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Street Perspectives: Conversations with Syrian Refugees in Athens

Kairos Europe

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

We would like to thank Hamdy Basha, the Athens based local Egyptian migrants and restaurants that allowed us to use their premises interview the handful of refugees we were able to speak with. Most importantly we are grateful onto the refugee families and individuals from Syria, Iraq and Kurdistan who participated in our discussions; of which this report is intended to give them a voice to raise awareness here in the UK and Europe about the real plight of Refugees. We are deeply grateful onto Amelia and Daniele of Kairos Europe who made this opportunity possible.

INTRODUCTION:

We (within Britain) with a bit of research are now well aware that the number of migrants arriving on Greek shores soared by 408% over the first six months of 2015 compared with the same period last year (UNHCR Greece). Furthermore, up until the 8 March, this year, when the Macedonian border was definitively closed, the vast majority of the refugees and migrants arriving in Greece continued on their journey towards other EU countries passing through the Balkans (Amnesty International, Trapped in Greece, 2016). However, through the site visits and

conversations carried out by myself and colleagues in Athens in June 2016; the refugee dilemmas, traumas and day-to-day life stories in between these statistics was better understood and documented.

Along with my colleague Ms. Amal Almansowri; we ventured through the capital of Athens meeting and speaking with various Arab and Kurdistan refugees (mostly Syrians) in what was an eye-opening experience for them. Many Greek Islands including the islands of Lesbos and Chios have become a focal point of the refugee crisis in Greece. Whilst the residence of some on some of these islands have been nominated for a Nobel peace prize for their empathy and assistance; worries over the persist over long-term effects to social cohesion, tourism industry and national security have been brought to attention via recent atrocities in France, Turkey and Germany.



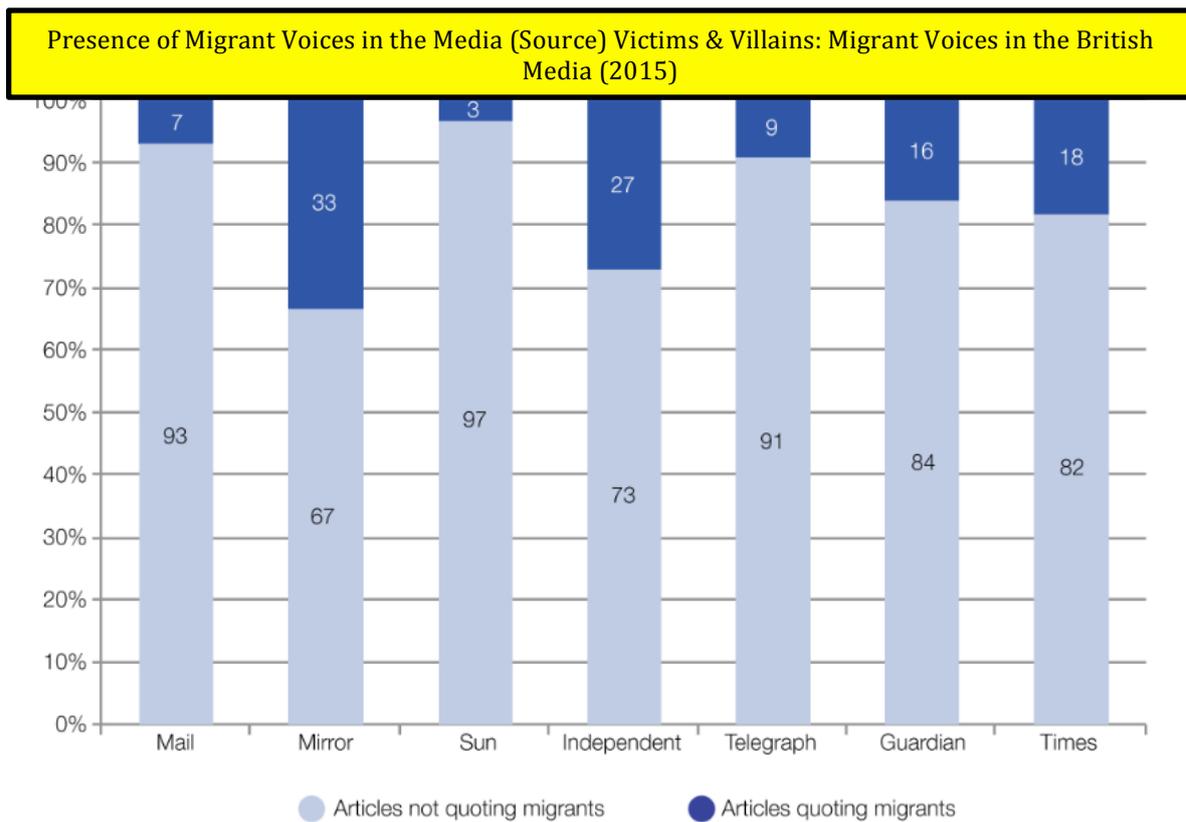


From Left to Right: A. Almansowri, Syrian Refugee and T. Alli (June 2016)

APPROACH:

The report draws on documentation of 10 conversations we had with Refugees in around Athens. Interviews took place outside the Katachaki Centre and some across locations in the Iouliou area of Athens. Ms. Almansowri translated the questions I asked and the answers that were given as 9 out of the 10 conversations took place in Arabic with one in English. All the interviews were conducted in an informal manner and

Below are some of the accounts from of these Refugees; illustrating the sole objective of this brief report. We are aware from research conducted last year that migrant voices were less likely to be present in stories that were negative about migration and migrants in British Media; some tabloids to the extent of 97% of it's migrants articles do not include voices of migrants themselves (Kaiser, A et al 2016).



setting with the classical approach of Ms. Amal translating the questions and myself jotting down the assertions in my notepad.

MR AND MRS ASSAF:

“We (parents) arrived via boat on the 19th August. Our treatment was basic. We (the five of us) stayed on the Island for three months before making our way to the mainland. Our son, who is seventeen, is in Germany. The other is in Austria. He has been granted ‘Exceptional Residency’ and we are waiting to see if we can be re-united with him. Our youngest daughter has several health problems (which we don’t want to go in detail about). We receive no help from Greek people here. We are grateful onto some of the Arab and Egyptian restaurants that give us some bread and tea in the evening (as it is currently Ramadan) but we know after Ramadan finishes; we know it will go back to normal. We are originally from Palestine but lived in Syria until the war began. In Syria; even if you are a third generation Palestinian born in Syria; you’re still given a Palestinian ID. This is the second time we’re becoming refugees. Once is in Syria; and now here in Greece. All we want to go is go back and be re-united with our son in Germany before November because he will turn eighteen and if that happens; he’ll be denied certain accommodation privileges there and we don’t know what will happen to him.”

“The Greeks and Turkish have a tough attitude towards migrants. Syrians that

have been granted indefinite leave to remain (in Greece) want to sort their own lives out but those that are refugees and Palestinian suffer discrimination amongst Arab communities. Middle east and North Africans discriminate against Palestinian refugees. Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have suffered greatly. See – look at some of our fractures, broken bones and some of the abuse soldiers of the Syrian regime have done to us. We have a strong idea of where ISIS comes from home and how they are funded; but we don’t really care. All we want to know is how we’re going to survive and wish to return.”

“We know that the UK has one of the biggest professional intelligence service in the world; and though they behave like they do not know what is happening. I know they are well aware of what is happening with us right here right now.”

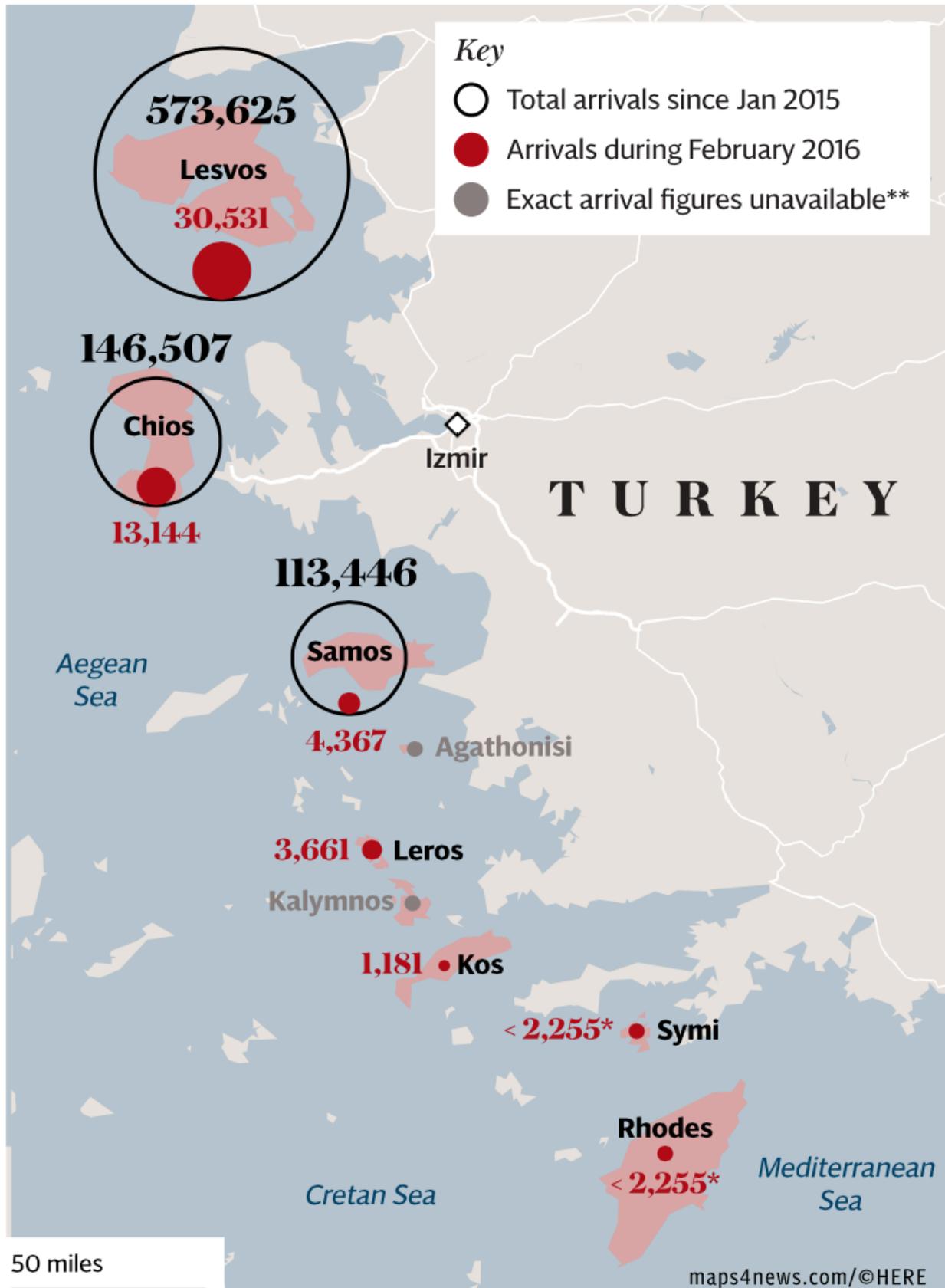
“There is a lot of financial blackmail that takes place. Sexual abuse, rape, throwing very sick people off at sea and unspeakable atrocities took place. When we came via the boats, we saw at least 80 people dead at sea (as they had their boats capsized. Many of the Turkish coastguards were and are ruthless at sea as many boats were deliberately capsized. The problem is this: when the EU decided to open their borderline; it was a great idea; but they didn’t establish rules for

Syrians only and verifying that we are Syrians. Many North Africans as a result have taken advantage of the open borders because these traffickers can make a lot of money. Some migrate for economic reasons and others for political reasons. I lost two of my children at sea, What can you say to me?"

"We fled from Syria to Turkey, from Turkey to Greece by boat. We walked from Turkey to Greece (via River). It took us 7 ½ hours from Adana (Turkey) to the river where we stopped to get water. A group of men (appearing in uniform) approached us and told us "Where do you come from?" We came with them because we trusted them as they were wearing Police uniform. They took us to a closed place like a warehouse; they asked us to take our clothes off. They took away our belts and shoe-laces and searched us thoroughly and widely. The female staff searched us. They looked Greek (but spoke fluent Arabic); we went 14 hours without food and water. My daughter needed water – she was crying. Around 12 midnight, the staff brought a truck, around 600 of us (women and children) were taken inside lorries. They drove around 2 hours – they took us back to the river where we crossed – they had guns and knives and placed us into small boats. On our way back; they found a Syrian man whose wife was returned, but they never returned his

three daughters. We fled again to Greece and arrived on March 19th and were given ID.

Migration crisis on Greek islands



*UN Refugee Agency's figures show that approximately 2,255 migrants arrived in the Southern Dodecanese during February 2016

**The whole of Greece saw 52,809 migrant arrivals during February 2016 – and 980,727 since January 2015

AMEENA:

“My name is Ameena. I have 11 kids. My husband is in Norway. He is dying of cancer. I want to go and meet him with my three children here as he desperately wants to see them before they pass away. We only keep in touch if he has enough money to sms. When we arrived to Chios Island who provided us with three meals a day; although the food wasn't nice – we forced ourselves to eat it. My children lost weight. It took us two months to arrive in Greece and we arrived today (on the day we interviewed her). I am here (in Katehaki Camp) to find out whether we can go to Norway to see him. The Centre told me to get a phone and address. I don't have these things. I have no idea where I am staying tonight.”

HASHAM:

“I am Syrian, 29 years old – Architectural Engineer. We (me and my friends) started in Syria and travelled to Turkey. The traffickers from Syria to Turkey are Syrian; those from Turkey to Greece are Turkish. We arrived on the Island of Leros and then two months of Greece and within 5 days of arrival we were given Homeless ID. Me and my friends (the three of us) live in the marine, no food, only a roof – no financial support. The reason why we come here (Katehaki Camp) daily is to be allocated to another place in Greece or abroad.”

“The criteria of relocating us is unknown; we're told one thing but shown another. My family is in Syria because of the dangers of travelling by sea. My wife and two kids are there. We want to relocate to other countries but we are still in the dark. I signed up to go to eight countries. I'd like Luxembourg or Belgium but I don't really care. Anywhere will do.”

YARA:

“I'm from Syria, I'm 25 years old. All my family were killed there and I fled. We all arrived on the same day (Hasham and Amoudi). We paid money to the traffickers. I'm not married. My cousins are the only ones left from my family and they are in Sweden. I want to go there.

HAMOUDI:

“I'm 27, a refugee and desperate on the streets here in Athens. I'm from Iraq. ISIS killed my dad, my mum and the rest of my family are in Iraq. I am wanted by the militias in Iraq and escaped immediately out of Iraq via Turkey. We (three of us) all arrived to Greece on the same day. I dream of Britain but I know I cannot reach the UK. I tried to go via Traffickers; but the price is too much. Whether my family depends on God. All I want is to be reunited with my kids. I don't care if I end up with a tent in a park – I just want to be with my wife and children. I want them to send

me to another country so I can bring my wife and children.”

ORANCE ALAHAB:

“I was in Turkey for two years and was 4 to 5 months on Milos Island before coming to Greece mainland. I was given ID on the 26th February 2016, which is valid for six months. I have been here in Athens for 4 days. I was at the Turkish/Macedonia border camps. All my family are in Syria; I’ve haven’t heard anything from them in almost three months. I am seeking protection from the war. I don’t want my family to come just yet. I have no money. Just eating meals where they serve food. I borrowed money from Syrian people to buy money for transport. I need to have an operation on my back. I want to go back to Turkey. I can’t buy anything and I can’t work. My cousin who is in Macedonia told me this morning that there is Refugee Registration taking place there and I need to get the train tonight. If I’m caught – I know ill be in trouble as I don’t have money to pay the fares.”

AHMED KASEM:

I am 30, I left Syria a year ago. We arrived at **Mytilene Island** and stayed in a shelter. I got my ID on February 28th 2016. We have no solicitors to advocate for us. We heard speculation that they will evacuate the camp so they fled. There is a small self-funded organization that I work with as a

volunteer. I can’t remember their name but their staff is from Switzerland, Italy and the US. The European volunteers that I worked with all the ‘open border stories’ are lies. When I was on the Macedonian Border; the Greek Military came to the town in Macedonia; there were incredibly large in number. They asked all of us to leave. They brought buses and asked us to board them. They distributed us on the ‘salonie border’. I can’t remember the name but there were/are a lot empty factories where we set up tents inside. We couldn’t eat or sleep. There was very dirty river and/or lake nearby which had insects. As the proverb goes “Follows the liar until the end of the corridor”. Many of the organizations and police and professionals that were registering us were telling us lies – we couldn’t take it anymore some of us left. We arrived in Athens. I must say the church really helped us. There was a Christian organization that had several volunteers with them here in Athens – they have been good to us.

AHMED IBRAHIM ISA:

“I am 34, from Damascus Reef in Syria. My dad and mother passed away during the war. Me and my wife and three kids fled to Jordan in 2013 as refugees. We were sent back to Syria by the Jordanian government, as we weren’t allowed to work. We were caught and went back to Syria. Seven months after being deported

back to Syria. I left for Turkey. And then I went to Greece via Traffickers. Afghans, Syrians and Turkish – we were a mixed group on the boat that arrived to Samos Island. I just want to be given indefinite leave to remain so that I can visit my family (who are now back in Jordan) in a legal way. There is no support here in Athens. I haven't been given any further instructions. If I knew that this is how life was going to be here then I would have stayed in Syria.

ALRYAN MUSA (15 YEARS OLD):

Nb; real identity concealed hence the false name. "I am from the Damascus Reef in Syria. I came by plane to Turkey to Istanbul. I stayed there for 6 months. Friends and family paid money to traffickers. I arrived at Chios Island. I have a special ID for minors issued to me from Turkey. I escaped the Island and find myself in Athens. I am currently in contact with a Solicitor that I was put in touch with via an organization named RCG. I want to apply for a Relocation Settlement to Germany as some of my relatives are there.

RAZGAR OMER ALLI:

"I'm from Kurdistan. I've been in Greece for four months. My daughter has brain damage. We've been in need of serious help about her disease. My family and brothers wanted to kill my daughter so we fled. I am worried that my family will come

and kill my daughters due to the social shame. I changed religion from Islam to Zarchacki

"Two things we want from the UK government. Firstly, stop funding and giving financial support to countries (via secret agreements) not to allow Syrian migrants and illegal immigrants nowhere past Greece.

OBSERVATIONS:

Most arrive with money that they have saved and have spent a lot of their money on accommodation and they go to wherever and whoever offers them places to sleep. This is a result of the desire to reunite with family members or the prospect of receiving support from communities established in another member state, as well as the lack of adequate reception services, impediments to access effective asylum and poor integration prospects in Greece.

The majority are Syrian, Afghans and Iraqis fleeing persecution, violence and conflict. Many people feel they have no choice but to leave their country of origin and they arrive in Greece full of hope, only to find a country in crisis with little to offer in terms of basic services. The families we met tell us they have risked everything to come to

Europe to give their children a safer and brighter future.

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