challenge.

### Disdain

One of the biggest flaws which has characterised refugee policy and action in Greece over decades has been the absence of any constructive engagement with the refugees. This is all the more clueless now refugees are stuck for years in camps all over Greece and have the time to be more involved. As Saad pointed out in nearly one year in the Samos camp he was never asked for his opinion on anything. No psychologist or social worker ever asked him if knew of anyone who needed their help. Yet the refugees often know well who amongst them is struggling. In its various forms this lack of engagement, and here we would include most of the NGOs, portrays a fundamental disdain of the refugees.

But in its absence the refugees in a myriad of ways make their lives better. Those who can cut hair set up their workplaces. Cooking groups abound where evening meals are cooked and shared. Artists paint and draw. Nails are manicured. And so on with the spaces filled by Facebook and Whatsap. With a little bit of imagination and most importantly trust in and respect for the refugees life even in these appalling open prisons could be so much better. It is unlikely to happen but we can still dream.

Finally in trying to understand why there are so few explosions within the camp we should not forget that the police and the army are in their midst. They carry guns. They have tear gas and batons. And in Greece as we all know, they will use violence without much provocation.

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