



Greece's Other Crisis: The Rise of the Refugee Crisis and the Decline of European Political Unity

Michael Boosalis and Chris Kennard

Having been asked by the American Hellenic Institute (AHI) to write on a current social-economic issue facing Greece and how Americans could render assistance, I chose the refugee crisis. I reconnected with an old friend and former colleague, Chris Kennard, whom I had met during a summer internship at the U.S. Consulate in Thessaloniki in 2011. Together we embarked on a six-week journey through northern Greece. Our goal was to gain a better understanding of the current refugee crisis.

What's Happening?

For almost a decade the Greek people have lived through economic and social crises. A series of punishing austerity measures have propelled Greece into a perpetual state of economic decline. Since the wake of the Greek Depression in 2007, the beleaguered nation has seen its economy teeter on collapse, its healthcare and public welfare systems slashed and overstressed. Greece also suffers from a twenty-five percent general unemployment rate and over fifty percent for those under thirty.

Almost half a million Greeks have left Greece in the past eight years, of which over 190,000 are university graduates. Those staying behind, face a seven-year economic depression. The average Greek citizen is now forty percent poorer. Two out of five Greek children live in poverty.ⁱ

Chris Kennard and I met with refugee officials from the Greek government, experts from the U.S. State Department, and a number of representatives of NGOs, both local and international. What we learned is that, as bleak as the situation is, Greece's *biggest crisis is yet to come*. The nation now faces a new challenge – how to handle a massive influx of migrants and refugees.

The refugee influx stems from a series of escalating conflicts, which began shortly after the Arab Spring in 2011. The main driver is the Syrian conflict. A festering civil war in Syria has killed over half a million of its people as well as displacing a further 11 million Syrians.ⁱⁱ On-going violence in other parts of the region, including Iraq and Afghanistan, have also contributed to the refugee surge into Greece. In addition to refugees, there are tens of thousands of economic migrants from Eurasia and Africa also coming into Europe via Greece.

For the majority of refugees, the most popular access into Europe is via the Aegean Sea. Since 2015, over one million refugees have arrived on the shores of Greece, fifty-five percent of which are women and children.ⁱⁱⁱ Their journeys are treacherous. They face hunger, illness, abuse, and loss of family members. Those who survive arrive on Greek shores malnourished and traumatized, facing an uncertain future. The chaos is compounded in many cases by a lack of proper documentation.

Most migrants do not intend to stay in Greece. Generally, their ultimate destination is northern Europe. However, since February 2016, when the Balkan land crossing was sealed off, the remaining refugees and migrants are now stranded in Greece. They are housed in about fifty camps throughout the country.^{iv} Greek detainment camps are severely overcrowded. They are understaffed and face serious shortages in basic supplies.

According to UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency), some 470,000 refugees and migrants are currently in Greece. At least 24,000 are without any shelter or accommodation.^v Refugees face squalid and unsanitary conditions, limited access to food and health care and living conditions far below basic international standards. Medicine is scarce and psychological and trauma relief is nearly non-existent.

Many of these camps are unsafe – especially at night. Small subsets of migrants have formed gangs, which prey on the vulnerable, particularly women and children. Reports of theft, physical and sexual abuse, as well as forced prostitution occur frequently.

What's Next?

The EU's response to the migrant crisis is centered on a deal with Turkey. Since its implementation in March 2016, the EU-Turkey deal has managed to stem the flow of migrants into Greece. The terms of the deal are as follows:

- Migrants arriving in Greece without asylum would be sent back to Turkey.
- For every Syrian migrant sent back to Turkey, one Syrian already in Turkey will be resettled in the EU.
- Turkey will contain migrant flows along its European border.
- Turkey will receive six billion euros in aid, as well as political concessions including the possibility of visa free travel for Turkish citizens in the EU.

Initially, the agreement seemed to succeed. However, Turkey's recent failed military coup, continual social unrest, as well as repressive government reprisals, have seriously complicated Turkey's future and its role in the region.

The deal with Turkey is Europe's only serious attempt to solve the refugee crisis. There is a growing deficit of political will within the EU. This is directly causing further disintegration within the Union. The rise of anti-EU sentiment, punctuated by the recent Brexit referendum, is symptomatic of Europe's impending disintegration.

Hope of a renewed unified EU response is breaking down. If conditions in Turkey remain unstable, the refugee crisis will only intensify.

What Can We Do?

Our journey brought us to the realization that the financial crisis, compounded by the massive influx of refugees, has metastasized into a full-scale humanitarian tragedy. This larger humanitarian crisis is impacting not only refugees and migrants, but also growing segments of the native Greek population within their own local communities.

We also discovered that NGOs and private initiatives are attempting to provide critically needed services. Many individual Greeks are also responding admirably to the crisis on their doorstep. Social charities within local Greek communities have started soup kitchens and clothing drives, among other efforts. Some have even opened their homes to help refugees, at their own expense.

We came across many such initiatives during our travels. We met Charles S. Anthony, a Greek-American from St. Louis, Missouri, who is the Director of the Ormylia Foundation. The Ormylia Foundation is a Medical and Healthcare Center in northern Greece. The Center, which already has a history of providing healthcare to the poor and disenfranchised, is seeking ways to utilize the expertise of its staff and its facilities, including recently donated state of the art digital scanning equipment. Frustration lies in the lack communication and intra-organization with other NGOs already working within the camps. A lack of basic services such as transporting refugee children to the medical center for scans or trauma treatment, impede their efforts.

We met with Nicholas Kavalas, the Director of ARSIS (Association for the Social Support of Youth), a Greek NGO operating in Thessaloniki. ARSIS has built its reputation assisting children separated from their parents, providing care and shelter. However their frustration lies in a shortage of medical supplies, equipment, and expertise.

We also went to Idomeni, the notorious makeshift squat near the northern Greek border.^{vi} We witnessed firsthand the frustration of the relief workers struggling with sparse supplies and rampant dysfunction. We met a medical doctor from Medicine Sans Frontiers (Doctors Without Borders) whose frustration included his inability to properly set a child's broken arm, due to a lack of something as simple as a basic scan.

We witnessed the suffering. We felt the frustration. Yet we see a clear solution. It's a matter of communication. What is needed is a network of individuals, programs and NGOs that work together, serving as a conduit for aid and relief. Thus was born Critical Relief for Children. (CRC)

Critical Relief for Children promotes direct cooperation between private independent supporters, specialists and benefactors, with our network of NGO partners. Critical Relief for Children seeks partners that provide critical medical relief to those most acutely vulnerable - children and their mothers. CRC operates not only in refugee camps, but also in underprivileged local communities within Greece itself. The humanitarian crisis engulfing our ancestral home is harrowing and heartbreaking. However, individual relief efforts continue to serve heroically. It is our intention to support those efforts. Consider joining us. Learn more at: crcnetwork.org.

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- ⁱ Stylianou, Lucy Rodgers Nassos. "How Bad Are Things for the People of Greece?" *BBC News*. 16 July 2015. Web. 07 Sept. 2016.
- ⁱⁱ "FRONTLINE." *PBS*. PBS, 2 Feb. 2016. Web. 07 Sept. 2016.
- ⁱⁱⁱ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "UNHCR Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean." *UNHCR Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean*. Web. 07 Sept. 2016.
- ^{iv} Kingsley, Patrick. "'Prisoners of Europe': The Everyday Humiliation of Refugees Stuck in Greece." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 06 Sept. 2016. Web.
- ^v United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "UNHCR Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean." *UNHCR Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean*. Web. 07 Sept. 2016.
- ^{vi} Idomeni has since closed since July 2016

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