

Photos: Syrian refugees on the way to Europe

Refugees search for safe passage to Greece.

by Giorgos Moutafis

25 Sept 2015



MORE ON [SYRIAN REFUGEES](#)

Child dies after refugee boat capsizes off Lebanon2 days ago

What do refugees in the Netherlands think of the Dutch?2 weeks ago

Putin, Rouhani, Erdogan to discuss Syria's future in Tehran2 weeks ago

Yearning for the flavours of home: Syrian refugees' Eid in Turkeylast month

This is a historical moment for Europe. That is the thought that creeps into my mind every time I try to describe just what I have been documenting for the past few months.

As a photographer who has dedicated more than eight years to documenting the lives of refugees across the continent and beyond, I never foresaw that we could reach a point of such cruelty, never imagined that EU member states would be building fences to protect their territories from helpless, desperate refugees.

History is repeating itself as the Greek islands once again welcome refugees arriving via Turkey.

Over the past few months, the majority of the refugees arriving on the Greek islands are middle class Syrians, some of them highly educated.

[RELATED: Single mothers fight to survive](#)

I see them reaching Greek shores and kissing the ground. Unaware of what comes next in a crisis ridden country with no functional reception system, most of them believe they have reached their Promised Land.

As soon as the refugee-filled rubber dinghies reach the shoreline locals arrive - some are there to offer help, others to get the engines left behind from the boats. NGOs, solidarity groups and dozens of volunteers also descend - although they don't always know just what to do to help.

Then there is the media. Dozens of photographers, journalists and cameramen are awaiting to capture the moment.

Having just survived an enormously dangerous sea crossing, the refugees must immediately make one of the most difficult of choices: where to go next. The absence of a common European asylum system forces them to seek out those EU countries with the strongest asylum systems, where they also have a greater chance of integrating. Thus, after reaching Greece, most embark on a new journey north.

Along the Greece-Macedonia border, the situation is even more chaotic. Many refugees remain stranded in between the two countries, their passage subject to daily negotiation. It was here that, at the end of August, police officers attacked refugees as they held their babies in their arms.

I have documented violence, despair and helplessness with my lens more times than I can possibly remember. But I have honestly never seen anything like that before: terrified and beleaguered people trying to cross the borders, children screaming and crying and families being separated between the two countries. Hell by the border.

The Balkan passages are particularly dangerous.

[RELATED: The Syrian refugees of Gaza](#)

In April 2015, I was on the Greek island of Kos, when I witnessed the arrival of a boat full of Syrians. Among them, there was a man called Almouthena, an English language teacher from the city of Deir Ez Zour.

"Freedom, freedom," he screamed as he stepped off the boat and onto the shore. He had left Syria after four years of daily clashes in his region. I followed him from Kos to the north and the borders with Macedonia and then I met him again a month later in a hostel in Beograd, Serbia. The same day we both bought a bus ticket to Hungary. Together with a group of 20, I followed Almouthena and after several hours we reached Kanja, a city a few kilometres from the Hungarian border.

It was already dark and the rain had just stopped. We got off the bus and started walking, trying to find our way with the help of the GPS on his phone. We soon left the city and found ourselves on a dark and lonely road. And then we were stopped by the Serbian police.

Two policemen stepped out of a van and asked us to follow them to the police station. They told us we could continue without a problem if we paid them 50 euros (around \$56) each.

I felt scared, and tried to hide my camera as I searched for the money in my pocket.

Almouthena left the group, went to a policeman and explained that they had escaped the war in Syria and didn't have enough money to give them.

The group made a move to head back in the direction of the city from which we had come. And then I heard it, in the dead silence of the night: a gun being loaded. I turned back to see a policeman holding the weapon to the head of a young Syrian.

We all stopped. The policemen took the 200 euros (about \$224) that some of the Syrians managed to scrape together, got into the van and disappeared.

I will never forget that moment in my life. Or the look in the eyes of that young Syrian as he stared into the barrel of a Serbian policeman's gun - there, somewhere along those much talked about European borders.

Photogallery



Syrian children sit in front of the abandoned hotel Captain Elias - Kos, Greece, August 2015
[Giorgos Moutafis]

42

KODAK 400TMY-2

43



▶ 2 ▶

Refugees pray during a funeral ceremony for an unnamed Syrian refugee in Mytilene's cemetery
- Lesvos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]



A refugee prays after arriving on a dinghy on Lambi beach on the Greek island of Kos - Kos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

KODAK 400TMY-2

44



A refugee boy sits on the Greek side of the border beside Macedonian special forces who are guarding the border with Greece near the village of Idomeni - Idomeni, Greece, August 2015
[Giorgos Moutafis]



A refugee buries an unnamed Syrian refugee during a funeral ceremony in Mytilene's cemetery - Lesvos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

52

KODAK 400TMY-2

53



A path used by refugees who arrive on Lambi beach on the Greek island of Kos – Kos, Greece.
August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

41

KODAK 400TMY-2



Refugees dry their clothes on a tree on Psalidi beach on the Greek island of Kos – Kos, Greece.
August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

D A K 400TMY-2

45

KODAK 400



A man from Pakistan sleeps outside Captain Elias, an abandoned hotel used by the Greek authorities as an unofficial reception centre on the Greek island of Kos – Kos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]



A Syrian child moments after his arrival in a dinghy on Psalidi beach on the Greek island of Kos – Kos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

DIAK 400TMY-2

50

KODAK 40



A refugee prays moments after he arrived in a dinghy on Psalidi beach on the Greek island of Kos – Kos, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]



A Syrian refugee walks towards Greece's border with Macedonia, near the village of Idomeni – Idomeni, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

AK 400TMY-2

50

KODAK 400



▶ 8 ▶

Men from Pakistan wait on the railway tracks at the Greece-Macedonia border, near the village of Idomeni – Idomeni, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

51

KODAK 400TMY-2



Syrian refugees wait at the border to be allowed to cross from Greece to Macedonia – Idomeni, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]

2

51

KODAK 400TMY-2



A refugee carries his daughter as he and others make their way to the Greece-Macedonia border
– Idomeni, Greece, August 2015 [Giorgos Moutafis]