

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'

‘TELL ME HOW YOU MOVE, AND I WILL TELL YOU WHERE YOU ARE FROM’

THE EU MANAGEMENT OF MIGRATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF OTHERING
REFUGEES AND RE-CONSTITUTING THE MEANING OF ‘EUROPEANNESS’

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The researcher volunteered in refugee camps along the Western Balkan refugee route in order to join the refugee flow at several places and gain access to refugees willing to be interviewed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper should be taken as a semi-fictional and critical effort aimed at making the reader feel the refugee ‘other’ battling the systematic violence, inequality and discrimination that are present in the current ‘refugee crisis.’ The particular refugee whose memoirs are recorded on these pages, Ahmad Waleed Rahimi, is in fact a composite, rather than a real person. Ahmad was born out of numerous interviews with refugees of all sorts of nationalities, genders,

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classes and ethnicities. The narrative follows the commonest themes and concerns I heard in these open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Indeed, the motifs reproduced in this paper have come up in most if not all the interviews. I decided not to use the narrative of a single person for two reasons. First, I wanted to be sure of protecting any one refugee's identity and security. In the present circumstances, even a record of a refugee passing through a specific place at a specific time could potentially result in push-backs and deportation – no academic would want to be liable for endangering any refugee's journey and safety. Secondly, my goal was to provoke rather than represent, describe rather than analyse. Thus, I aimed at achieving the great depth of the refugee experience, which can more easily be achieved through multiple voices condensed into one than through the lone voice of a single refugee. I understood and accepted the problematics of such an approach, which reduces the multiplicity of contradictory experiences to a single experience. However, while I would not necessarily take this approach in researching other social groups, I found it strikingly beneficial and constructive in representing the reality of a refugee's life along the Western Balkan route. Throughout my research, one observation would always dominate the field: in order to regulate and govern movement and migration, the EU turns plurality into a body. Hence the title, 'Tell Me How You Move, And I Will Tell You Where You Are From': by channelling the refugee flow in a particular way, Europe establishes refugees as particular types of subjects, as non-European, non-liberal, undocumented and undeserving subjects. Thus, I found that the plurality of refugees can indeed be condensed into a refugee body, the body of an Ahmad Waleed Rahimi, who narrates the everyday situations and events of an average European refugee-citizen.

Admittedly, there are clear political reasons behind this kind of work. The EU is, for the first time, reacting to a global impact in an utterly uncoordinated and disintegrating fashion. Some talk about these circumstances as the end of the EU. Nonetheless the chaos of this crumbling system generates a need for new understandings. This, I believe, is the crucial moment in which we can redefine 'Europeanness' and accept refugees as the 'New Europeans.' In my opinion, the EU remains the most accomplished experiment in economic, social and political integration in human history, and the challenge of the present moment is to accept and integrate refugees as, not the European Other, but Europeans in the making. In this process, moreover, refugees are not Europe's passive victims, but agents in its construction. It is important how we write history.

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MEMOIRS OF AHMAD WALEED RAHIMI

Born June 19th, 1995



'Ahmad Waleed Rahimi'. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

November 2nd, 2015

A smuggler driver, whom I contacted two months earlier, rang in early November and demanded, 'Are you ready?' 'When?' I asked. 'Tomorrow.' The call startled me; it saturated me with chilling panic, confusion and disbelief. I stood in a dreamlike stupor, while the world was spinning around me. The whirling sensation of my head reflected onto the room, which started pirouetting around me, spin and twirl, spiral and swivel. Just like my body, my breath stood with a deathly still, as if the air thickened and obstructed my bronchial passages. Almost inconvincibly, I stuttered in a response, 'I am ready; *merawaam*, I am going.'

In fact, I could not have been readier. My family sold our small stitching shop for \$2,000 USD; my brother sold his taxi for \$1,500 USD; and my mother's brother gave me \$1,000 USD he had in savings. In total, I was given \$4,500 USD. That is four times the average price for a plane ride to Europe. I wished I could take an airplane. My cousin told me the world looks very different from up there. However, my father explained why taking a plane to Europe is out of the question. Strictly speaking, I could reach the airports, I could afford to buy a ticket, but I could not leave. This is a decision of Europe, my father said – one cannot

fly without a visa. Following this legislation, the airlines insist on visas as they would be heavily fined for allowing me or anyone else to board a plane to Europe without such a permit. 'You will need to walk, *pesar*, my son' my father told me. 'There are also buses, boats, trains and taxis; take those to speed up your journey.' 'How long will it take me,' I asked my *baba*. 'As long as what's the will of Allah,' he replied with calm and poise.

The distance I was to transverse was 6,000 km in length. I have never travelled that far. As a matter of fact, I have not spent more than three months living outside my home town, Mehtar Lam. Those three months of expatriation I spent in Kabul. I hoped Kabul would give me an opportunity for education. I wanted to learn business and mathematics, so I could expand my father's stitching business. Initially, Kabul seemed like the right place for my ambitions. We used to call the city *Kabubble*, for its reputation for isolation from violent realities the rest of Afghanistan was facing. In those days, Kabul was known as the city of freedom, safety, food, entertainment and enjoyment. Soon enough, however, *Kaboom* became a more suitable moniker than *Kabubble*.

Explosions and shootings became a part of life. I navigated my way around the city based on avoiding the suicide-bombing hotspots. I could have endured all of these hardships, but I couldn't fight the Taliban evil. The Taliban visited me every two or three days, aiming at drafting me into their military troops. I wanted to go to university, not the army. However, in Kabul, anyone who was fit to fight was now in the army, in the process of joining it, or escaping from it. The Taliban threatened me, and they threatened to harm my family. A month into my move to Kabul, the Taliban killed my best friend's father and older brother in the family's tea shop, after my friend refused military recruitment. I was terrified. Indeed, life in Kabul was one of the constant alarm and terror.

I could have joined the Taliban and end all the uncertainty, but who was I going to fight? I don't want to fight anyone. I don't want to kill. I don't want to be killed. The security the Taliban is offering is a lie. What would happen to my family if I joined the Taliban, rather than ISIS or the government? Or would the Taliban insult my family if I fought on the side of ISIS or the government? Once one joins the army, whichever army it is, he places himself as the enemy of all those opposing the army's efforts. The enemy doesn't care one joined so one's family could have peace. I do not support any militarist ideology. I do not take an interest in the rights or wrongs done by any of the Afghan power figures. I am a simple man. I want peace and safety. Thus, I decided to flee Afghanistan. 'I am ready,' I repeated to the smuggler on the other end of the phone; this time, however, with reassuring confidence and firmness in my voice.

November 3rd, 2015

My arduous journey from Afghanistan to Germany started on the outskirts of Kabul, at the Ahmad Shah Baba bus depot. The Ahmad Shah Baba service is among the most popular ones, having gained a reputation for fast and daring driving that can finish the first step of journey, to Iran, in twelve hours. The way to the border-town at Nimruz led through Kandahar and Helmand, the two scariest and deadliest Afghan provinces. The closer we went to these southern areas of Afghanistan, the more fires we saw and the more rifles we heard. However, the atmosphere on the bus did not echo any of these dangers. We became comfortably numb to the violence around us.



Refugees gathering at a bus terminal, determined to reach the EU. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Small bribes were paid in dollars, Afghanis² and cigarettes as we progressed from checkpoint to checkpoint. Despite the strict prohibition, the driver was continuously sipping a bottle of local wine while at the same time, munching on a bag of American chips. The chips were the Cheetos kind. The white Taliban flags, *al-liwa'*, were flying intimidatingly from poles, trees, and the buildings around us. The flag of the Taliban Caliphate is no longer entirely white, as I remember it from my childhood. There is now black Islamic writing on the

² The Afghan Afghani (AFN) is the currency of Afghanistan.

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white flag surface. The Islamic text reads 'I bear witness that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is his servant and Messenger.'

Many other things have changed since my childhood. During an ordinary morning walk towards the school or office, one could always notice the Kabul streets overflowing in shops and stores. Afghan people are known entrepreneurs, always investing in their businesses to bring their families prosperity. However, the contemporary types of businesses are some we could have never seen before; among them, the IT and cell-phone companies, most certainly, dominate the landscape. Two things have not changed – violence remains a ubiquitous threat, and soccer remains the most popular sport.

November 4th, 2015

Power outages are the norm in Afghanistan. Flashlights are always at the ready since one never knows when they might be plunged into darkness. This is especially worrying seeing that one needs to carefully select routes to schools and offices; some routes are safe and others are deadly, even more so when unilluminated. I do not think Europe has a problem with power outages, but I took a flashlight with me anyways.

I have always wondered how it feels to live without such concerns and due precautions in mind. How does it feel to always have light and electricity, water plumbing and a toilet inside one's home, a full stomach, and an annual vacation? I have only seen such a lifestyle on Hollywood movies, which I indulged in at every free moment I found.

When Facebook came in 2004, I connected to thousands of people from everywhere in the world. I have a friend from almost every country around the globe! They often ask, 'How is it to live in such a dangerous place like Afghanistan? What is the war like?' How is it not to live in a dangerous place, I wonder in turn.

While I asked questions about every country in the world, Germany has always peaked my attention the most. Germany is a single country that is uniformly spoken of as the country for good living. In Afghanistan, many eyes light up at the very mention of the country, and those who have visited Germany are talked about as local heroes. Indeed, even along the refugee route, when I asked others about their destination, the answer was almost without an exception 'Germany.'

Germany is also where I headed. I have a cousin living in Germany. It is important to go to a country where one already has family or connections. Family helps with information, jobs and housing, and it makes it easier to adjust to new places. Otherwise, I would have had a very difficult time settling in Germany. I do not know much about the country. I only know

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that Germany has good people, and that too only as a hearsay. The more I thought about Germany, the more I realised how unfamiliar I am with the country. What is their food like? Do they have buses or trains? Do children wear school uniforms? Are there any mosques in Germany? My head was spinning under the swarm of questions. My eyes were closing, and soon I fell asleep on the bus that marked the first step on my way to this unknown European country.



Afghan refugees resting on a bus in preparation for the rest of the long journey to Europe.

November 5th, 2015

I woke up as my head hit the window when the bus stopped abruptly. We arrived at Afghan-Iranian border in the middle of the night. I looked through the window. The only thing I could see in that pitch darkness were roofless Humvees, waiting for us across the border. The cars' lights revealed that the border was just a small patch of sand mounds, marked by the wired fence. The driver, who was not the smuggler I initially contacted but the smuggler's working staff, told us to leave the bus. We obeyed his order and waited on the roadside until he 'checked out the situation.' He looked for any potential guards, I presume.

The terrain was 'not clear.' So, the smuggler took us to another place, just a few kilometres further. After repeating the terrain-surveying procedure, he returned and told us to run. We scaled the sand mounds, crept through a hole in the wire and reached the Humvees. My

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backpack was ripped open by razors in the wire fence, and the only two shirts I had brought with me were destroyed. I kept them, nevertheless. The winter is coming, and there are many mountains to be crossed, I thought to myself. I will need all the extra clothes I can get, I calculated, even if ripped.

42 of us crammed into three, four-seater Humvees. I squeezed with four others into what I believe was a modified trunk space. The smugglers aimed at fitting as many people as possible by the removal of the trunk railing. To them, more people means more profit.

The cars started moving. I was gasping for oxygen; there were so many people breathing so little air. Luckily, I thought to myself, I have athletic lungs – I went to the gym daily; I am healthy and enduring. However, there were few old men and some women in my car. One of the women was pregnant. 'In which country will the baby be born?', I wondered, while looking at her visibly large stomach.

Another abrupt emergency stop made my head bump into the window. With a finger placed over his mouth, the driver turned to us and made the 'ssh' sound, signalling us to be quiet. We sat in dreadful silence for few slow-passing minutes, only hearing the wind playing with the sand below our Humvee.

Suddenly, a loud gunshot pierced through the air. The agitation and distress crept among us like flesh-eating maggots. Indeed, fear eats the soul. The driver pressed the pedal to the metal, as hard and far as he could. Everything around me was motion-blurred and seemed surreal. 'Is this really happening? Is someone really shooting at us?'

The Iranian police fired at our car. The border police often lie in wait to intercept 'irregular migrants' crossing the Afghan-Iranian border. My father warned me of the Iranian police specifically. 'They will not accept bribes; they just want to get rid of you. Avoid the Iranian police at any cost!' These words kept running through my head as I looked at bullets cutting through the foggy air.

Many gunshots missed our Humvee, for the smuggler was making reckless, quick and short turns, as if we were slalom skiing. However, the sound of bullets hitting the metal and the plastic was frequent and persistent. We were chased. I thought I was going to have a hysterical breakdown. Then, smack! A bullet hit the window, right in front of my nose. The bullet made a circular pattern in the glass; it looked like a giant snowflake that got stuck inside the glass. I have always liked snowflakes. This one came as a God-given salvation from the nerve-racking state of panic I entered.

The bullet-snowflake reminded me of my childhood, when my days passed in playing *aaqab* and *khusay* with other children from our village. *Aaqab* is a tag game. One child is the

eagle and sits on a rock. The other children are pigeons and stand on the safe area. The pigeons leave the safe area, pretend to be pecking at the ground for food. The child who is the eagle leaves the rock and chases the other children. When the eagle touches a child, that child is out of the game. The game continues until the last pigeon is out. Another eagle is then chosen. *Khusay* is a bit more complicated to explain. It is a game of race with obstacles, one could say. Each player holds their right foot up behind the back with their left hand. When someone shouts 'Go!', the players in each team seek to reach a place designated as 'the goal' while preventing the other team from reaching it. The players stop their opponents by making them lose their balance, to stand on two feet or fall. The players who lose their balance are out of the game. A player who touches the circle on the opposite side wins a point for his team, and the game is over when one of the teams scores ten points.

I hope that, one day, my children will also play *aaqab* and *khusay*, be it in Afghanistan or in Germany. All the more so, I hope that snowflakes will not remind them of bullet marks. I hope they will play with kites and dolls, which are now banned under Taliban rule. I especially hope for the former, as I used to be a very skilled kite-runner as well. I wish to teach my children all the secrets and tricks of kite-flying. 'Are there kite-flying competitions in Germany? Is Germany windy?'

At that thought, a strong wind hit my face. A bullet pierced through the window, shattering the glass. The car stopped. Without delay, the doors opened. Several flashlights blazed in my face, hurting my eyes. Then the light went away, instead illuminating the faces of my co-passengers. The flashlights belonged to the Iranian police. This was my first arrest.

The weak sun started rising above the horizon by the time we reached the police base on the outskirts of some city. The outpost accommodated barely a handful of policemen, however, they were heavily armed and threatening, as if there was an army of officers. The four officers who brought us up to the station lined me and my co-travellers up against the wall. The remaining officers approached us swiftly and forced us to kneel on the concrete floor; some of the officers pushed us, the others hit our calves with batons, but all shouted and yelled to accompany their chosen method of assault. Hereafter, they took us one by one into a separate room for interrogation.

As the first to be interrogated, the police officer seized a young girl. She was about twelve years old. In Iranian law, female children as young as nine are deemed culpable and, thus, potentially reprehensible and held liable. Not even a child is innocent.

Following the girl's return to the waiting room, the police forcefully separated the pregnant woman from her family, who was in outright distress and worry. They silenced them with

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threats to hurt the woman. By their speech, I recognised that this family are Hazara. Hazara are Shia Muslims and are, thus, targeted by both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Regardless of sharing a Shia religious denomination, Iran is also extremely unsafe for Hazara; this is true even for Hazara of Iranian origin. The reasons for hatred are often obscure, but many Iranians will say that the hatred is historical and racialized. Due to Hazara's Mongol face-features, many Iranians deem them a hated reminder of the Mongol subjugation of the region in the thirteenth century. The Iranian hatred towards Hazara is probably what caused such grave concern in the woman's family. The cases of Hazara dying in Iranian detention were everything but rare.

My turn. The Iranian police have a reputation of being extremely cruel and brutal, perhaps, even more so against Afghan people. However, this was my lucky day.

As I sat opposite to the interrogator, he offered me a cigarette and asked, 'Where are your documents?' I unzipped the little bag I carried around my waist and handed him my passport. 'Why is there no Iranian visa in your passport?' Iran charges Afghans over \$100 USD for a one-month tourist visa, while a business visa costs over \$3,000 USD. Besides, it may hinder one's asylum-protection claim if one has previously been granted a tourist visa. 'I came as a refugee,' I replied; 'I am heading to Europe because life in Afghanistan is very difficult.' The officer smirked at me, 'We cannot let you do that. You violated Iranian borders. We are sending you back.' That was it, I thought. I was stopped at the very beginning of my journey: how on earth could I hope to cross another eight borders? I lowered my head and remained silent. The guard who previously stood in the left-front corner of the room approached me and escorted me back to the waiting room.

Back in the waiting room, I sat still while the rest of my co-passengers were being questioned.

The remaining passengers included an old lady who was travelling with her middle-aged son. Five young, 20-25-year-old men, and three older men, who must have been in their 50s. There were twelve of us in total. The Humvee driver was arrested with us as well; however, unlike us, he was put in a jail-cell immediately. Rather than instantly deciding what to do with us, the surprisingly humane main officer ordered for us to be temporarily imprisoned. I spent two days in prison cell, with little water and almost no food.

November 7th, 2015

Sometime during my third day in jail, an officer came to my cell and gestured to me that it is time to move. I was jailed with two other men of my age. I expected them to be released as

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well, however, that was not the case. As I left the cell, I realised that my other co-passengers were not in the waiting room either. 'Am I the only one being released?'

Without saying a word, the officer signalled me to follow him. We walked down the mountain for about forty minutes. There were thousands of thoughts running through my head, not a single one complete and coherent. It was a moment of paralyzing and overwhelming uncertainty; I felt light-headed and as if my head will explode under pressure at the same time, my heart was racing and stopping, my feet were heavy as lead at one time, and I could barely feel them just the moment after. Then, I resigned; I stopped thinking, I stopped feeling, I stopped hurting. I just followed the officer and blind faith.

The officer led me back to the exact border pass where we were intercepted and captured. I could still see the patches of fabric at the place where my backpack caught in the razor-wire. The officer pushed the barrel of his rifle into my chest and ordered me to go back across the border. I walked across the border.

I knew that, by returning to Kabul after an unsuccessful flight, I would be in a greater danger than ever.

Hidden in the bush, I waited for three to four hours until sundown. When the darkness ensured my concealment, I found a new place to cross back into Iran. This time, I travelled on foot. I walked for two days across desert-like mountains, until I reached an Iranian city from where I could continue my journey to Europe.



Refugees walking together along the motorway in a bid to reach the Iranian border. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

From this moment on, my life became structured around movement. My days were reduced to thoughts and strategies about where and how to move. Respectively, for the states through which I travelled, I was merely a dangerous moving object, nothing more. I was reduced from a human being to a moving body, a moving body that needed to be stopped and expelled. However, stopping and expulsion mean death for me. I decided to live. Thus, I continued to move.

November 9th, 2015

I walked for two days, without any water or food, until I reached the first city, a city in the Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran. This is a well-travelled route, embarked upon and talked about by thousands and thousands of Afghan refugees. By the time I made a journey, I knew the route like the back of my palm.

Once I reached the city, I phoned the smuggler who organised the failed trip across Afghan-Iranian border, as the price of my smuggling package included him getting me to Qom. I wanted to reach Qom because I had a cousin there, Adnan. I knew that he wanted to leave Iran. I hoped he will come with me.

The smuggler sent me to the city's downtown bazaar. At the bazaar, there were vendors selling freshly squeezed pomegranate and sugarcane juices, sweet and ripe grapes, furniture,

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radios, TV sets, cupboards and other household goods, all at bargain prices. Among the vendors, smugglers were just as numerous and easy to find.

So called 'travel agencies' were mushrooming from every corner, and although they offer regular travel packages as well, not many Afghans approach these shops as tourists but as refugees wishing to be trafficked into Europe. Indeed, using a trafficker is the safest way to Europe; a trafficker knows what he is doing.

I entered the first 'travel agency' I liked, approached the agency's worker, and delivered the code name of the smuggler to whom I paid my dues. These agencies worked more like a network rather than independent, competing shops. Thus, it didn't matter which one I entered; each agency, taking this smuggler's code, would have pointed me to the same place – the bus leaving from the bazaar's parking lot that afternoon.

I spent few hours until departure eating, washing myself and praying. I rested a bit, and was on the road again. I boarded the bus in the afternoon, and had about sixteen-hour-long journey ahead.

November 10th, 2015

I arrived in Qom mid-morning. There are many Afghan people living in Qom, yet their life remains difficult. Police are continuously harassing Afghans, and the harassed must bribe the police to be left in peace. Furthermore, being given a status is an impossible mission. Even those born in Iran, but to Afghan parents, are without citizenship and their respective rights.

Among the missing rights, the most difficult one to manage without is the right to work. One enters a paradox of needing to bribe the police to be allowed to work. Word for word, as I was told, Afghan refugees, their children and even grandchildren are paying to be able to work, earn money and support their families, just to give the earned money away as bribery. What is more, sometimes, one doesn't get paid for the work they have done. If an Afghan doesn't get paid, who can they complain to? 'None of our business,' authorities say.

Undocumented Afghan children are not allowed to enrol in schools, so children spend their days working in the streets. If someone gets hurt or ill, they have no medical insurance to get the treatment.

Initially, I thought I could stay in Iran, rather than continue to Europe. However, by walking the streets of Qom and looking at the Afghans suffering, I shook off the thought and continued to search for my cousin's house.

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I found the address fairly easily. I am familiar with these narrow and curvy streets. Indeed, Qom is not much different than Kabul; it only lacks checkpoints, barricades and sounds of gunshots to entirely mirror Kabul.

Upon reaching my cousin's house, I noticed that he had already emptied out his small apartment and sold all his belongings, including the bed, the carpet, the kitchen utensils and the TV. My family notified my cousin about my arrival and, to my pleasure, he was more than ready to flee with me. People rarely seek refuge alone; fleeing is a dangerous endeavour.

A street dealer paid my cousin \$1,500 USD for all the household goods. Additionally, he borrowed \$1,000 USD from relatives, which we hoped was a sufficient amount for the trip from Iran to Germany. We went back to another 'travel agency' at the downtown bazaar and purchased a smuggling package to Turkey's Izmir. This cost us \$1,000 USD each.

November 16th, 2015

Early in the morning, the trafficker called with a message that everything is ready for the trip. 'When are we leaving?', I asked. 'In two hours,' the voice on the other side of the phone replied; 'No delay.' 'There is nothing left to wait for,' I replied; 'We are coming.'

The trafficker then explained that we will take a car to Iran's border with Turkey. Then, we will cross the Iranian-Turkish border on foot, or, if we wish to pay \$300 USD extra, on horses. After these costs, the remaining \$1,500 USD felt barely enough. We still had left to pay for a boat journey to Greece and for in-Europe transportation to Germany. We declined the horses.

The car journey took twelve hours. An Iranian family of five squeezed in with us in that Toyota Corolla – three young children and, presumably, their parents. Despite being cramped in an overcrowded car, this bit of the journey was its easiest part. I slept half of the way, and spent the rest of the time playing with the carefree and chatty children. This ride, at least for a short while, returned a sense of normalcy into my life.

The Iranian-Turkish border is the place where many Afghans lose their lives. Some die due to exhaustion, but many more due to Turkish police gunshots. The trafficker said that he gets caught in a curtain of gunfire on a rather regular basis; 'I still need a job,' he added. Indeed, the hike to Turkey was a perilous and onerous odyssey, twisted and perverted in its wryness from everything I thought about the life before. If the soul grows by leaps and bounds, as they say, mine came to its full stature within those hours in the Iranian-Turkish mountains. Nothing will ever be the same.

The sun had already set once we started walking across Iranian border to Turkey. The trafficker led the way. The path that led into Turkey was surrounded by thick undergrowth and scrappy bushes. My feet kept getting stranded under thorny branches and bunches of entangled grass. Some parts of the pass had a foot of snow. My feet were freezing. Every so often, I would hit my toes onto a rock hidden by the layer of snow; my feet were bloody, scratched and bruised. Not to mention my shoes ripped open, exposing my feet even further to the cold and injuries. I kept stumbling and falling. The trafficker would hit me, Adnan and even the children with sticks whenever we were so exhausted that we had to stop walking. The gunshots kept firing at other groups of refugees around us, often followed by screams of pain and grief. We walked for sixteen hours; sixteen dreadful hours. This was the first time I questioned whether the whole trip was worth it.

November 17th, 2015

Once we reached Turkey, we took a day-long bus journey to the Aegean port of Izmir. Both me and Adnan slept for the whole bus ride; that was for almost 24 hours.

Izmir is where the Turkish and international elites build their summerhouses. Ironically, it is also the city from where refugees embark on boats to cross the Aegean Sea to Greece – the first EU country, the first trace of safety, the first speck of a lull.

Before setting sail to Greece, however, me and Adnan decided to spend few days with our uncle who lives in a village adjacent to Izmir. We were too tired and too disturbed to continue the trip immediately. Besides, our uncle was thrilled to see us. We greeted our uncle, ate well, slept some more, and then left the house to search for a smuggler.

While walking the streets of Izmir, we saw refugees and their tents scattered all around the city. The Basmane neighbourhood, however, was the refugee hotspot. Namely, the neighbourhood's Hatuniye and Çorakkapı mosques were the focal points of Turkish people bringing their donations, and refugees receiving them, as well as thriving money exchange, sales and trafficking businesses.

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Refugees gathered in front of the Çorakkapı mosque. Credits: Sakip Sakir.



Refugees receiving aid in front of the Hatuniye mosque. Credits: Sakip Sakir.

Upon reaching the Hatuniye mosque, I found myself in shock. Up until that point, we had travelled only with other Afghans and, perhaps, several Iranians; in Izmir, however, we met

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refugees from many countries – Syria, Pakistan, Morocco, Algeria, Iraq, Kurdistan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Nigeria. Taxis appeared quickly to pick the people up and take them to the boat launch sites. We can search for smugglers on the day we wish to leave, other refugees advised us. There was no need to make pre-arrangements, boats leave every day.

We spent quite some time with other refugees. This was a great opportunity to get information we needed for the rest of the journey. In Izmir, I realized that I am a part of the 'European refugee crisis.' I just never understood what made the crisis 'European.' Refugees are the ones in crisis, not Europe; that is why refugees are coming to Europe, because Europe is not in crisis. I cannot say that I fully understand this logic even today.

The animosity against refugees in Turkey was strongly felt. Unlike us, many of the refugees had an official status in Turkey and have spent some months, or even years, in several of the country's cities. They speak of working for sixteen hours a day in textile sweatshops, scavenging the streets for discarded cartons they can sell for few liras, and selling tissues at traffic lights. What is more, in such circumstances of unregulated labour and black market jobs, refugee labour is exploited. Refugees are taken advantage of, overworked, hungry, and often fail to be paid on time, if at all.

It wasn't until mid-January, 2016, that Turkey finally granted refugees the right to work legally. The right to work came five years after the influx of refugees from Syria to Turkey began. A little bit too late, if you ask me.

Although the law seemed to be a positive change, not many refugees managed to obtain the promised work permits. The Turkish bureaucracy is massive and sluggish, and, while refugees are spending their days in never-ending queues, their dependants are hungry and uncared for at home. Thus and so, many refugees opt out of seeking work permits and either work illegally, or continue to Europe.

The refugees spoke, in a similar fashion, of other discrepancies between the promised and the obtained. For example, the official refugee status in Turkey formally allows refugees to obtain education and medical care. However, instead of going to school, children are often forced to bring income for the family as well. Solely the parents' income does not suffice for ensuring family's survival. In regards to medical care, the services are often denied to refugees by health care workers themselves. Most of the refugees in Izmir have the temporary ID card, which comes with a promise of health care upon the refugees showing the card to the hospital personnel. However, a striking number of refugees testify that their cards were rejected for 'looking fake,' or for their serial number not being found in the database.

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A refugee ID issued by the Turkish state. Credits: Sakip Sakir.

Strikingly, the pressing issue for many refugees, especially for women, was not even getting asylum or the right to work, but having safe access to a clean bathroom. Indeed, I thought, I had a chance to wash myself twice during the two weeks of my travel, and that only because my cousin and uncle lived on the refugee route and in proper housing. Many refugees don't have such luck. Where do women change their babies' diapers, I wondered; where do they wash their children who wet themselves, where do they wash themselves during the sensitive days of the month?



Women on the move. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Other than refugees, I noticed the presence of another peculiar group of people in Izmir – volunteers. Up until then, I believed that donations and aiding are strictly religious matters. These people, however, were largely independent of mosques or any other religious institution. They came from all over the world, America, France, Sweden, Serbia, Greece, and many other countries I have not even heard of. They were doctors, students, teachers, hairdressers, dentists, housewives, just regular people ‘wanting to help.’ I still cannot say I fully understand such a motive, nevertheless, volunteers seemed to be helping refugees a lot.

During my days in Izmir, an organization called MedVint was responsible for providing medical care for refugees. There are always different organizations and volunteers at any one time, they come and go. This organization was doing a good job, and I hoped for it to stay until the crisis is over. The MedVint volunteers would bring a mobile ultrasound doppler to tents and advise pregnant mothers on the progress of their babies. They also treated various infections, old war wounds, sprains, dislocations, diaper rashes, malnutrition, diarrhoeas and skin conditions. If they couldn’t treat a refugee in their tent, they would take the person to hospital. Doctors were much more likely to treat refugees when they were brought by a volunteer than if refugee were to walk in by themselves.

In addition to medical care, volunteers also brought with them food, phones, diapers, hygiene necessities, toys, tents, sleeping bags, clothes, shoes, praying mats and baby carriers.

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They introduced Wi-Fi and phone-charging stations to many areas where Internet and electricity were inaccessible, such as Izmir streets and squares. Many volunteers asked refugees what they needed and, thereafter, passed on these lists of things to their shortly-arriving friends.



A refugee receiving new shoes.

The most striking thing about volunteers, however, was their mobility. They were more mobile than refugees. They were passing borders with all the freedom, the same borders that were closed for refugees. How could that be?, I wondered.

November 29th, 2015

About two weeks after our arrival in Izmir, me and my cousin decided to continue our journey to Europe. Our uncle prepared us a big breakfast, we drank tea, kissed goodbye, and left his place with a hope and sorrow never to return to Turkey.

We have heard rumours that the Turkish coastguard was waiting in ambush for refugees embarking on boats and forcing them to return. These rumours have later shown to be true, as the Turkish coastguard actions were a preparation for what will later come to be known as the EU-Turkey deal. In this joint action plan, Turkey agreed to accept the rapid return of the majority of refugees crossing from Turkey into Greece. Furthermore, Turkey and the EU also

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'

agreed to continue stepping up measures against smugglers and have welcomed the establishment of the NATO activity on the Aegean Sea. What has Turkey gotten for this Devil's deal? Money, lots of money – six billion euros, as well as the re-opening of negotiations for membership in the EU. Everyone feared the Turkish coastguard and police. We did too.

Early in the morning, we bought life-jackets from the downtown bazaar. Neither me nor Adnan knew how to swim, thus we firmly decided to choose the safest option, no matter its cost. One would have thought that life-jackets will be a hard find, as they are a specialty merchandise. However, there was not a single store or shop, from grocery stores to barber shops, that were not selling life-jackets. Thereafter, we caught a taxi just outside the Hatuniye mosque and asked the driver to take us to the boat launch sites. Without any sign of hesitation, the driver knew exactly where to take us. He must have driven this route thousands of times.

The driver brought us to a place called Çeşme. Çeşme lies on the Aegean coast, just six miles from the Greek island of Chios. Thus, Çeşme makes for one of the shortest routes to Europe. Once we reached it, we found the smuggler fairly easily. He gave us the price, another \$1,000 USD, which leaves both me and Adnan with \$500 USD each in our pockets. We agreed to the price; we had no other choice. However, the weather was poor that day. The wind gusts went up to 35 km/h and the waves were 0.9m high. That meant we had to wait. The smuggler told us that some refugees are staying in hotels in Çeşme, while others were hiding in forests near the seaside. With the lack of money, we opted out for the latter. This has later shown to be a better choice as, that night, the police stormed several hotels and threatened the hotel owners with heavy fines if they allow refugees to stay. Hereby, many refugees who have already paid their stay were forced to sleep outside anyways.

We spent four nights at the shores of Çeşme, waiting for the sea to calm down.

November 30th, 2015

While lying on the beaches, I looked out at the sea separating me from Europe. I wondered how long it would take to swim across that few kilometre strip. Not that I knew how to swim – Afghanistan is a land-locked country, and swimming is on no one's mind; swimming is no one's priority. Still, I thought, if I knew how to swim, I would have considered it as an option. Swimming four kilometres cannot be very different from running them, can it? I ran so many kilometres in Afghanistan, uphill and downhill, across and beyond any bounds. Many more kilometres than four at any one time.

There are generally less crossings from Turkey to Greece in the winter, as the weather conditions worsen at that time of the year. However, I could see countless boats being prepared at the shores that evening. That means that the weather forecast has foreseen calm winds and waves for the night.

Not being able to swim was my greatest fear. What if we sink, plunge into the freezing Aegean waters? I feared our boat leaking or capsizing, as so many of them had before. I had a life-vest, but it hasn't significantly reassured me of my safety. Just a month ago, one Izmir company was caught selling faulty life-vests. Not only they were not floating, but they were made of sponge and suitcase fabric, the materials that become heavy when soaked and would have cause their wearers to sink. The police decided to raid life-vest producing factories, following several events of bodies of refugees being washed ashore while still wearing life-vests that were supposed to prevent them from drowning. Ironically, these life-vests were being made in factories employing refugee women and children. Refugees themselves were making the instruments of their own death. Can this situation be any more twisted? It can, indeed. In search of a safe life-jacket, I found out that the official life-jackets can cost up to \$150 USD in Turkey; that is, ten times the cost of cheap alternatives one can buy on the streets of Izmir. Some people could not afford either.



A refugee mother taking a piece of polystyrene from her daughter's body, which, lacking money for a life-jacket, served as hoped-for protection from drowning in case of their boat capsizing.

I remember this story of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, a ship that sank in the Baltic Sea after being hit by Russian torpedoes in 1945. The ship was of capacity to hold about 1,400 people, but, since the passengers were desperate WWII refugees fleeing the advancing Soviet army in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, 9,000 of them boarded the ship. Only the lucky ones slept on the cabin beds; the majority of the others slept on mats in the dining room and the music hall, in drained swimming pools and shower stalls. It is difficult to imagine that Europeans were once refugees. To be fair, it is also difficult to imagine that I am now a refugee. None of this strange new reality feels as if it could be mine.

The *Wilhelm Gustloff*'s refugees, in the middle of a night that was not unlike the one when we embarked on our trip to Greece, perished in the freezing water of the Baltic after their ship capsized. 9,000 people were thrown in the water, so easily, so simply. The story was so similar to that of the *Titanic*. I haven't heard the *Titanic* as a story; I watched it as a movie. Indeed, I have seen it once as a beautiful romantic movie, but all that was coming to my mind

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back then were the scenes of people chilling to the bone, benumbing, descending into the water and drowning. I was awfully scared of our boat capsizing and myself freezing to death or drowning.



Graves of refugees who drowned at the Mediterranean, buried on Greek island of Lesbos. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

This was the day we sailed to Greece. The smuggler's voice sobered me up from my thoughts saying, 'You, you, you and you, move!' He stood above us holding a rifle. Then, I realized, there was no going back. The smuggler called to my cousin and me, and another three families; they were Syrian and Iraqi Kurds, as far as I was able to surmise based on their clothes and bodily features. One family was fleeing with their five children, one barely older than another, and all of them not older than five. The other family had a baby which must have been born in Turkey; the baby could not be older than few days. The third group were four young men, boys; they were travelling from Homs.

It was pitch dark. We travelled at night, largely to avoid the Turkish coastguard. Yesterday, the Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu struck a deal with EU leaders to prevent refugees from travelling to Europe in return for six billion Euros in cash, a deal on visa-free travel for Turkish citizens, and renewed negotiations on Turkey joining the 28-nation EU bloc.

Since the deal was in preparation, we heard stories of Turkish coastguards firing guns and water cannon at refugees at sea, thus killing them and sinking their boats. The night before, I

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saw an online video of the Turkish police slamming the pole against the back end of the eight-metre dinghy carrying refugees and, thus, trying to stab the engine and dislodge the fuel line. While police were trying to disable the engine with a pole, a young girl that was sitting right beside the engine was hit on the head multiple times. The police also tried using the mooring rope hook, but nothing worked as the dinghy that was carrying the refugees was rather good at zigzagging and avoiding interception. Unfortunately, however, that was not enough. The small police boat apparently called for help. Soon enough, a bigger police boat showed up. The larger police vessel started making circles around the refugees' boat, thus creating dangerous waves that were intended to flood the engine, but could have also capsized the boat. Luckily enough, the refugee boat soon reached Greek waters, which meant that the Turkish coastguard had to pull back. The video stops here, and there was no information about whether these refugees reached Greece and how hurt the hit girl was. I wished I knew what happened to them. I wished I knew what will happen to us.

December 1st, 2015

After midnight, and some additional waiting at the shore, the smuggler pointed his rifle at us again and said 'It is all clear. You are going now.' 'You?' I was confused; 'Is the smuggler not coming with us?' He was, indeed, not coming. Another shock was another group joining us. Up until now, we were made believe that it will be the fourteen of us boarding the boat, however, another thirty people joined us. I thought they might be giving us a bigger boat then, seeing the increase in the number of passengers, but they did not. The 44 of us started hopping on the boat.

Our vessel to Europe was a rubber boat, a small but seemingly firm dinghy. I sat at the left-front of the boat. I felt the safest there; 'I will spot any danger from here easily and be the furthest from the water if the boat starts leaking,' I thought. The boat had a small engine. The smuggler briefly showed a man sitting next to the motor how to push the transmission lever for the boat to go forward and to twist the throttle to accelerate. Then he pointed to the island saying, 'Drive in that direction. Do not zigzag, you will not have enough fuel. If you are in danger, scream for the coastguard, but only after you reached the Greek territorial waters; you do not want Turks bringing you back, because all of you will be jailed and beaten up. Now go!' The smuggler yanked the start cord on our outboard and the motor started revving loudly. The just-graduated refugee driver pushed the transmission lever and our dinghy started to steer in the direction of Europe.

The journey lasted about four hours. It was rainy, windy, and the waves kept carrying us off the course. The water was entering our boat, be it waves or the rain; most of the time we could not tell which one was it. The people around me had pale and frightened looks on their faces. I wondered if I look that panic-stricken as well.

I was soaked to the bone. My feet were cold, and I was shivering under the below-freezing wind-chill. I tried to distract myself with thinking what Europe will be like. I always thought of it as the shining light at the end of the tunnel. I imagined it as a safe and peaceful place, with good schools and fair working conditions.

I have not had a chance to study much in Afghanistan, although I know how to read and write well. I also speak four languages; Urdu, Pashto, Dari and English. Well, almost everyone in Afghanistan speaks Pashto and Dari, but I am rather unique for knowing Urdu and English as well. I learned Urdu through my uncle's foreign bride; she is a Pakistani and took care of me for my entire childhood. In a way, I learned English from her as well. She discovered for me a world of Cartoon Network, Roald Dahl, Beatrix Potter, Harry Potter, nursery rhymes and other heroes of American and British cultures. She was familiar with these, as she had studied for her undergraduate degree in psychology in Canada.

My father believed that this familiarity with the foreign world will make it the easiest for me to go, although I was not the oldest among my brothers. I have one older brother, two younger ones, and one sister. The plan was for me to reach Germany, work to save some money, obtain refugee status and then ask the German authorities to authorize family reunification visas to my parents and siblings. Two of my brothers are waiting in Iran, while my parents are with my youngest brother and sister in Afghanistan. I hope we will all be together soon.

I entertained myself with these thoughts and plans when I saw a flashlight and several cell phone screens' throwing light in our direction. It was clear that these people were trying to signal the path. Soon enough, we understood why.

Right in front of our boat were cliffs and sharp rocks. The people from the coast kept pointing their light towards the left side of the island. Thus, our driver changed the course and steered the boat towards the rear shore of the island. Indeed, the beach was much less steep and easily approachable from this side. The wind was also calmer, and so were the waves. We could have easily crashed on the rocks if we landed from the other side, I thought; *mashallah* for these people, thank God.

The signalling people turned out to be European volunteers who had organised themselves to come to Greece and help the 'refugee crisis.' However, as I was soon to discover, what is

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happening in Europe is not a refugee crisis; it is a solidarity crisis. The European problem is not that there are too many refugees, but that they do not want refugees at all. Europeans fear migrants and refugees, those of darker skin or different religion. What they do not understand, perhaps, is that once a country or a union decides to build walls against outsiders, they start building barriers for everybody. At this point, the idea that people can live 'united in differences,' as the EU motto suggests, is dead. With the death of the idea of unity, so comes the death of the EU as a project of political unity. This is not a crisis anymore; this is a new regime, a regime of Fortress Europe.

Back to my arrival story. Our boat landed on the shore near the volunteers' housing area. A dozen volunteers approached us as soon as we came a few metres close to the shore. They entered the water up to their waists and started pulling our partially flooded boat. Some of them took children and babies into their hands and wrapped them into some paper-thin golden and silver metallic blankets. Maybe these blankets are some European technology. I could not see how can they possibly protect anyone from this harsh wind and the biting cold.



Afghan volunteer getting ready to help refugees disembark from a rubber dinghy. Credits: Jim Keady.

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



A volunteer trying to warm up and console a refugee baby that has just got off a boat. Credits: Jim Keady.

The boat became rather unstable in this chaos and commotion. I decided to jump off as well. The water was shallow, and I was getting impatient to finally step on European soil. I could also not wait to get off that boat, that executioner that showed me mercy.



A refugee jumping into the freezing water, in obvious relief that he has made it to Greece alive. Credits: Jim Keady.

I plunged into the water. The cold thrust the air out of my lungs. It was so difficult to move my legs towards the shore. I struggled through the water. Upon reaching the shore, a volunteer handed the funny-looking blanket to me as well. I put it on and, indeed, the European invention worked. I felt the wind striking my back, but I did not feel its chill. 'Where am I,' I asked. 'You are at Kaiga Beach near Skala Sikamineas on the island of Lesbos in Greece' a volunteer replied. We were supposed to arrive in Chios, I thought to myself; 'Maybe we went off course because of the wind.' It did not matter. I was in Europe. It did not matter where in Europe.

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



Refugees discard their life-vests upon arriving on Greek islands. Credits: Jim Keady.



Refugees shedding their 'skins'. Credits: Jim Keady.

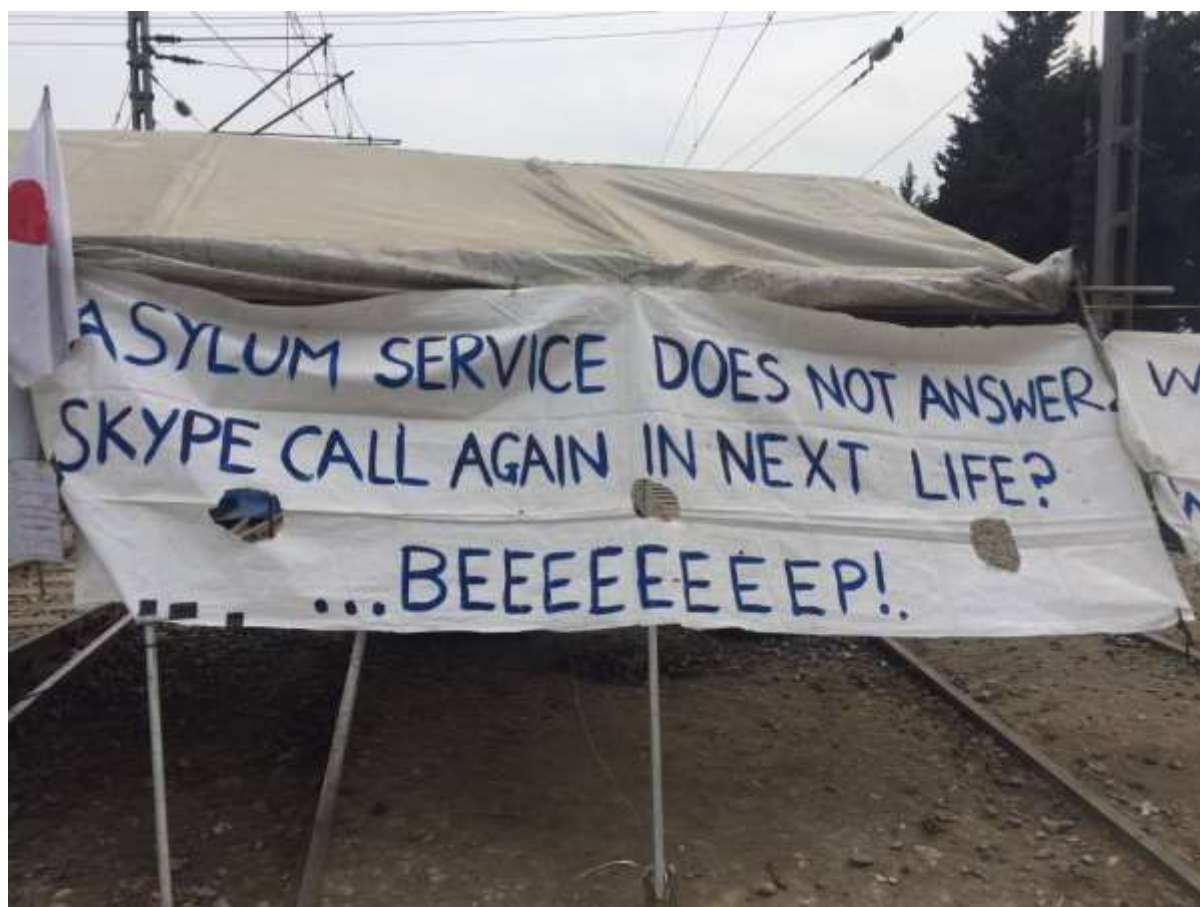
As I walked further into the island, I encountered another group of volunteers; they stood by the van, distributing tea and food. The tea soothed me so much, and I have not realized until that moment how hungry I was. A few steps further stood another van. The volunteers there distributed shoes, socks, coats, pants, gloves, and some more of those strange but effective foil blankets. The refugees crowded in front of this van. No one had socks. No one had dry clothes. Everyone's shoes were broken and soaking wet. My group emptied the volunteers' van with donated clothes and supplies.



Refugees receiving donations from aid organisations. Credits: Abraham Teran.

We were lucky to arrive early. There were no donations left for other groups and, that night, 2,462 refugees came in on boats according to official UNHCR figures, although independent volunteers are estimating 4,000 – 5,000 refugees to have arrived to the island by the end of the day. I always trusted the volunteers more; there was not one UNHCR personnel on the island, as far as I could see. They say that the UNHCR personnel have a small house away from the shores, but what good are they when hiding in the warm house while refugees are landing at the shores? It would have been better if the money for their paycheques was invested into purchasing more donations.

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Refugees criticizing the UNHCR for not answering their calls.

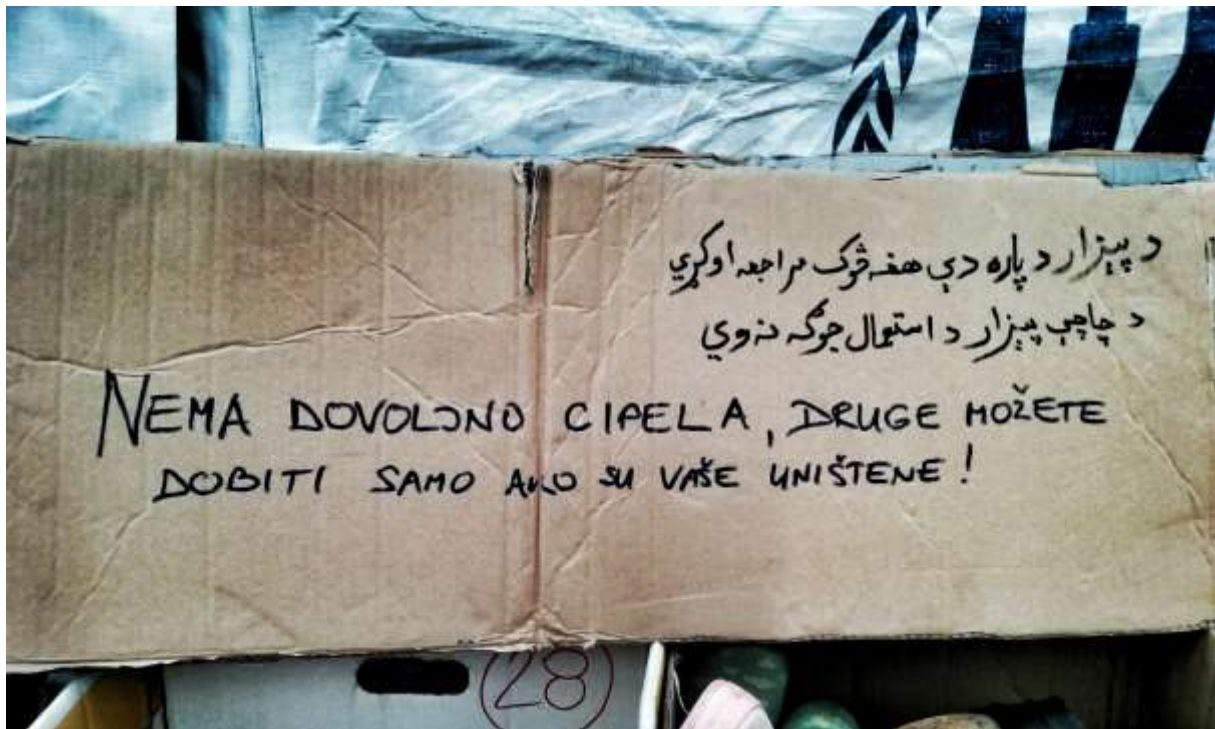
As the time passed, volunteers started to give out garbage bags and cardboard boxes. They ripped holes in the bags and put them over the children who did not have jackets. 'Thank you, thank you for you; *shukran*,' the incoming refugees were replying.

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'They treat us like dogs. Why do they make us wait here in the rain? We have to wait like this everywhere. And here it rains, we are cold, this situation is very bad. My children are cold, my baby is sick. I would rather die in Syria with my family than here in this horrible place.' Credits: Jinsub Cho.

After some more time, the volunteers had not even had garbage bags left. 'No, I don't have shoes. No, I don't have a tent to give you. No, I don't have a blanket. Later, I hope; *inshaallah*. No, I'm sorry. I'm sorry; *mafi*. I know. It's awful. I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'



The sign reads: 'There are no enough shoes. You can get new shoes only if yours are completely destroyed!'

For every volunteer one could find 25 cameramen on the island. Everyone wants a photo opp with a baby or a crying refugee. It's difficult to know people's true intentions for being here. Grandeur? Help? Photos?

After few hours, local truck-owners arrived at the beach. They were volunteers too. They came to pick us up and take us to the nearest refugee camp at Matamados. Initially, I was rather uncomfortable with accepting this offer. Only few weeks back, I was warned about the Greek mafia promising to transport refugees to Moria camp for 100 Euros per person and, while en route, kicking the refugees out in the middle of nowhere if they could not pay more money. Many such incidents were reported in Lesbos. I kept reading about them in unofficial Facebook and WhatsApp groups, as well as Twitter initiatives, which were set up by either volunteers or refugees themselves; more often than not, the two groups cooperated in these efforts.



Local truck-drivers picking up refugees on the shore and taking them to nearby camps. Credits: Abraham Teran.

These social media allowed me to know what to expect at each section of the route. One cannot be a refugee without a smart phone. Not only does it provide a link to an old life, but it helps in creating a new life too. I could keep in touch with my family back home. I did not have money to waste, so, instead of talking to them, I would merely ring their cell phones and, by the phone's country code, they would know where I am, they would know whether I am stuck somewhere or whether I'd made the next move. On the other hand, I received information on the safest route. For example, I hoped to avoid Lesbos due to information on Greek mafia operating in the island and tricking refugees, thus I asked for a smuggler who worked on the route Izmir-Chios. Although my trip did not go according to plan, I knew what kind of dangers to look out for. I thought twice before I hopped on the truck, as well as I asked the volunteers whether they are familiar with the particular trucker. Only after I was reassured of the driver's benevolence, I hopped on the truck and continued my journey.

On my way to Mantamados, I looked at the phone pictures of my family; my younger brothers and sister were smiling, and my father stood with the same seriousness and firmness he is known for at our birthplace. A picture of my mother stood independently. I took that picture at one of the local Saturday bazaars. She is holding a basket full of vegetables –

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cucumber, tomato, eggplant, pepper, onions and garlic. The picture was taken in the summer, this year. There was never such a plenty in Afghanistan in winter-time. I heard that in European supermarkets one can buy any vegetable at any time of the year. I consoled myself with the plenty I expected to enjoy in Europe. I also comforted myself with a thought that my family will join me in Europe soon, I just need to work hard to bring them over.

My phone, I was always holding it. I was holding on to it like I was holding on to an identity of my own. That phone represented a connection to my family, to my place of birth; it also held the pictures of my passport and identity card, my high-school diploma and achievement certificates. There were many paper documents I knew would get wet, dirty, soiled, muddy, stained or, in any other way, ruined beyond recognition. Thus, I brought their pictures instead.

I used my phone for many practical purposes too. For example, when we were discussing whether to call for coastguard's help once the water started flooding our boat, I used the GPS on my phone to locate the boat, to see whether we were in Turkish or Greek territorial waters. If the weather had worsened and if the boat continued to flood at the greater pace, I would have been able to contact the coastguard through my phone. The map function on my phone was crucial, indeed. At each new country, I bought a SIM card and activated the Internet to download the map to locate myself. I would never have been able to arrive at my destination without my smartphone.

Some refugees use their phones even more extensively than I did. One can find a smuggler online, such as on Facebook pages 'Smuggling into the EU,' find out where to receive donations and how to reach camps with sleeping tents, learn asylum claim questions up front, and pool together money to share transportation. That little smartphone is what brings down international borders.



Smartphones are a lifeline for refugees. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

The ride to Mantamados was brief, 15-20 minutes long. I located the camp through Google Maps and only then realised how far off the course the currents took us. Not only had we arrived to the wrong island, the one to which the disembarkation point is near Istanbul, but to the completely opposite side of the island, north rather than south.

Mantamados was, however, a well-developed refugee camp. The change in course, thus, came as a lucky mishap. Namely, in Mantamados, volunteers had established a camp where they provide shelter, medical services, a children's play area and safe space for mothers, as well as they provided food, water and blankets.

The dawn was already breaking as we entered the camp. I ate, and then I slept throughout the day and night until the next morning.

December 2nd, 2015

Mantamados was only a transit camp. This means that I could not have been registered there. When I woke up a whole day after my arrival, I went to ask volunteers for some food, upon which they asked for my registration papers. 'I don't have any papers,' I answered. The volunteer handed me a bag of food and said, 'Eat now and then go to the bus at the east exit of the camp; it will take you to the registration camp at Moria. You will not be able to continue your journey without registering in Greece.'

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'

The Medicines Sans Frontières (MSF) bus waited outside the camp. It would leave as soon as the bus was full, which did not take that long at all. Moria was spoken of as the failed UN camp. The camp had barracks that could hold about 300 refugees. However, when I arrived at the camp, there were about 5,000 refugees present. The camp was overcrowded beyond belief. There was no food other than biscuits. People slept on the frozen concrete, looking for a safe place for their wives, a warm place for their child. There were not more than 200 blankets in the whole camp. We were burning plastic bags and what there was of dry branches to light fires and warm ourselves up. People were asking for a toilet, a doctor, a blanket, a cup of water. Human faeces were everywhere; scabies infested the area.

I saw many refugees before, but not this type of refugees – a kid travelling alone, a young man with a broken arm, an old lady with frostbite on her feet, a pregnant woman travelling with her two toddlers to her husband in Germany. All of that enclosed within a ten-metre-high barbed-wire fence and riot police. I did not expect to live this life in Europe.



Refugees living in deplorable conditions in Greece. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Police were so many in Moria. The registration was carried out by Greek police units. It consisted of fingerprints, photo taken and some questioning if refugees are not lying about their origin. The UNHCR, which I saw for the first time there, coordinated the protection of refugees.

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As borders closed for certain nationalities, refugees would often discard their documents and tried registering themselves under other nationality, more often than not Syrian.

I have not quite understood what the registration process was. There was no one to really explain it either. The wait for the registration was long and exhausting; it meant weeks of standing in queues, just to be told that the registration is closed for the day and the queuing was in vain. At the same time, I desperately looked at buses with new refugees continuously arriving and the most vulnerable refugees, such as the sick, the pregnant and the families with young children, being allowed to skip the line.



Refugees waiting to register. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

The gossip in the queue among the refugees claimed that the European Union is threatening to start legal action against Greece for failing to correctly register migrants, the same being experienced by Italy and Croatia. Thus, Greece has started to register refugees more carefully. For us, that meant strict restrictions and prohibitions, control and ordering, long waits and exhaustion. I am unsure if the strict registration deterred any refugees. It pushed them to smugglers, perhaps, but it did not deter anyone from their attempt to reach safety. The wave has started, and everyone recognised the moment as the right one for joining the stream. I spent almost three weeks queuing in that camp.

There were only a handful of volunteers in Moria camp. The few that were there told me in secrecy that the supplies on the island are many, but the authorities did not allow them into the camp for 'safety reasons.' 'How safe were we, cold, unsheltered, ill and hungry,' I wondered; what kind of unreasonable logic was that?

About a month later, a refugee baby died in this camp. They said due to natural causes, but there was nothing natural about Moria; the camp was subhuman, out of this world. I remember the medical team officially had a 24-hour schedule for doctors on duty, but all too often the medical huts were closed. At night, the sound of children coughing and babies crying would rise through the pouring rain. I slept, or I tried to sleep, on the soaking wet blankets that others used to line their tents. 'Was this my big dream? Europe was the big

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'

dream. I just wanted to be safe. And this, what is this?' Such thoughts of disbelief lulled me into sleep every night for the next few weeks.



Refugees' pleas for help.

December 22nd, 2015

By the time I managed to register, Moria has become pretty calm and fairly empty. While I waited, I spent time volunteering to shorten my time: translating, helping distribute food, maintaining order and cleanliness in the kitchen, checking on other refugees and volunteers at night. The remaining refugees were largely young Moroccan men who had no idea what their fate will be, since Morocco has been announced a safe country to which the refugees can be returned.

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



A sign at the entrance to Moria camp stating that Moroccan, Tunisian and Algerian refugees will not be registered or sheltered.

I became great friends with one of those Moroccan men, Said. Later on, Moroccans were separated from refugees of other nationalities and taken to a closed detention camp in Korinthos. Said told me that, in Korinthos, he and others were beaten by police in order to give fingerprints and sign deportation papers. I have not heard from him thereafter.



A refugee sneaked a phone into detention to let his friends and volunteers know where he is located. He was held illegally. When volunteers find out about particular 'rightful' refugees being detained, they urge the police to release them.

The narratives of such forced returns or deportations were heard at every step of the route. Each nationality seemed to have been targeted by a different country. For example, while Afghans were largely being deported from Greece and Germany, Syrians were being evicted from Turkey, and African nations, such as Eritreans and Sudanese were deported from Egypt and Israel. One Syrian man, Joudallah, whom I met in Moria, tried crossing the border with Turkey twice, as the Turkish authorities deported him the first time. After the first crossing, he was staying in a camp at the Turkey-Greece border in the town of Edirne. He was trying to travel legally across the land border into Greece rather than risk his life in illegally crossing by boat across Aegean Sea. 'There were thousands of Syrian refugees there, thousands,' Joudallah said; 'We were all camping together at a local stadium.' Before they were able to cross, however, they were all cleared away by the Turkish police. Joudallah did not know to where the other refugees were taken. He and the handful of others were sent to detention centres in Aydin, and later to Tekirdag. 'I was beaten badly in detention,' Joudallah said, showing me bruises that have not disappeared even a month later. 'I sat in that cell without

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any charges and without any access to lawyers or a trial. Then, one day, they drove us to the border and forced us to sign a piece of paper on which it was written “I want to go back to Syria”,’ he told me while showing me the Turkish exit stamp on his passport. ‘A few others did not want to sign, and they were taken back to Erzurum prison. I bet they eventually resigned under the beatings.’



One refugee's opinion of racial and national discrimination at EU borders. Credits: Gabriel Tizon.

Under the ‘non-refoulement’ principle of international humanitarian law, a state is prohibited from deporting individuals to a war zone. This fact, however, means nothing to Europe. ‘This is why, in the end, I had to spend even more money and embark on the even more dangerous route, the one across the sea, which brought me here to Lesbos,’ Joudallah said. ‘But Moria Camp is where Afghans, Iraqis and other refugees of non-Syrian descent are detained,’ I stated in confusion. ‘How did you end up in this particular camp rather than in Kara Tepe,’ I asked. ‘I don’t know,’ Joudallah shrugged his shoulders.

With the end of the Joudallah’s story, the two of us entered the registration tent. He was called by the official on the left, and I was called by the official on the right. My cousin Adnan was next in line. The registration papers allowed me to move within Greece for a limited period of one month. The registration process included being fingerprinted and questioned, with the information being stored in the European database of new arrivals.

Registration centres all over Greece were overcrowded and in squalid condition. Refugees waited for days and weeks to get registered. During my wait-time, I considered travelling to another registration centre, but the problems were to be found everywhere.

In my last days in Moria, the temperatures have dropped below 0°C, and the cold wind was blowing; people, refugees and volunteers alike, were freezing. Refugees huddled on the ground under thin blankets, pressing together for warmth, burning trash and hiding behind dumpsters. Many refugees have already been very ill, but the volunteers now started reporting many cases of hypothermia and frostbite. All of that was accompanied by the lack of medicine, blankets, tents, food and water. The camp was basically a dirt and rock field, covered with garbage, ranging from cans of food to life vests. No amenities. No one has even thought of putting up a simple garbage bin.

Refugees were stuck in such camps anywhere from days to indefinitely. Only in February, as I later found out, had Greece set up additional registration centres for refugees, drafting in the army to help the lack of registration officers. The openings followed criticism from the European Union, which accused Greece of not doing enough to stem the influx of migrants. The new registration centres were set up on the 'hotspot' islands of Samos, Lesbos, Chios, Kos and Leros near the Turkish coast, where refugees leaving Turkey tend to arrive, just as I did.

The time I spent volunteering was rather insightful, to say the least. I got to see the crisis from the European and aid agencies' perspective. Greece was giving priority to Syrians when it came to providing refugees with registration papers and allowing them to continue towards their destinations. I wondered what happened to the principle of non-discrimination stated in international human rights law and the Refugee Convention. Was the principle just something written on the paper? 'Syria yes, Afghan no. Why Afghan no?' I kept asking. No answer.

Be that as it may, Afghans still had it good at this point, unlike the numerous Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian refugees. Greek police would separate Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian refugees from others, refusing to register them or to provide safe shelter for them. Many were left sleeping on the streets, largely in Athens' Omonia and Victoria Squares, where a few hundred people squatted with nowhere else to go. On Christmas Day 2015, 273 refugees, including ten minors, were locked up in detention centre in Corinth. Most of them were Moroccans, many of them sent directly from the Greek islands after being arrested for their nationality.



Refugees sleeping rough on the streets of one of the many refugee hub-cities. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Police are especially brutal to the non-Syrian, non-Iraqi, and non-Afghan refugees or so-called non-SIA. Volunteers from Idomeni camp reported to the Greek volunteers' WhatsApp group that the police were refusing the injured and sick access to doctors. Namely, the police were allegedly coordinating with bus drivers to charge non-SIA people more money for bus tickets that take refugees to hospitals. If the refugees had no money for a return ticket to Athens, the police threatened them with jail. What is more, the police were reportedly refusing to let injured non-SIA people rest in the camp. The sick refugees were forced to sleep in streets, merely because they were of the wrong nationality.

Volunteers were, moreover, reporting police abuse of non-SIA people who try to enter Macedonia on foot. They were regularly being caught, beaten up and pushed back to Idomeni. Those who were caught with smugglers were taken to detention in Gazi Baba, one of the worst detention centres on the Balkan refugee route. This was, officially, for witnessing against the smugglers, but the detained refugees experienced the worst treatment at Gazi Baba, bordering on torture.

Due to these circumstances, at that point and up until today, there was no safe passage for non-SIA people. But I am not a Moroccan, Tunisian or Algerian; I am an Afghan and, thus, I was allowed to pass. My fellow nationals were not of such luck even a month or two later, when the EU closed its borders to Afghan nationals as well.

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



Refugees protesting at the closed borders, demanding to be let through. In desperation, some refugees started a hunger strike, while others laid down on the train tracks, set themselves alight or sewed their lips together. Credits: Jinsub Cho.



'Fleeing war is no crime! You are keeping us here without any rights!' Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Moria, that huge complex surrounded by concrete walls, high chain-link fence and barbed wire was now behind me. Right after registration, the police showed me the way towards the coach bus that was to take me on the next step of my journey – to the port from where I was

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to embark on a ferry to mainland Greece. Although the police gave no information, I knew from the time spent volunteering that the Moria refugees are taken to either Athens or Idomeni. I hoped for Idomeni, as it is closer to Macedonian border.



A bus packed with refugees who, more often than not, have no clear understanding of where they are being taken. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

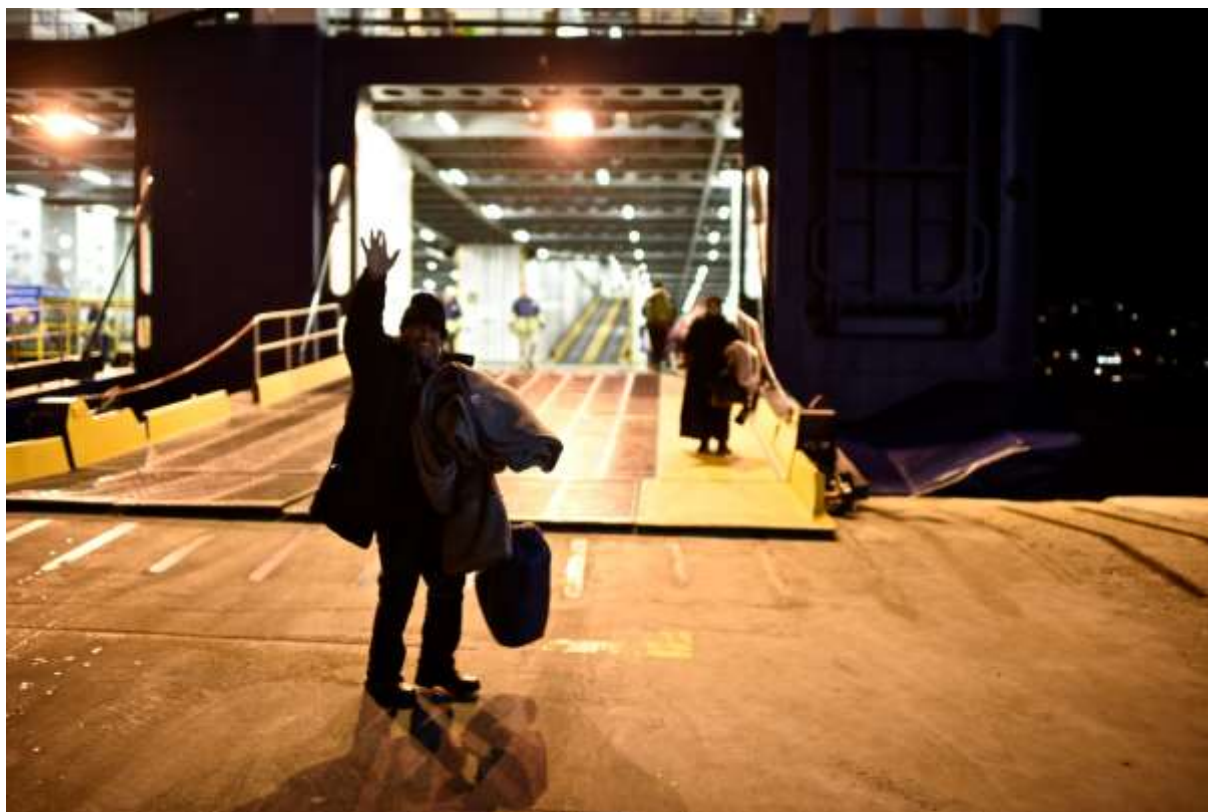
Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



A group of activists protesting against the conditions in which refugees were being kept in Spielfeld, Austria, even on Christmas Day, a holiday sacred to a great number of refugees.

December 23rd, 2015

The following morning, I travelled to the mainland Port of Piraeus near Athens. The ferry was massive, weighing in at about twenty tons, with the capacity to hold over a thousand people and travel upwards of 24 knots. That boat was, indeed, very different from the rubber dinghy I came into Greece on. I paid 25 Euros to travel on that boat. That's almost 2,000 AFN. My head would go dizzy if I tried converting the Euro to Afghanis.



Slika 1A refugee waving goodbye upon leaving Greek islands for the mainland Greece. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

I spent several weeks at the E1 gate's tents at Piraeus before I continued my journey. The E1 gate was, in fact, the only gate where refugees could stay for a longer period of time. More specifically, soon after my departure the Chinese shipping company COSCO had retained control of gates E2 and E3, thus demanding the refugees to be gone. Another difficulty in Piraeus hosting refugees was that the port is, in fact, a tourist terminal and the main gateway to the Aegean Sea islands. Thus, the refugees had to leave before the tourist season begins. E1 was able to offer shelter for a little longer as it was not privatized, and tourist boats don't dock there. There were some demonstrations against the port privatization in Piraeus while I was there, but these pleas have not been heard far.

E1 was overcrowded with tents. I remember not having showered for weeks. Many refugees were sick; the ambulance kept coming, although largely for women in labour. 'Born a refugee – what a bizarre identity!', I thought.

In such overcrowded conditions, tensions between refugees flared. Many fights broke out during my time at Piraeus. One in particular was massive. It broke out between a group of Syrians and a group of Afghans. Tens of people from each side were beaten on and throwing stones at each other. Some windows were broken, and people were hospitalized.

The media wrote about this fight as if it has emerged out of Syrian and Afghan cultural differences, but I cannot agree with this – if one is hungry, one will fight the other for food; if

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one lives with thousands of others on few hundred square metres for weeks, people will fight. That is not cultural; that is human. I do not believe that French, British and German people would not start a fight if they lived like we did for weeks and, later, months on end.

I stayed at Piraeus longer than intended, as I was helping a translator in return for some money. I learned a lot about Greece and decided that, although it is a European country, life here would not be good.

Greece has been a country of forced destination for refugees for years. Northern Europe has used Greece as a container for refugees, from where they select the most qualified ones. Indeed, Europe seems to need a certain number of migrants to survive, economically and demographically. Moreover, Greece is a country based on tourism, and Greek tourism is based on employing migrants in the black market. At Piraeus, the officials were claiming that, for the national economy, it is vital that the port is cleared out, yet it seems that the national economy cannot survive without refugees either. The paradoxes and ambivalences in European relations with migrants appeared at every step. The greatest factor why I did not want to stay in Greece, however, was the high unemployment; refugees find no jobs.

January 30th, 2015

Suddenly, everything started moving so fast. I was bused to Athens right after sundown. There, refugees squatted on Athens' squares and stadiums. SIA refugees and non-SIA families were provided with an official shelter, modest though it was, while single, non-SIA men were left in the streets with no protection. Indeed, racial profiling and ethnic segregation were ongoing, and registration was extremely slow.

I knew that Athens will be overcrowded with so-called 'economic migrants,' who are in fact refugees, escaping the same type of aggression as I was, but of non-SIA nationality. While volunteering at Piraeus, I heard that at least 3,000 refugees at the Greek-Macedonian border had been labelled 'economic migrants' and were therefore sent away from the border's Idomeni camp. This purge included everyone except Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi refugees. For three days, these 'economic migrants' have been receiving written warnings to leave the camp. Additionally, police officers were walking around the camp and advising people to take this warning seriously. Free trains were provided to take 'economic migrants' back to Athens, and officials were promising there is enough accommodation for everyone. Since the trains could not take all the refugees, buses were also employed for this purge. The buses heading for Thessaloniki were charging ten Euros per person, while those driving to

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Athens charged thirty Euros per person. 'Refugees paying for their own eviction – what a paradox that is!'



Exhausted refugees being returned from the border. Credits: Jinsub Cho.



Trains often did not allow food and water on board, regardless of some journeys lasting for hours on end. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Our bus stopped in front of Victoria Square. As Victoria Square is not an official camp, I expected to see thousands of single men, those ‘economic migrants,’ but the square was overflowing in women and children. I was confused. We were told that we will spend the day there and continue with the bus towards the Macedonian border as soon as night falls.

The square was as alive as any Middle Eastern bazaar. Cookies, tea and cigarettes were the most precious possessions, along with the fake Afghan passports, which were being sold for 1,000-1,200 Euros a piece.

Languages and dialects were many, and I was always surprised when I heard a Syrian dialect of Arabic. ‘Why are you here?’ I always asked; Syrians were the one to whom European compassion was reserved, or so I thought. ‘I don’t have a passport. Who could I ask a passport from, Assad?’ some replied. ‘My passport expired on the way to Europe, and I was told it is invalid proof of my Syrian identity,’ claimed an unbelievable number of others. ‘I have a passport for myself, but my child does not have a birth certificate. I would not be able to take my own child with me.’ Reasons for the lack of birth certificates were many – due to children being born en route, more often than not in Turkey; or due to Syrian nationality law, which permits fathers but not mothers to pass citizenship to their children. Because so many fathers have gone missing, have died or were fighting in the conflict, they were not present to

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register their children with the Syrian government and, without proof of a Syrian father, children were not able to assert their claim to Syrian nationality. Finally, the last major reason for the Syrians being pushed back was failing the 'language test.' One woman exclaimed: 'A translator in Serbia, who speaks the poorest Arabic, told the police I am not Syrian because my Arabic is bad. A blonde, European translator who learned Arabic second-hand said I do not speak my own mother tongue! Disgrace!'

I knew that some refugees were trying to pass as Syrians to better their chances of getting asylum, but European governments have come up with a very problematic system to identify 'real refugees.' You are what you speak? But the Middle East is such a linguistically diverse region. The crying woman was Syrian, indeed, but different parts of Syria say things differently; does Europe have that many linguists who are that knowledgeable about all the Middle Eastern dialects? Furthermore, languages don't follow man-made borders. There are Afghans who only speak Urdu and were thus mistaken for Pakistanis, for whom borders were closed. The consequence – pushbacks.

The pushbacks were being conducted as a joint effort of the Austrian, Slovenian, Croatian, Serbian and Macedonian authorities. The reasons for pushbacks were many: not having Syrian, Iraqi or Afghan identification documents, failure to pass a language test if one is being suspected of not being an SIA national, wrong answer to final destination (must be Germany or Austria), wrong answer to reasons for migration (must be war), many arbitrary decisions, such as suspicion of translator not being politically neutral, a refugee not being recruited in the military, not knowing the date of some religious holiday, discrimination based on the national, racial, linguistic characteristics of a person.

The pushbacks occurred without regard to official procedures or international protection rights. The route of return was: Šentilj (Austria) – Dobova (Slovenia) – Zagreb (Croatia) – Slavonski Brod (Croatia) – Šid (Serbia) and/or Belgrade (Serbia) – Macedonia – Greece. A refugee could attempt to re-enter the route. Indeed, many refugees redid the route a few times before they were finally granted asylum, which only tells they had the right all the time, but the European regime denied it to them.

After two hours of sitting on bus and being left with no activities but to sleep or observe, the driver opened the door, and we were allowed to get out. I decided to rent a room for the night at some hotel, so I could shower and get a good night of rest. This was, however, much more difficult than I thought. Hotels were routinely saying that they are full when they clearly were not, and others were overblowing the prices.

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I then checked the Airbnb, an online apartment rental market place; some ads were explicitly saying 'No refugees.' Humorously, a family of Syrian refugees in Athens put their tent on Airbnb, promising scorpions, dehydration and broken promises. It was later removed from the website. In a statement, Airbnb said it had removed the listing because it was 'not permitted under our terms of service.' This brought some laughter to another night I was to spend outside, in the cold.

January 31st, 2016

The refugees enter Macedonia through only one border crossing – Idomeni-Gevgelija, stone 59. Thus, I had to find a way to reach Idomeni, which is about 550 km from Athens.

Transportation was not hard to find – there were organised buses that were taking refugees to Idomeni for 45 Euros per person.

I took the bus in the morning, after I managed to find a motel where I rented a room for three hours to shower and rest a bit. The bus ride was peaceful. I slept for the most of the ride.



Riot police preventing refugees from boarding a bus at the border between Serbia and Croatia. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

The number of refugees entering Macedonia was significantly reduced in the last 48 hours by the ongoing strikes of Macedonian taxi-drivers and blockades by Greek farmers over pension reform. Both groups used the refugee crisis for their benefit. Due to these ongoing

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protests on both sides of the border, up to 5,000 refugees have been waiting for almost two days to go from Idomeni in Greece to Gevgelija in Macedonia. That walk, if not halted by the European protesters, would take only ten minutes. Instead, it was unclear when we would be able to continue our journey.

Idomeni, above all others, was not a place where one would want to get stuck. I have never seen that many kids. Some leaflets were shared among refugees, reporting about people with hepatitis A among us; this is a virus transmitted through the ingestion of contaminated food and water, or through direct contact with an infectious person. It is normally associated with a lack of safe water or poor sanitation. A Syrian baby born in Greece ten days ago died today in Skopje (Macedonia) hospital, following severe health complications. None of this was surprising, seeing the Idomeni camp's conditions.

By the afternoon, the camp became even more overcrowded. Since Idomeni was full, many refugees were stopped at EKO and Polykastro gas stations, just within a reach of Idomeni. That very afternoon, the refugees stuck at the Polykastro gas station decided to walk to Idomeni, after buses refused to take them. Around 800 people were on the highway towards Idomeni that afternoon; we could see them coming by climbing the highest hill of the camp. The border remained closed for everyone that day.



Refugees walking along the highway after refusing to wait for borders to open. Many left most of their personal belongings

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behind, so they could carry their exhausted children. Volunteers were legally prohibited from giving refugees a ride. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

February 1st, 2016

I woke up to news that, in the night, a pregnant 27-year-old Afghan woman, her 17-year-old sister and their cousin drowned while attempting to cross the river between Greece and Macedonia. Their drowning caused an outrage among the Idomeni refugees. Leaflets appeared during the night, condemning the border closure and inviting refugees for collective action. As a result, a big group of around 3,000 Idomeni refugees attempted to make a collective crossing on the same spot where the drownings took place. Refugees started marching from Idomeni camp to the Suha Reka river in the morning, with many volunteers and journalists following them on what they called The March of Hope. After a 6 km march, tens of international volunteers have decided to help the refugees cross the river. The river was very fast and dangerous due to recent rains. Nevertheless, the desperation pushed people into the strong and cold river, and as many as 1,400 refugees managed to cross the border. However, no one was allowed to continue their trip further.

I stayed in Idomeni camp and witnessed the returns. 600 refugees were returned to Idomeni by military trucks at around 10 p.m. Macedonian police cut a hole in their border fence in order to force the rest of the refugees back to Greece. The remaining 500 had to wait in the Macedonian fields, deep into the night, for their push-back to happen. These refugees had it worst. They spent entire night trapped between a swollen river and Macedonian soil, soaking wet, with zero humanitarian support.

Volunteers who helped refugees were punished as well. While both river banks where volunteers were helping the refugees to cross the water were on Greek soil and, thus, accessible to volunteers, some of the volunteers and journalists accompanied refugees while crossing the nearby green border, thus making an illegal entry to Macedonia. About eighty international volunteers and journalists were arrested and detained by Macedonian police. They were penalised with 260 Euros fines, and a six-month ban on entering Macedonia. For those who refused to pay the fine, the ban on entering Macedonia extended up to five years. Police advised both volunteers and refugees to avoid making the same attempt tomorrow.

Indeed, similar penalties made many volunteers reluctant to help refugees. I stumbled upon one of the non-penalised volunteers crying behind the tent. He regretted not following the refugees; he called himself as a coward. 'I don't blame you,' I said; 'We are all scared of police.' He then told me that 31 refugees drowned in front of the eyes of volunteer-rescuers

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few days ago. 'The volunteers were unable to help refugees due to laws regulating smuggling,' he explained. Maritime law states that refugees must cross borders under their own steam and that anybody assisting them in doing so by piloting or towing vessels could be charged with people-smuggling. Due to these rules, rescue workers usually only assess refugee boats from a distance while waiting for them to cross maritime borders unaided.

Lifesavers were in international waters while the sinking boat was stranded on the Turkish side of the sea, with volunteers unable to assist the refugees until the boat had left Turkish waters. Then, it was already too late for 31 persons. I feared that today's arrests of volunteers would have led to many volunteers fearing to act.

February 2nd, 2016

The strikes were over. The Greek pensioners haven't gotten their requests met, but the Macedonian taxi-drivers have. To put it briefly, the taxi-drivers were angry at being cut out of the lucrative business of transporting refugees northwards through Macedonia to the Serbian border. Thus, the local taxi-drivers have staged days of protests that have largely blocked the Greek border and halted the flow of trains northwards.

Before the protest, most refugees were transported northwards from the Greek-Macedonia border by train; it was only recent that the taxis were demanding to be allowed a share of the business. To continue the refugee flow, Macedonia allowed the taxi business.

The taxi prices were more than fair. The train price and the taxi price were the same – 25 Euros per person. The train was unheated, freezing, old and rocky, and taxis gave some comfort. If a taxi transported four people, the driver earned 100 Euros for a four-hour drive to the Macedonian-Serbian border. Still, was it fair to profit from people fleeing for their lives? Taxi-drivers were small players in this. The Macedonian state transported about 1,500 refugees per train, and that in horrific conditions. They were the big profiteers. Due to this agreement, however, we were finally allowed to walk into Macedonia.

The Macedonian border camp at Gevgelija was about half a kilometre away from Idomeni. While entering Macedonia, each one of us had to possess documents for registration from Greece, or any other document by which will be confirmed our nationality. The entrance to Macedonia was allowed only to the refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. We waited in groups to enter the camp. Things started moving fast again. The waiting time was about three hours. Once in the camp, we lined up again for registration; I waited to get registered for about one hour.

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During that time, I received complete humanitarian aid – various organisations and volunteers jumped in to give me new shoes, a sweatshirt and a jacket, scarf and gloves. I was given some food, a can of fish, bread and a banana; it tasted better than anything I ate in months. One volunteer then walked around giving out chocolates; she gave me three. All of this was free.



'We are not terrorists, we are just crossing the borders.' Credits: Jinsub Cho.

I stayed in the camp until the train came. The wait lasted for less than an hour. I was tired due to not being able to rest at all, but I was glad about my journey passing so quickly. The train was to take us to Tabanovce, a camp at the Macedonian-Serbian border. We boarded the train around midnight.



Refugees boarding a train.

February 2nd, 2016

The train ride was terrifying. Several smugglers boarded the train with us, and they were taking fifteen Euros from those sleeping on the floor. 'Stand like everyone else or pay for taking extra space,' they threatened. 'This is too much! You're taking fifteen Euros for sleeping on the floor! At least make it ten,' one young woman complained. 'This is the only choice you have,' the smuggler replied. 'Or, there is another choice. Maybe you could come with me to an empty berth.' In obvious lack of money, the woman got up and put her two crying toddlers on their feet too. 'We will stand,' she said with horror in her eyes.

Me and Adnan leaned on the window and were able to sleep a bit, but we never slept at the same time. One of us always stayed awake. The chances of getting robbed were nearly absolute. To be honest, even when it was my turn to sleep, I couldn't. I was always afraid something may happen. I was so tired. That 171 km took four to five hours to be passed.

When we arrived in Tabanovce the sun was shining, but it was bitterly cold in the camp. All the arriving refugees huddled together in large tents warmed by patio heaters. There were no beds, just wooden benches and grey blankets on the floor. The blankets hid the traces of refugees who previously travelled the same route – bread and cookie crumbs, oil from fish cans, spilled drinks, used tissues, abused shoes, discarded clothing; these items laying

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abandoned like the skin of a disappeared species. Volunteers walked among refugees inside the tent, asking if anyone needs shoes, clothes, baby food, or a doctor.

I laid down to sleep, but was awoken by heavily armed police starting to line the refugees up in a queue within twenty minutes. I was confused as I could see no buses nor trains that came to pick us up. At the exit of the camp, the police asked for our documents by which they could confirm our SIA nationality. Non-SIA refugees were segregated and placed at the eastern corner of the tent; the SIA were allowed to pass. Later I found out that the non-SIA had only one option, ask for asylum in Macedonia, or they were to be returned to Greece. The police, however, did not inform the non-SIA about the asylum claim opportunity and, thus, almost all of them were returned to Greece.



Refugees being registered. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

The rest of us, the SIA nationals, were told to walk across the Macedonian-Serbian border. This was a three-kilometre walk, which felt like an eternity under that exhaustion. I have not slept in two days. We were continuously pushed: 'Go, go, go! *Yalla, yalla!*' Those were the only Arabic words the police knew.

Following the walk, there was a seven-kilometre bus ride to camp Miratovac. The buses waited for us right across the border. There were that many buses that the scene looked like a forest-built central bus terminal. Nevertheless, the buses were overcrowded.

Miratovac felt exactly like Tabanovce. We spent about half an hour at a poorly equipped tent. As I realised, Miratovac served as a container where refugees were held until the previous group has been registered at Preševo, a registration centre another seven kilometres down the road. Indeed, after a brief stop, buses picked us up in front of Miratovac. They took us to Preševo. 'Finally, a sign of civilisation,' I exclaimed upon arriving to the camp. This was a place with good facilities – free Wi-Fi, mobile phone charging facilities, a local shop, some tea, food that is not just a can of fish and some bread, a separate tent for child-care. Indeed, the further in we went into Europe, the better care we received.

Registration at Preševo was unlike any previous registration. Refugees were obliged to sign papers indicating which country they want to seek asylum in. This information was then written on our papers, and the question will be asked again at every border. Indeed, I was questioned about my destination at every border crossing along the route, all the way to Germany. Volunteers informed us that, unless refugees said they want to claim asylum in either Austria or Germany, they will not be allowed to continue their journey.

There were reports from different border crossings that border authorities ask trick questions to find out whether one really wants to go to Austria or Germany. They ask for example: 'Do you have family in a different country who you want to join?' Or, 'Where do you want to go if Germany and Austria are full?' If one answered any of the questions that one wanted to go to a country other than Austria or Germany, one was not allowed to continue onwards. One should have always said they want to go to Austria or Germany, even if they were to continue to another country. Unlike in other such situations, however, volunteers and translators informed us well about these circumstances.

I didn't know why it was decided this way. The governments rarely told why they made their decisions. However, since my wished destination was Germany, I had no problems with this decision. Some refugees, on the other hand, had spouses and children in Italy, France, UK and Nordic countries; this decision was a grave problem for them. Were they not putting up with the entire journey just to be reunited with their families and loved ones?

On that day only, the Slovenian authorities refused entry to 154 refugees who, allegedly, provided false claims about their origin and destination, and returned them to Croatia. Austria rejected 54 refugees for the same reasons.

I registered within an hour. It was 5:30 p.m., which meant that the 5 p.m. train to Šid, a camp at Serbian-Croatian border, just left, and I had to wait for the second daily train, which was leaving at 11:30 p.m. 'I will finally get some sleep,' I thought to myself with relief. I

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slept for hours, until the police started waking us up and queuing for the train. I paid twenty Euros for that train ride.



A war-injured refugee getting ready to board a train to safety.

February 3rd, 2016

The train ride took twelve hours. It was snowing in Šid, and last night the temperature fell to -15°C. I cannot say much more about Šid. I remember it only as a place where we switched trains for Croatia. The registration was quicker than ever. We exited the train, passed through the registration tent, and made a move towards the other train waiting on the other side. That train took us to the Slavonski Brod camp in Croatia, this time for free. Actually, from this point on, all the transportation was free, which I was grateful for, since my money started to run out. I worried how will I settle in Germany with so little money left.

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Refugees crowding on to a train with a capacity of 900. Regardless of the capacity, the trains usually carried between 1,400 and 1,600 refugees. Credits: Jinsub Cho.



Waiting for a train in the cold. Credits: Jinsub Cho.

Soon enough, I was back on the train taking me to another such transit camp. Everything in Slavonski Brod resembled my Šid experience. We exited the train, registered and exited the tent, only to re-enter the train and continue the journey. I was tired, extremely tired. However, the train that took us from Šid towards Croatia and further to Slovenia was heated and rather comfortable. It was not even that crowded. The number went down from 1,500 refugees per train to about 900-1,000. The very same day, I continued my journey towards Slovenia. 'If we arrive today, I will be crossing five countries in two days,' I thought to myself.

February 4th, 2016

The train had reached Slovenia in the late evening hours of the previous day, however, the Slovenian police waited in early morning hours and thick dark to transport us to Dobova camp. Dobova was another fast registration and transit centre. Everything there was so well organised; the organisations made a maze of services through which they guided refugees. As we exited the train, we entered a tent where we were handed a bag of food. Thereafter, we entered a heated tent, while grabbing a blanket and a mat that were piled up at the entrance.

After dropping our heavy bags, we exited the rest tent, only to enter another tent, specialised for registration. After registration, the maze took us back to the rest tent. There

were three rest tents, and the police guided refugees towards the next tent as soon as the previous one filled up. All three rest tents were connected with the registration tent and, as soon as the tent number one was done with the registration, tent number two was full and ready for registration, while tent three was just starting to be filled with refugees.

In Dobova, I met an interesting and curious woman. She was an anthropologist from England who asked me to tell her about my journey. I did not know what “anthropology” is, but she told me ‘Don’t worry, no one does.’ She said that anthropology studies human societies and social life, and that she studies ‘a society of refugees.’ ‘Can refugees be thought of as a society? I guess we can, we experience very similar realities; we have very similarly structured life opportunities and trajectories.’

However, she did not only ask what it means to be a refugee, which I answered her thoroughly. She asked, ‘What does it mean to be German to you? What does it mean to be European?’ I was unsure how to answer that in a more thorough way than to say, ‘By receiving refugees, the ultimate challenge of Europe will be to transform from a community of shared blood towards a community of shared ideals. We are the new Europeans, but all we want is safety, peace, work and education for our children.’

I am scared of German rightist propaganda. There is a growing rhetoric that, faced with refugees and different cultures, Germany must propagate Judeo-Christian or ‘truly German’ values. Under such an umbrella of beliefs, refugees are either to stay out or adapt. I believe, however, that we can live together, ‘united in diversity,’ as the EU motto suggest. That is the promise of Europe that refugees came for. We can adapt to Europeans, but can Europeans adapt to us? I parted from the anthropologist as a friend. I promised to keep in touch on my way, and I did. I managed to reach Germany, but I decided to move to England. ‘It will take a while to learn German,’ I thought; ‘I’d better go to an English-speaking country.’ I wanted to enter university so badly. In England, I got that opportunity.

The Balkan route to central Europe officially shut down in February, stranding more than 53,000 people since in Greece. I was one of the last refugees who managed to reach safety and get protection.

Benceković, 'Tell me how you move...'



Which direction will the refugee crisis take? Credits: Jinsub Cho.