

# a crime of survival

executive summary

Samos island, Greece, May 2021



## why you need to read this

Today, wherever you are, you may feel safe and secure. But everything you have could be taken from you at any moment. You, your father, your mother, or a friend may suddenly find themselves in the kind of vulnerable situation that so many others find themselves in on the Greek island of Samos. Situations those people could have never imagined for themselves.

So, **read about those people, and listen to them.**

And, while you read this report, try to prepare for the battle that may face you, and maybe all of us.

## a message from Samos island

Another weary face, another stifled cry. This is a message from the victims of a prison that should not exist, from the prisoners who went through no trial. A message from the **perpetrators of the crime of survival.**

This is a message to those who truly believe in freedom and peaceful coexistence, and do not draw borders out of a belief in the superiority of a particular race or belief system.

The aim of this report is not for you to sympathize, but rather to correctly document and narrate the marginalization and silencing that we experience on a daily basis.

In this report, we will describe what really happens on an asylum journey to Europe, and what the world must know. The reality is, what is happening to displaced people in Greece is a *systematic crime*, built on capitalist exploitation and the collusion of those who claim to be guardians of morality.

What we will mention here is a *small part of a systematic policy that exploits the Syrian cause*, as well as similar ones across the world.

## research methodology

This report is the result of research that was conducted in April 2021, among Syrian nationals resident in the Vathy refugee camp, on Samos island. The authors of the report, themselves asylum seekers living in the Vathy camp, collected their research data in the form of a questionnaire distributed to camp residents.

The questionnaire was shared 'tent by tent', and answered by Syrian nationals residing in the so-called 'Jungle' of Vathy camp.

Across the three days of research, a total of 250 people engaged in the survey, both single people and families with minors. This resulted in 102 individual responses. All respondents were informed of the complete anonymity and confidentiality of the research and gave their consent for their answers to be published.

The author of the survey reached out to the *Samos Advocacy Collective*, a collaborative project between the grassroots organizations operating in Samos, who assisted in the general drafting of the research report.

The decision to survey Syrian nationals in particular arises from an acknowledgment of the specificities of going through the European migration policy and Greek asylum procedure as holders of Syrian citizenship (see text box below), as well as the **shared path that binds together all people fleeing from Syria**.

## about the Syrian people living in Vathy camp

Syrians are one of the most largely represented communities to have arrived on Samos island over the past years.<sup>1</sup>

The living conditions inside the Vathy Reception Identification Centre are widely known to be undignified. Everyone living there is cut off from any form of independent sustenance and every aspect of daily life is completely dependent on camp management authorities. But it is especially in the so-called 'Jungle', the extended hillside camp area, that living conditions reach disheartening and inhumane levels, where people live in makeshift tents with scarce to no access to electricity or internet, water supply, heating, hygiene services and proper waste disposal management.

Oftentimes through the past 5 years, the RIC and 'Jungle' have recorded numbers of residents that were far above what the simple word 'overcrowding' can describe.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the inherent problems of sharing an inadequate living space with thousands of others, additional factors worsening the unhealthy environment include pests, snakes and rats, that infest the overcrowded living area. These living conditions have a systematic negative impact on the mental

*O stranger, what takes you out of your country?*

*And if you leave, what is your destination?*

*Do you think that the Earth gives you the right to live in peace anywhere you go?*

*Do you think you look like everyone else?*

*How can a person be a stranger?*

*You have heard about war, but! not allow you to reality and the extent of the tragedy that people are suffering in Syria.*

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Mediterranean Situation: [Greece](#)

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR: [alleviating suffering and overcrowding in Greek islands' reception centres must be part of the emergency response](#) (24/9/2020)

health of people who have already been through traumatic experiences that are far beyond the capacity of the psychiatric care accessible on the island.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, of the total 102 respondents, only fifty (50) reported no medical conditions at the time of the interview. At least thirty (30) reported having **at least some form of psychological or psychiatric condition** - for oneself or a relative - which in some cases was also added to **other forms of medical conditions**. Among the people in need of medical treatment, the identified conditions accounted for cases such as chronic headaches, migraines and sleep disorders, together with urinary diseases, artery diseases, kidney diseases, abdomen pain, back pain, eyes and ears problems, malnutrition and anemia, complications due to pregnancy, allergic reactions to insect bites, as well as asthma, cancer, high blood pressure, diabetes, epilepsy and other possibly preexistent conditions. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic adds yet another layer, with ensuing discriminatory restrictions and a poorly-managed response from the health authorities, which has been documented.<sup>4</sup>

Such are the living conditions of the people interviewed in this research. And such is the life of thousands of men, women and children for months on end, and often more than a year.

Among the many answers provided in the survey, one in particular is worth highlighting and stressing with insistence: of the 102 people who responded to the survey, all have been confined to such a life in the refugee camp for more than 12 months.

At the time of writing, 96 had lived in the camp for 1 to 2 years, while 6 of them had lived there for over 2 years already.

On average, the **interviewees have spent 1.61 years in Samos**. The shortest period recorded was 1 year, 2 months, and 8 days. The longest period registered is 2 years, 11 months, and 2 days - and counting.

All except two of them, at the time of the research, were residing in makeshift shelters and shacks inside the 'Jungle'.

Of course, given such a long time spent waiting for the asylum procedure to be carried out, one would assume that the people interviewed were already in the know as regards their refugee status. This assumption would be, for the most part, wrong. In fact, 73 respondents were **still waiting for a decision on their asylum applications** and did not know when this would

**What is the EU-Turkey Deal?** The reason for the fate of Syrian nationals being different from that of other individuals lies in the letter of the statement signed by Turkey and the European Council (known as EU-Turkey Deal) and the Greek implementation of this agreement in Article 90(3) IPA.

The EU-Turkey Deal was agreed in March 2016 in light of the European Union facing large numbers of arrivals since 2015.

Through the Deal the EU has *de facto* accepted Turkey as a 'safe country', ruling that all illegal entries on the Greek islands can be returned to Turkey and, for each Syrian refugee who is returned to Turkey, the EU will accept one other Syrian the *Resettlement Programmeln* return, Turkey prevent illegal departures from borders towards Greece.

In addition the EU support Turkey with 6 billion euros and liberate visa requirements for Turkish citizens.

As Turkey has not fully ratified the Geneva Convention, the implementation of the Deal implies *at the very least* an endangerment to the individual's right to asylum.

**The asylum procedure for Syrian nationals:** implementing the EU-Turkey Deal meant the creation of 'hotspots' and a 'fast-track border procedure' on Lesbos, Chios, Leros, Kos and Samos.

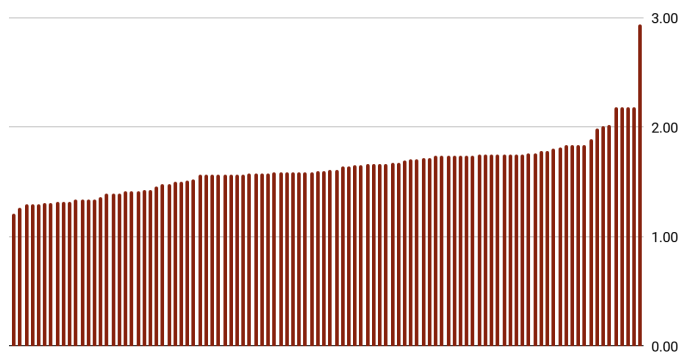
This procedure implies that the asylum claim of Syrian nationals to pass an *admissibility stage* before even entering the Greek asylum procedure.

In the interview of the admissibility stage it is examined whether the person might have been safe in Turkey and they can be returned there. Only when it is proven that applicant is not safe in Turkey, they can access an asylum interview the reasons they fled Syria.

<sup>3</sup> Reliefweb, NGOs release [new report on the 'invisible' mental health emergency](#) for asylum seekers on Samos

<sup>4</sup> Fareid Atta, ['Worse than in Syria'](#), Zenith Magazine (7/6/2021)

period spent in the 'Jungle' on Samos island (years)



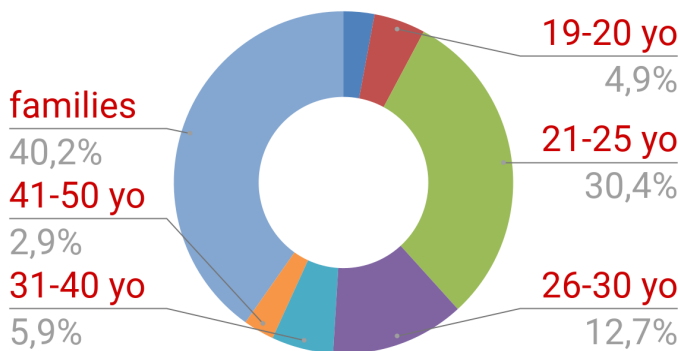
be disclosed to them. Of those who did know about the state of their asylum applications, only 8 had received a positive decision.

The very high rejection rate can be explained by many factors but, undoubtedly, a large part is played by the specific design of the asylum procedures for Syrian applicants - as explained by the EU-Turkey Deal.<sup>5</sup>

That being the case, at least 13 respondents reported a time between being notified of a decision on their application or appeal, and the actual disclosure of that decision, that varied between 1 month and an entire year.

Speaking of access to information, another data set obtained was regarding the respondents' knowledge and **understanding about their own asylum procedure and their rights as asylum seekers inside the EU.** The question 'do you feel you can easily access accurate information as regards the asylum process, about the services available to you, and about your rights in Samos?' received a single, unanimous answer: **every single respondent answered 'no'.**

social status and age groups



While the limited reach of our survey may pose questions about this data, the response to the question above is undoubtedly significant.

There is a very thin line between the lack of knowledge about one's own legal rights and the concrete absence of these rights.

testimonies

The vast majority of the 102 people who responded to the survey (87 of them) stated that they left Syria due to the war. Although this is an expected response, it is paramount to stress that **fleeing war**

**is not a choice but rather a necessity.**

The Syrian people were forced to leave their country, much like they were forced to flee Turkey because of a hostile treatment given there to all refugees at large, much like they are now forced to wait on Samos island until their asylum procedure is over.

Among the few who did not identify war as the reason for leaving Syria, 6 reportedly fled in order to avoid military service, and 2 reported the oppression of the Assad regime as the reason for their displacement. 2 respondents stated the need of medical treatment for oneself or a relative as reason for leaving Syria, and another 2 for reasons of family reunification. Only 3 respondents stated that they had fled Syria for better employment or study opportunities.

Whatever the reason for their original journey, when asked about their most pressing need at the moment of the interview, the respondents most commonly **reported the need of legal support, as well as physical health and psychological support,** or a combination of the three. Among the additional replies, 4 people

<sup>5</sup> [Answer by Commissioner Ylva Johansson on behalf of the European Commission](#) on the 'growing number of Syrian nationals in the Greek islands who have been notified by the Greek Asylum Service of final negative decisions'

mentioned needing financial support, and another 5 expressed the need of better housing and transfer from the island.

On this note, the respondents were unanimous in replying to the following question: *do you have any suggestions to alleviate the suffering of people in the camp?*

9 respondents mentioned the need for better food provision or support in employability and education, in order to integrate into Greek society. However, the most common answer, shared by 80 out of the total of 102, was once again **to be removed from the island**.

Additionally, 3 other respondents had a very simple request: *freedom*.

Finally, when asked if their opinion on coming to Europe had changed due to the experience of living in the 'hotspot', respondents offered a variety of answers:

*No, because the suffering we are going through is temporary.*

*I do not regret building a better life for my family.*

*Yes, because of this island, but I want to get out of here.*

*No, because I just need some time to get to my sister.*

*No, but I hope that the situation will be better in the future.*

*We hope that in other countries we will find better conditions than the current ones.*

*Yes, because life is difficult here on the island, and if Europe is like this, I do not want it.*

*Yes, because the situation is very bad in Greece and they did not take care of my daughter.*

*Yes, because of this island, and I did not expect this treatment in Europe.*

*We ran from death to death, we hope for a better Europe.*

*I regret it very much and I hope to return to Syria safely.*

*Yes, because our souls were destroyed here.*

*Yes, because the situation here is very bad.*

*Yes, because of this island, and I want to go to my daughter in Germany.*

*Yes, because of this island, and I did not expect to find this sort of treatment in Europe.*

*Yes, and a lot because of the island.*

*Yes, because of this island, I imagined one thing and saw another.*

*No, but life here is difficult.*

*Yes, if all countries are like Greece, I do not want it.*

*Yes, because I am here.*

*No, but living here is very difficult and bad.*

*I do not regret coming here, because of the war.*

*Yes, because I have suffered for a long time, about a year and a half, and I suffer from diabetes.*

*Yes, if it is all like this island, I do not want Europe at all.*

*Yes, because of the island's bad conditions.*

*No, we hope that Europe will be better than Greece.*

*Yes, for the sake of this island, and I did not expect this treatment in Europe and did not differentiate between them and Bin Bashar al-Assad.*

*Yes, a lot, because of this island and the future of my boy - and a lot of this is lost.*

*Yes, because of this place.*

*No, because it's better than my country.*

*No, Europe had a difficult start, but afterwards it will be better.*

*Yes, I did not expect the situation to be of such degree in Greece.*

*Yes, because it's a bad life here in Greece.*

*Yes, because if Europe is like Greece, I regret it.*

*Yes, because of this situation.*

*Yes, because of this situation and this island.*

*Yes, I am very regretful, because the situation is very bad and psychologically devastating.*

*Yes, because of this island, and I lost my life.*

*No, because I am Kurdish and I am a fugitive.*

*I regret my arrival on this island, and if it is all like this in Europe, I do not want it, and humanity has deceived me and we did not see it.*

*No, because Greece is not my destination and I know that I will pass it and continue to my destination in Europe. I know that it is a temporary issue.*

*Yes, because of this island only.*

*No, but if we remain in this situation, Europe will not remain what we thought.*

*Life is difficult on the island, but I know that it is a matter of time and it will be over.*

*We hope it will be better. We did not know that Europe had such unjustic*

### a note from the author

When I left Syria, I was confident that persecution is limited to the frontiers set by the old colonies, colonies which in my view have ended.

I continued to trustfully search for protection for our souls and sustenance for our ambitions. So, I crossed the sea.

As we embarked towards the sea, pictures of destroyed buildings in my country passed in front of my eyes, telling me: *We are waiting for you to rebuild us.*

And pictures of charred corpses, telling me: *Stay safe for as long as possible.* My dreams and ambitions intensified.

I was met with bullets as I tried to survive, and my family and I entered the only available shelter - which was Turkey.

When we arrived at Samos island, the reception was disorganized and confused. Perhaps, because of the atmosphere of emergency, some mistakes were made.

All the way to Samos, we were looking at each other, feeling blessed, with the expectation and determination for a better life... However, that all shattered when we reached the main gate of the reception center. On it, there was a blue plaque. Written on the plaque: *'No photography'*.

Not long afterward, **we discovered that some consider survival a 'crime'**.

### after you have read this report

There are two things you must understand.

First: Displacement can occur due to natural disasters such as hurricanes, volcanoes and floods that can occur at any moment.

Second: Syrian displacement did not happen because of a natural disaster. It has happened because of a war created by a colonialist mindset and extreme greed.

You may feel safe and secure today, but at any moment you may find yourselves in similar situations to the people in this report.

Now, it's your choice. Decide how to act. Consider if you can at least try to make a difference. **What will you do?**