

Arrivals on the island of Lesbos, summer 2015

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Lesbos, population 85,000, received more than 85,000 refugees and migrants in 2015 up to the end of August.

By the end of August 2015, improvised camps had been set up all over Mytiline, the capital of Lesbos, and outside the two designated areas. This created a huge pressure for the local population and authorities, already low on resources due to the economic crisis. But there was an outpouring of volunteers from the villages together with foreign tourists who helped people when they disembarked, disoriented from the trip and traumatised from their experiences.

The people arrive here from the Turkish seaside town of Ayvalik and surrounding remote beaches. Syrians in the great majority, recent refugees most of them. Among them, many Kurds and Palestinians but also Iraqis who have passed through Jordan, and by the time they get to Lesbos some of them register as Syrians hoping for 'priority' treatment. From Afghanistan, through Iran, walking and taking buses. A few Africans, from Eritrea and Somalia, through complicated smuggler

routes. Pakistanis – and some Syrians – who often were originally smuggled into Greece, worked here for several years, left and are now returning, speaking the language.

You will hardly hear the words Al-Qaeda or ISIS, so popular in European and American analyses of the situation, when Syrians and Iraqis speak about what has driven them to undertake the perilous journey. There are people who have tried legal channels to reach the wealthier countries of Europe and North America, and failed. There are Palestinians from the West Bank, who cannot get visas to anywhere. There are people who can afford to book hotels through the internet to stay after they get their papers and while they wait for the ferry to leave, and there are those who barely have enough money to get to Athens.

They land at the north and east coasts of Lesbos, the closest point to Turkey. They then have to walk the 45-60 kilometres to town where registration takes place. It was

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Lining up for registration in the camp for Syrians on Lesbos.

initially prohibited for private vehicles to give them a lift before they receive their registration papers but even then many locals were giving lifts to the old, the injured, families with babies and pregnant women, at the risk of arrest for violation of anti-trafficking laws. And there are taxi drivers that charge hundreds of Euros to bring the refugees and migrants into town.

The road is lined with people – families, elderly, sick and disabled, young and strong. They arrive in the camps with blisters on their feet, dehydrated, having stepped on sea urchins while landing on the shore, some with chronic diseases, pregnant women, small babies.

At the small village of Sikamnia, one of the main entry points, a dinghy arrived in front of us. People disembarked, all Syrians. Most spent some time on the beach to get their bearings. Smiling, hugging, taking selfies with the Turkish coast in the background. They had had a smooth crossing, less than two hours. Many refugees are not sure where they are landing in Greece and do not trust what the smugglers tell them. Three young men came up to us with huge smiles. They were grateful to reach this

country, even under the most stressful of circumstances. They were adventurers on the road, they had found their safety.

We met a family from Aleppo: the father a teacher of music, missing all the instruments he had left behind; his daughter of 12, whose school was bombed but who was still longing for home; the son of 16, trying to behave like a grown man; and the mother, with tears telling us that they had tried for four years to fight it out but in the end there was no life left in the city. They didn't know where they were heading, maybe Sweden, they had heard asylum is given there, but the girl wanted to stay in Greece, relatively close to Syria.

The refugee and migrant arrivals have placed a huge strain on Lesbos in 2015. Greece has been under this pressure for at least five years but it is only in the summer of 2015, when the numbers of refugees and migrants increased exponentially and they moved on to reach Hungary, Austria and Germany, that the issue became a significant debate.

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