

# Greece and the Refugee Crisis

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**Greece has been a passageway for refugees on their way to the European Union. The country has been criticized both for deplorable conditions in refugee camps and increasingly anti-refugee policies. This policy outlook looks at the political and media hostility faced by refugees, the impact of the new Greek asylum law on refugees both en route to Greece and those currently in the country, the plight of unaccompanied child refugees as well as illegal practices by Greek security forces to curb refugee arrivals. It also includes policy and programmatic recommendations for stakeholders including the Greek government, the Council of Europe, as well as European and Greek media.**

Greece has been a passageway for refugees on their way to the European Union (EU). The country has been criticized both for refugee camps in deplorable conditions and increasingly anti-refugee policies. According to the United Nations Human High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are now more than 96,500 refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, mainly because most of them remain in Greece after being denied entry to northern European countries due to border closures along established migration routes.

Greece witnessed the highest number of refugees reaching the islands in 2015. The main goal of the 2016 EU-Turkey migration agreement was to prevent migrants from attempting the potentially fatal crossing from Turkey into the EU, as well as to help curtail human trafficking. One of the EU-Turkey migration agreement's stipulations is that refugees could be sent back to Turkey from the Greek Islands. [The deal worked effectively and reduced numbers of migrants dramatically.](#)

However, following the EU-Turkey deal and the subsequent geographical restrictions for refugees that arrive through the Aegean Sea, refugee camps on the Greek islands [have been facing massive capacity issues](#), leading to abuse and neglect. More than 10,000 people, mostly Afghan and Syrian families, crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey to Greece in September 2019 alone. This is after the flow of asylum seekers increased by almost 30 per cent from 32,000 in 2018 to almost 44,000 by late 2019. In response, the Greek government was quick to pass a [new asylum law](#) on 31 October 2019. The law aims at speeding up procedures and facilitating the return of more people to Turkey under the terms of the EU-Turkey migration agreement.

## Political and Media Hostility

The refugee crisis has now become a major political issue in Greece, with far-right opposition groups blaming the Greek government. According to a [Pew Research report](#), nationalist and racist attitudes are on the rise in Greece, fuelling calls for more anti-refugee policies. During the past few months, rural Greece has witnessed regular protests against refugee relocation with protestors expressing fears of an "ongoing invasion", as well as their resistance against the "Islamisation of the country". According to Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, "Greece has reached its limits".

Unfortunately, a clear pattern has emerged from the Greek handling of the Syrian refugee crisis: many stakeholders including political leaders and governments seem to be 'using human suffering as a tool' for pursuing military and political objectives by prolonging human misery. Innocent refugees are being exposed to dangerous conditions both en route to Greece as well as while in Greece applying for asylum.

Marina Rigou, a Professor of Journalism and New Media at the University of Athens, was of the opinion that "[The media](#)

[is fuelling the situation further by constantly reporting on increased arrivals, even though they are much lower than those in 2015.](#)" With media coverage of refugees in Europe tending to be both fragmented and contradictory, there is room for questions to remain unanswered, myths to be circulated and stereotypes to be promoted. Questions such as 'Are they [refugees] bringing their problems to our shores' and 'Do they threaten our culture and values' remain unanswered effectively, and the problem is made worse by media outlets that stroke hostility and tie [well-worn stereotypes about savage, dark foreigners and their alleged threat to white European purity to the refugees of today](#)'. For example, the Polish magazine Sieci featured an image of the arms of dark-skinned men groping at a white woman draped in the EU flag, under the headline 'The Islamic Rape of Europe'.

As the European media continues to promote racist stereotypes of refugees and asylum seekers, the Greek government has also engaged in [mass arrests of immigrants based on ethnic profiling](#) and detained immigrants for identity checks. Between 4 August 2012 and June 2013, the police stopped and detained approximately 124,000 people on the streets of Athens itself, according to a 2014 Human Rights Watch report. This is even more disturbing given that less than 6 per cent were found to be living unlawfully in Greece. Even though there were reports of growing racism and violence in the country after Greece accommodated more than a million people from Albania and other Balkan countries in the 1990s, xenophobia and violence has escalated substantially particularly in the wake of the Syrian refugee crisis.

## Alarming Living Conditions

As outlined above, the EU-Turkey migration agreement stipulates that refugees can be sent back to Turkey from the Greek Islands, but not from mainland Greece, where their asylum applications have to be processed. If they are transferred to mainland Greece and their claims are rejected, asylum seekers have to be deported to their countries of origin, not to Turkey. The new asylum law passed on 31 October 2019 aims to speed up processing for the asylum seekers. However, human rights organisations have criticised the new law as a "rushed" attempt that would impede access to a fair asylum process for refugees. Tens of thousands of people are already living in deplorable conditions in refugee camps on the Greek Islands, and sending them back to Turkey would put pressure on already stressed Turkish systems. Sending them back to their home countries is often impossible in terms of threat to life and property. Dunja Mijatovic, the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights, has called the situation "explosive", while a Greek journalist slammed her country's cruel treatment of refugees saying, "[I am ashamed of the situation in refugee camps in Greece. Not only as a Greek citizen but also as a European](#)".

The number of refugee arrivals are increasing rapidly. Several factors have contributed to the worsening



Life vests of irregular migrants, coming to Greece's Lesbos Island hoping for a better life by avoiding the wars in their countries, are seen near Molyvos of Lesbos, Greece on November 28, 2019. (Ayhan Mehmet - Anadolu Agency)

refugee influx: political indecision and intra-EU fighting, overwhelming numbers of refugees in Turkey leading to the country's insistence on a renegotiation of the EU-Turkey migration agreement with better resource mobilisation and the situation in the refugees' home countries. According to a report by Marianna Karakoulaki and Dimitris Tosidis, Syrians made up the largest number of arrivals in Greece in the past but this year saw majority coming in from Afghanistan, [accounting for 34% of the refugee population on the Greek islands](#).

In Moria, on the northeastern Aegean island of Lesbos, 26,753 women, men and children live in camps designed for about 6300, according to the government's most recent figures. Journalist Lianna Spiropulu says that the refugees in Moria have to wait approximately [9 hours in line to obtain three meals a day if food is available at all](#).

In July 2019, the Greek government cut access to public healthcare for newly arrived asylum seekers. As a result, people with chronic illnesses have to pay for care or rely on help from NGOs. Furthermore, children are not able to be immunised. According to Katrin Brubakk, Médecins sans frontières' (MSF) Mental Health Activity Manager, people with severe medical issues require medical attention but are not able to get it. [This has led to a rise in suicide attempts among both adults and children](#). Despite this, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was removed from the vulnerability criteria taken into consideration during the asylum process as the Greek government claimed that people pretend to suffer from it to increase their chances of receiving a positive response to their claims.

The UNHCR has called sanitary facilities 'woefully inadequate'. According to Apostolos Veizis, the Director of Medical Operational Support in Greece for MSF, [there is one toilet for every 300 people on Samos and one shower for every 506 people at Moria](#), the worse conditions in his 20-year career with the organisation. In September 2019, the governor of the north Aegean region of Greece, Christiana Kalogirou, announced the closure of Moria camp if "[uncontrollable amounts of waste](#)", [broken sewage pipes and overflowing rubbish bins](#) are not dealt with. Not only do the locals protest against incoming refugees, the

[refugees themselves have protested](#) by blocking entrances to refugee camps in northwestern Greece, their goal being to prevent the arrival of police buses bringing in even more people to already severely overcrowded camps.

Women and children are the most vulnerable. According to the UNHCR, many asylum seekers have reported being targets of sexual abuse in the Greek refugee camps, and levels of sexual violence are rising. Even "[bathrooms and latrines are no-go zones after dark for women or children](#)" in camps on the islands of Lesbos or Samos as per UNHCR spokesperson Cecile Pouilly. Bathing during daytime can be dangerous with one woman telling UNHCR teams in Moria that she had not showered for two months out of fear of being raped or molested.

Violent incidents and assaults are rife in the camps. According to a Syrian refugee in Lesbos, "There are fights but what else would you expect? They're suffering and the whole future for their kids is totally destroyed. They fled war and now have to live in a place like Moria. They're sleeping in tents in the mud. [Every day is worse than the day before](#)".

A deadly fire broke out in the Morea refugee camp in September 2019. Renata Rendon, aid agency Oxfam's head of mission in Greece, slammed the EU's migration policy, "People arriving in Greece should be relocated to safe accommodation across the EU, [not crammed into dangerous spaces where their life is at risk](#)".

## Suffering Unaccompanied Minors

According to the UNHCR, women and children account for 56 per cent of arrivals over the past two years, with the majority of children being under the age of 12. Minors travelling without their families represent two out of every 10 people who have arrived. The [unaccompanied children in Greek refugee camps suffer through the same inhumane policies](#) and harsh living conditions highlighted above, but without the protection of parents or guardians.

MSF observed a sharp deterioration in mental health and an increase of attempted suicides and self-harm incidents involving children. Human Rights Watch has also documented arbitrary and prolonged detention of children in violation of both international and Greek law. These children are detained in unsanitary conditions with little access to basic care and services. In some cases, they lived and slept in overcrowded, filthy, bug and vermin-infested cells, sometimes without mattresses and without even minimal privacy. Though international and Greek law requires the separation of adults and children during detention, many children have faced abuse and sexual violence given that there was no separate accommodation for them in the refugee camps. Reports have also indicated ill-treatment by police forces. Although Greek authorities have acknowledged the problem concerning minors, they have done too little to address it.

## Broken Judicial Process

The new asylum law passed on 31 October 2019, intends to process applications for asylum quickly. A number of methods are to be applied to be able to achieve this including the creation of a list of so-called “safe countries of origin” that presumes nationals of the selected countries do not need international protection. This is because the Greek government believes that the majority of people arriving in Greece are in fact economic migrants, even though according to UNHCR, 85 per cent of arrivals are from Afghanistan, Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, or other countries experiencing violent conflict. Additionally, under the new asylum law, Greek police and personnel are in charge of conducting asylum interviews, previously done only by Greek Asylum Service or the European Asylum Office. Human rights groups are worried that police and army personnel are not trained for the task, do not have an adequate understanding of international law and can overlook accuracy for speediness.

Though the emphasis is on quick processing, appealing a rejected asylum application has become more complicated. Many legal documents are required that refugees may not have access to, and most of them do not have access to legal counsel from the state to navigate the process. Under the previous system, the committees hearing appeals to rejected asylum claims were composed of two Greek judges and an independent expert trained by the UNHCR. Now, the committees will not have an independent expert trained by the UNHCR. The new asylum law also allows for the detention of asylum seekers who have their claims rejected or who are having them reevaluated. According to human rights groups, this can result in people remaining in detention for upwards of 18 months – something that is against the Greek Constitution itself.

When it comes to voluntary return, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) programmes in Greece have been criticised in the past for allegedly using psychological and physical violence to force asylum seekers to sign the documents for so-called ‘voluntary’ return. Greek NGOs have documented cases involving police beatings that have resulted in severe injuries, including loss of sight. Documentation of such allegations includes photographic evidence of electrical torture, beatings and sexual humiliation.

## Illegal Practices by Greek Security Forces

Following the July 2019 election, the Greek PM closed the Ministry of Migration and transferred responsibility to the Ministry of Civil Protection i.e. the Greek police. Following this decision, there have been dozens of reports of the Greek police and army pushing asylum seekers away from the country’s land and sea borders and committing other abuses. In terms of numbers, [11,867 asylum seekers were](#)



A group of refugees stage a protest, demanding to reunite with their families, in front of the parliament building in Athens, Greece on November 01, 2017. Protesters told they will set up tents and will start hunger strike in front of the parliament building to draw the officials’ attention. (Ayhan Mehmet - Anadolu Agency)

[pushed back to Turkey in 2018](#) while that number has climbed to 25,404 people in the first 10 months of 2019.

These asylum seekers have testified that, after being detained by Greek officials, their personal belongings were confiscated without any official procedure and they were subjected to abuse. These testimonies and images of refugees pushed back to Turkey reveal the severity of the situation as [‘all of those interviewed reported hostile or violent behaviour by Greek police](#) and unidentified forces wearing uniforms and masks without recognizable insignia’, as indicated by a 2018 Human Rights Watch report. The abuse included beatings with hands and batons, kicking, and the use of stun guns.

Despite the Greek authorities’ denials, findings of nongovernmental groups, intergovernmental agencies and media reports have been consistent. Inhumane push-back activities have been observed and denounced by several international bodies. According to Todor Gardos, the Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, “People who have not committed a crime are detained, beaten and thrown out of Greece without any consideration for their rights or safety”. Gardos also said that the Greek authorities should immediately investigate repeated allegations of abuse. According to Gardos, “despite government denials, it appears that Greece is intentionally, and with complete impunity, closing the door on many people who seek to reach the European Union through the Evros [Meriç] border”.

The [Council of Europe has registered Greece’s push back practices as violations of international law](#). The Council has requested Greece to stop the horrific practice and to investigate those responsible. Meanwhile, pushing asylum seekers back to Turkey by Greek officials continues.

## Policy and Programmatic Recommendations

- Greece’s policies and procedural changes involve intimidation rather than amelioration. The Greek government’s solution to the refugee crisis is to accelerate

the return of refugees and asylum seekers to Turkey. Greece has pushed asylum seekers to be eligible for return to Turkey from anywhere in Greece, instead of just those on the islands as part of ongoing negotiations for the continuation of the 2016-2019 EU-Turkey migration agreement. This would pressure already stretched out Turkish resources and systems for refugees. Instead of focusing on returning refugees from anywhere in Greece including the islands, negotiations could focus on providing effective asylum services in Europe by building a common European system and policies on asylum and mobilizing resources to support both incoming and current refugees in Turkey. According to German opposition politician Heike Hänsel, 'an immediate EU relief program should be put in place, and refugees should be evacuated in significant numbers from the Greek islands and into other countries'.

- The Council of Europe must conduct independent investigations into illegal practices by the Greek security forces. Investigations would need to take into account the new powers and authority granted to the Greek policy under the new asylum law. [In 2007, when the asylum procedure was entirely the responsibility of Greek Police, the approval rate stood at 0.04 per cent.](#) At that time, Human Rights Watch attributed the minuscule approval rating to "an institutional culture that takes a presumptively negative view of asylum seekers" and added that "police interviewers do not have sufficient specialized training or independence to conduct proper interviews". In this context, the new system authorising the practice of conducting first instance admissibility interviews by members of the police and armed forces jeopardizes the independence of the asylum process, considered a human right, as seen from previous implementations and police violence conducted towards asylum seekers.

- Upgrade facilities in Greek refugee camps to end the suffering of those who remain. Better lighting, increased security, as well as separate washing and living quarters for men and women, for example, could make a big difference in the refugees' lives. Greek journalists themselves have called Turkish facilities '5 star' compared with Greek ones

- Unaccompanied children must be provided separate accommodation with trained personnel and caregivers to look after them, as per EU law. Given their vulnerabilities, they must also be excluded from the new asylum law that rushes through applications.

- Learning from the Turkish model where most refugees live outside of camps, the Greek government should allow refugee claimants the freedom to choose to stay in the camps or not. They could do this in two ways: either actively cooperate with nongovernmental organizations and other groups to house refugees outside camps or allow them to work to support themselves. Syrian refugees have been allowed to acquire work as well as business permits in Turkey.

- The asylum process needs to be more efficient, but justice cannot be overridden by the need for expediency. Processes of application and appeal should be transparent and conducted by trained professionals. Security personnel must not be given the responsibility of conducting asylum interviews due to an obvious conflict of interest and must undergo significant relevant training to be able to sit on a panel of interviewers of trained professionals, if need be.

- According to the new asylum law, a list of so-called 'safe countries of origin' that presumes nationals of the selected countries do not need international protection will be created. This is problematic as the list could be created based on faulty or incomplete data, and can lead to generalisation of safety levels for entire populations, that are usually influenced by geographic areas, socioeconomic levels, proximity to war et cetera. Instead, all asylum applications must be considered on a case-by-case basis. The United States has a similar 'safe countries of origin' list meant to curb illegal immigration from Latin America that includes Honduras and Guatemala, both with extremely high crime rates and violence.

- Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019, to eliminate terrorists from northern Syria in order to aid in the safe return of 2 million Syrian refugees. [Turkey's expenditure on refugees for the past 9 years has exceeded \\$40 billion, while support from the EU through NGOs was €3 billion \(\\$3.3 billion\) only.](#) The EU, however, does not support Ankara's safe zone. Alternative solutions such as Turkey's safe zone in Syria must be supported for safe repatriation of refugees.

- Media outlets must recognise their power and responsibility. Misinformation and/or a lack of information about sensitive issues such as refugees' impact can have a corrosive effect on social harmony. While expecting media outlets to abandon or diverge from editorial guidelines may not be realistic, [it is imperative for all media outlets to consider the powerful effect they have on public opinion.](#) Firstly, all relevant media personnel must educate themselves on the issue, whether via specialised content training or seeking information on their own, to present the clearest information. Reporting of the issue can benefit from offering a neutral viewpoint. Research shows that by not including refugees' perspectives, news content presents them as the 'other' which may create antagonism by promulgating an 'us' versus 'them' mentality, possibly contributing to less intercommunal engagement. Media coverage could also include positive news pertaining to the economic impact of refugees, to provide a balanced overview. The story angles can go beyond the usual ones related to security, victimhood or illegal crossings, which are common themes. It is recommended to refer to research and evidence as much as possible in news coverage, and when there is no or inconclusive evidence, that it should be highlighted by the media.