

Abandoning Philoxenia at the Border

A Critique of the Humanitarian Response to Greece's ongoing Refugee Crisis

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Abstract

In 2015, Greece saw a dramatic influx of migrants and refugees at its shores. At the peak of the refugee crisis in 2015-2016, there were nearly 1 million arrivals. Five years later, the situation on the Greek islands is arguably worse than it was when the crisis began. Refugee camps have become overcrowded and can barely provide the most basic necessities such as adequate shelter, food and clean drinking water. Proper healthcare, education, legal counsel and other essential services remain inaccessible to a majority of the refugee population. Furthermore, asylum applications are backlogged, leaving a majority of refugees trapped in camps on the Aegean islands, unable to fully enter civil society. While both the Greek government and the EU possess adequate resources and claim to champion human rights and liberal values, these entities have deliberately ignored the severity of the situation, violating the human rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Greece. This failed humanitarian response has allowed the refugee crisis in Greece to persist for nearly half a decade leaving thousands of refugees trapped on the Greek islands. This puzzle ultimately begs the question, 'Why has the humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Greece from 2015 to the present failed to protect the human rights of asylum seekers?'

Introduction

The refugee crisis in Greece first prompted international attention in 2015 when nearly 1 million refugees arrived on the Mediterranean shores over the course of a few short months. The islands were overwhelmed and lacked the adequate resources and infrastructure to receive incoming migrants. Greece is once again seeing an increase in the number arrivals with figures nearing those of 2016. Half a decade has passed since the refugee crisis began in earnest, and the situation has only intensified rather than improved. Refugee camps are overcrowded and barely provide the most basic necessities such as adequate shelter, food and clean drinking water. Asylum applications are backlogged, leaving a majority of refugees trapped in camps on the Aegean islands, unable to fully enter civil society or travel to other parts of Greece and Europe. While initially sympathetic and supportive, the local Greek population, already struggling to make ends meet during Greece's economic recession, has become restless and resentful towards asylum seekers. Neither the Greek government nor the European Union have taken serious steps to address the current situation, allowing refugees to continue to live in abysmal conditions, with no hope in sight.

The humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in Greece has clearly proven to be a failure, and only continues to worsen. If Greece and the EU are both outwardly committed to upholding liberal values and human rights, then why has the European refugee situation been handled so poorly? *Why has the humanitarian response failed to protect the rights of the refugees and asylum seekers in Greece?*

Table 1. Number of refugees arrivals in Greece.

Year	Sea Arrivals	Land Arrivals	Dead/Missing
2014	41,038	2,280	405
2015	856,723	4,907	799
2016	173,450	3,784	441
2017	29,718	6,592	59
2018	32,494	18,014	174
2019	59,726	14,887	70

Source: UNHCR, Mediterranean Situation Data Monitor

Understanding the Greek Refugee Crisis

At 68.5 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, we are currently witnessing the highest levels of displacement ever on record. Greece remains at the front lines as the first port of entry into Europe for most asylum seekers. Greece has seen an unprecedented number of migrants arriving at its shores, and remains utterly ill-equipped to respond to the situation. The implementation of the EU-Turkey deal in 2016 closed the Balkan route in an effort to limit the flow of migrants into Greece and subsequently other European countries. The EU-Turkey deal is an EU-backed containment policy that essentially keeps all refugees attempting to enter Europe either quarantined on the Aegean Islands, or rerouted through Turkey. Since the implementation of the EU - Turkey deal, protections for refugees have been rolled back, violating the fundamental rights of asylum seekers under international human rights law, specifically the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Recently, the refugee situation in Greece has again dramatically changed for the worse. A new conservative government was elected in the summer of 2019 and has since cracked down on the refugee situation. While the refugee situation in Greece seems to be constantly changing and evolving, one thing has remained consistent — the systematic disregard for the rights of refugees. Over the past five years, camps have grown ever more crowded. The government is processing asylum applications at a glacial pace, making it nearly impossible to leave the camp system on the Aegean Islands. The Greek government and the EU have been at best silent and at worst dismissive on the 'refugee question,' and have turned a blind eye to human rights.

A Failed Humanitarian Response?

The Greek refugee crisis has clearly seen tremendous human rights violations. Even more disturbingly however, is that these violations have gone completely unchecked, allowing the abuses to only intensify. The humanitarian response from the EU, Greece and larger international community has proved grossly inadequate. Why have these entities, which claim to value human rights, failed to protect the rights of refugees when responding to this situation? The explanation is as complex and multi-dimensional as the conflict itself. There are three potential explanations

- I. The Refugee Regime
- II. Greece's Socio-Economic Climate
- III. European Xenophobia and Nationalism.



Figure 1. July 2019. Chios, Greece.



Figure 2. Vial Camp, Chios Greece.

I. The Refugee Regime

Citizenship & Rights:

While in theory individuals are entitled to human rights on the basis of their humanity, the structure of international relations has inextricably linked rights with citizenship. The very existence of refugees is thus a by-product of an international framework constructed around the nation-state. Individuals are guaranteed rights by states, however, paradoxically states are also the primary perpetrators of human rights violations. Therefore, the very act of being a refugee, leaves asylum seekers without protection under the law or access to their rights. This state-based conception of rights is thus the root of the "refugee crisis."

The Convention on the Status of Refugees & Asylum Applications:

The asylum process has been one of the main ways that the government has controlled and marginalized asylum seekers. The Greek government has been reluctant to process asylum applications in an effort to contain the "refugee problem", and applicants generally wait years before hearing a decision. Even once applications are read and interviewed, asylum is often denied due to the relative subjectivity of "a well founded fear of persecution," and the rigidity of the types of persecution outlined by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees.

II. The Greek Debt Crisis

For the past several decades, Greece has made headlines for one of two reasons — the 2008 debt crisis or the 2016 refugee crisis. Both have taken a toll on the political stability of the Greek government, but more importantly on the stability of the Greek citizens. Years of economic stress and anxiety left the Greeks on edge, suspicious of the government and desperate for work. I argue that the impact of the Greek debt crisis on both the citizenry and the government put Greece in a difficult position to handle what would be the coming refugee crisis.

The Greek debt crisis irrevocably shaped the government's response, and more generally the course of the refugee crisis in Europe. The Greek government, still massively in debt, was ill-equipped both financially and politically to adequately respond to incoming waves of migrants. Similarly Greek citizens, already disgruntled and struggling financially, were not prepared to share resources that they felt they didn't have themselves.

III. Xenophobia & Nationalism

Recent years have ushered in a wave of conservative governments, rampant nationalism and overt xenophobia throughout Europe and the west. Greece has been no exception. These xenophobic tensions and fears have played a significant role in shaping the Greek response to the refugee crisis. Xenophobia, racism and fear have motivated the government and the common people alike to violence towards refugees. In March of 2020, the new conservative Greek government reinforced its borders with special forces, army and border police. These Greek Security forces have become progressively more hostile, brutally assaulting asylum seekers and migrants. While the Greek military shoots rubber bullets at children at the border, the EU applauds Greece's new "protective" measures. While xenophobia, racism and national political agendas have shaped the humanitarian response since 2015, the new government has officially weaponized these sentiments, which will likely escalate the violence against refugees and exacerbate existing human rights abuses.