



Artists: names unknown, residents from the “hotspot” on Samos. Photo: private

Still there: Samos

A short Report about Samos and the Situation in the Aegean

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Samos, Vathi: A ten-meter-high fence with wire on the top, mobile toilets, tents in every available spot and colorful paintings on the walls. Some of the paintings convey a political message, others are just artistic. The Samos Camp, which somewhat resembles an outdoor prison, is the direct outcome of the 2016 EU-Turkey deal, and has now become a place where individuals stay for months, or sometimes even upwards of two years. The existence of the camp is one of many consequences of European asylum seeker and refugee policy, which today affects around 17,600 (UNHCR 2018) people on the Aegean islands off the coast of Greece. The characteristics of current European asylum seeker and refugee policy include the “managing of migration” through rejection, not taking shared responsibility and controlling the movement of individuals by illegalizing their status. Not only Samos but all the camps on the Greek islands shed light on these policies and demonstrate the asymmetric power relations between refugees and the European border regime.

However, whereas politicians, journalists and activists have been focusing on Lesbos since 2015, less attention has been paid to the situation on the small island of Samos, located to the south of Lesbos. As I was on Samos working with a volunteer group in autumn 2016 and spring 2017, I am particularly interested in the situation there. This article provides a general overview of the situation in the Aegean and draws specific attention to Samos.

“Hotspots” and Pre-Removal Detention Centers

In 2015, around 1 million people arrived on the Aegean islands by boat. In the same year, around 3,771 people died or went missing during their attempt to cross the Mediterranean. The arrivals increased three-fold from 362,753 the year before, forcing local communities, political activists and other non-state actors to take action (UNHCR 2018). Back then, the islands were only used for transit before people moved onto the mainland.

Between October 2015 and March 2016, Greece set up five so-called ‘Reception and Identification Centres’ (RICs) on Lesbos (Moria), Chios (Vial), Samos (Vathy), Leros (Lepida) and on Kos. These so-called ‘hotspots’ were implemented by the European Commission’s [*European Agenda on Migration*](#) in May 2015. The original function of the RICs was for the registration and screening of newly-arrived people before they moved onto the mainland. In March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal changed the system. Ever since, all newly-arrived people became subject to a ‘restriction of movement’ for 25 days. “During this period, individuals undergo registration and identification and are not allowed to leave the centre” (Global Detention Project 2018) as it is a “crime” to cross the border from Turkey to Greece (Human Rights Watch 2016). This inhumane approach to deal with people who can only make use of their right to claim asylum by crossing the border “illegally” is one of many paradoxes of European asylum seeker and refugee policy.

After the 25 days people move to the so-called ‘open camps’ which are still constituted like outdoor prison; high fences, walls and police gatekeepers dominate the outlook of these “open camps” (Lesvos Legal Centre 2017, Human Rights Watch 2016). In October 2018, around 17,600 people (UNHCR 2018) had to stay on the Aegean islands either within the closed camps for 25 days or the ‘open camps’ without any possibility of moving to the mainland. The fact that the refugees are not allowed to move to the mainland without permission, which can take month, turns the islands themselves into prisons. Next to that, due to the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, Greece set up two pre-removal detention centres on Lesbos and Kos. According to the Global Detention Project, there are current plans to set up a pre-removal detention centre on Samos too, separated from the camp (2018).

Samos

There is only one camp on Samos in the present. Newly-arrived people are officially not allowed to leave for 25 days whereas other inhabitants can leave the camp through the open gates. As it is impossible to control

every single person who leaves the camp, it became an open camp that can be completely locked upon demand.

Due to the implementation of the EU-turkey deal, deportation from the camp to Turkey is happening frequently. When I was on Samos in Spring 2017, these deportations happened roughly in the early morning . During this time the gates of the camps were completely shut and all inhabitants were detained to stop the soon-to-be-deported from escaping. This inhuman practice of detaining individuals who didn't commit a crime, as well as the deportations, contradicts with the 1951 Refugee Convention, signed and ratified by all EU member-states. Owing to difficulties of access to information about deportations on Samos, I can only refer to the practices within the time I was on Samos myself. Compared to Lesbos, there is no activist group monitoring the deportations, which makes the practices on Samos far from transparent (bordermonitoring 2018, Papageorgopoulos 2018).

According to the UNHCR in October 2018, the camp, which has the capacity for 780 people, hosts around 4,300 people. In the first half of October, the highest amount of newly-arrived people by boat in the Aegean went to Samos: 363 out of 654 people arrived on Samos, whereas only 111 were registered on Lesbos (UNHCR 1 2018). As well as the Camp on Lesbos, the camp on Samos is massively overcrowded with a security and health crisis that nobody should be forced to live through. Compared to the last three years, Samos is currently hosting the highest number of refugees it ever has. Most of the inhabitants do not have access to proper accommodation and thus sleep outside or in tents. The upcoming winter will only make the situation worse if Greek authorities and the European Union don't react immediately.

Various protests by camp residents on Samos including hunger strikes have been held since 2016 (Are you Syrious? 2017). What I perceive as a difference in comparison to Lesbos is lack of politically active groups and media attention on Samos. Thus, political claims by refugees on Samos are quite often not heard. It is important that solidarity groups and journalists do not construct a hierarchy between the unacceptable situations on all the mentioned Aegean islands. Talking about Samos means talking about Lesbos and all the other Aegean islands. And the other way around. And talking about the Aegean islands means talking about the reality of Europe, racism and paradox migration policies.

Whereas the Aegean and especially Lesbos was the center of media and political attention in 2015 and 2016, the attention has faded since the EU-Turkey Deal, despite the reality on all islands not becoming any better. There is a need for constant political claims and support for protests by refugees on the islands. The solution of the situation in Greece cannot be the detention of 17,600 people on islands as outdoor prisons. Nor can it be the unshared responsibility of Greece, but instead must be shared by the whole EU. There should be honest political will by EU member states to open the islands and share responsibility over the fate of everybody currently detained there.

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