

POLICY REPORT

Seeking Safety in Greece

Recounting the Asylum Seeker's Odyssey

Aaron Nodjomian-Escajeda

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Methodology

USCRI believes that to truly understand the evolving dynamics that shape the experiences of those seeking refuge, it is imperative to listen to direct accounts from refugees and asylum seekers.

To reflect this people-centered approach to policy and advocacy, USCRI Policy Analyst Aaron Nodjomian-Escajeda conducted a field visit to Thessaloniki, Athens, Ioannina, and Lesbos, Greece in September 2023. The purpose of the trip was to assess the challenges that people seeking refuge face traveling along the Eastern Mediterranean route to Greece and their access to asylum and integration once arriving there. During his visit, Nodjomian-Escajeda visited asylum-seeker welcome centers and conducted dozens of interviews and discussions with civil society actors, asylum seekers and refugees, and Greek citizens. Additionally, he collected survey data on asylee registration and integration into Greek society.

With this first-hand information, Nodjomian-Escajeda explains in this report the dynamics surrounding access to humanitarian protection in Greece and, by extension, the European Union, shares stories of people seeking refuge, and provides recommendations to better address the crisis.



Peril on the Waves of the Mediterranean

The sea stretched endlessly before them, its vast expanse a turbulent canvas painted in hues of ominous gray and deep, brooding blue. Churning waves rose and fell like the breaths of a slumbering giant, each crest crowned with foamy whitecaps that whispered warnings to those who dared to venture too close.

A rickety boat bobbed precariously, its weathered, wooden planks groaning in protest. Ill-equipped for the perilous journey, the frail vessel's once-vibrant paint had long since faded, replaced by a dull, peeling veneer that told a story of neglect and hardship.

A patchwork of repairs adorned the hull, as if desperate hands had tried to mend the boat with whatever materials were near. Torn and frayed ropes dangled from the sides, swaying with each wave as if pleading for mercy.

The makeshift mast defied the wind rather than harnessing it; tattered shreds of what was once a sail fluttered weakly, resembling a tired flag resigned to its fate. Deprived of essential equipment, passengers relied on hope and desperation rather than the tools necessary to navigate the treacherous waters.

As the boat ventured further from the shore, it struggled against the relentless current, with its engine sputtering in protest. The occupants, a group of weary souls seeking refuge, clung to the boat's sides, their anxious eyes scanning the horizon for signs of land. In the face of the vast and unpredictable Mediterranean, these passengers must endure the challenges faced by countless others, both before and those yet to come, who seek safety and a new home.

-Aaron Nodjomian-Escajeda

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Executive Summary

In June 2023, 600 people drowned in Greek waters after the fishing boat *Adriana* sank. Those 600 people had been fleeing their home countries in search of safety in Europe, but the Greek and Italian authorities aware of the sinking ship did not respond to the calls and pleas for help. The account of the capsized *Adriana* and the deaths of those asylum seekers echo the Lampedusa shipwreck in 2013, during which 360 people seeking asylum from Eritrea, Somalia, and Ghana perished in the Mediterranean Sea.

These are only two stories among many recounting the deaths of asylum seekers in the Mediterranean Sea in the last ten years. So far in 2023, nearly 200,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean seeking asylum in Europe, and according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), nearly 2,500 individuals have died in transit, with four in every 100 deaths being children.

This report draws attention to the ongoing challenges that cause some refugees and asylum seekers to undertake a second, and sometimes third, more dangerous journey in search of safety and is an attempt to explain the complicated dynamics surrounding access to humanitarian protection in Greece and, by extension, the European Union. It retells the real stories of people seeking refuge – the treatment they receive, their struggles to have their legal rights recognized, and their personal triumphs. It provides an inside look at how organizations in Greece are responding to asylum-seeker needs and the barriers that they encounter. The end of the report provides recommendations to better address the crisis, including:

- 1) In accordance with internationally established norms on refugee protection, governments should accept responsibility for deciding asylum claims.
- 2) Governments should concentrate on creating efficient asylum procedures that do not compromise fairness or quality, instead of erecting barriers to refugees and migrants.
- 3) The high seas should be recognized as a humanitarian space and nongovernmental organizations that play a vital role in rescue operations in the Mediterranean should be legitimized and not criminalized.
- 4) The European Union should establish safe and legal routes for migrants fleeing persecution to mitigate the asylum seeker's need to cross dangerous sea routes through smugglers.
- 5) Additional safeguards should be established to ensure that survivors of human trafficking have adequate protections and services once in Greek camps.
- 6) Greek authorities should streamline the process for NGOs to operate and provide necessary services in Greek refugee camps to improve asylum-seeker and refugee protection and integration.

The Need for International Protection

Signed in the wake of World War II, the [1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), also known as the Refugee Convention, defines a refugee as a person fleeing their country due to persecution or a well-founded fear of being persecuted “for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside of the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” [The 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees](#), also known as the 1967 Refugee Protocol, expanded the scope of the Refugee Convention to individuals from all countries and reiterated the principle of “non-refoulement,” which means that people should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom.

Once individuals are considered refugees, they are granted certain legal rights, and signatories of the Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol are obligated to provide assistance and international protection.

The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) [projects](#) that more than 339 million people worldwide will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2023 due to ongoing crises, such as conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Sudan, widespread violence in Myanmar, and persistent insecurity and drought in Somalia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) [expects](#) 117.2 million people to be forcibly displaced or stateless in 2023, accounting for 29.3 million refugees, 5.6 million asylum seekers¹, and 61.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). The global surge in energy and commodity prices has added to the challenges for many already fragile nations, exacerbated by the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite these widespread challenges, a [consistent trend](#) prevails—most refugees and displaced individuals remain in proximity to their home countries. At the end of 2022, 70 percent of refugees and asylum seekers, including those in refugee-like circumstances and others requiring international protection, found shelter in neighboring countries. This pattern has persisted over the past five decades, with three-quarters of these populations remaining within the same region as their country of origin. Yet, many of these initial host countries are ill-prepared to provide long-term protections for refugees and asylum seekers.

¹ An asylum seeker is an individual whose petition for refuge, or international protection, has yet to be processed.

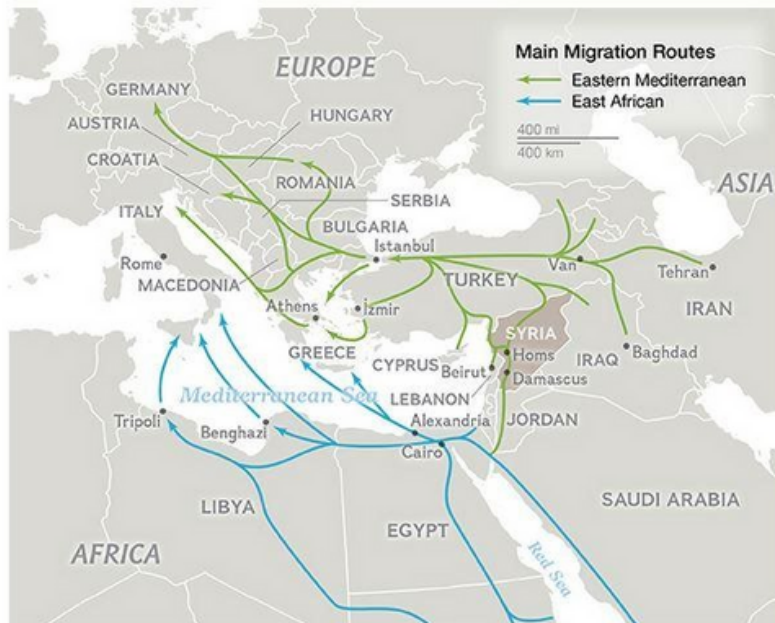
Due to political instability, conflict, economic challenges, ineffective or nonexistent asylum laws, and other push factors, countries across the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia are often under equipped to provide protection for refugees and asylum seekers within their borders. As a result, some refugees and asylum seekers undertake a second, and sometimes third, more dangerous journey to reach countries that seem better equipped to receive people seeking international protection.

Reaching International Protection

Owing to the proximity of Europe, individuals leaving countries in the Eastern Mediterranean often flee towards the European Union (EU) by the dangerous land and sea route known as the Eastern Mediterranean migration route.

The Eastern Mediterranean route primarily describes the journey from Türkiye to Greece but can also refer to [irregular arrivals](#) in Cyprus and Bulgaria. This route experienced its largest numbers in 2015, when more than [885,000](#) individuals traveled through it at a time of an escalation of violence in the Syrian civil war. Syrian routes [coincided](#) with an East African migratory route that has long been used by people fleeing conflict in Somalia, the DRC, and South Sudan.

Eastern Mediterranean Route



NG STAFF
SOURCES: MISSING MIGRANTS PROJECT; INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION; UNHCR; I-MAP;
REGIONAL MIXED MIGRATION SECRETARIAT

[Recent data](#) from the EU suggests that the top nationalities traveling through the Eastern Mediterranean route to Europe are Syrian, Palestinian, Afghan, Somali, and Iraqi. There is a significant percentage (7%) of individuals whose nationality is unknown in this data. Conversations with various service providers in Greece corroborate these trends and provide insight into the “unknown” nationalities as they have observed an increase in the number of people they serve from Yemen, the DRC, Cameroon, Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Pakistan, and even Rohingya coming from Bangladesh. According to lawyers from [ARSIS](#), an organization specializing in providing social support for vulnerable youth in Greece since 1992 and working with unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs) since 2015, most unaccompanied minors are boys from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq.

Dangers Enroute

Smuggling and Human Trafficking

It is [estimated](#) that 90% of migrants and asylum seekers travel to Greece through the use of a criminal network or smuggler. Migrants journey to Europe this way since the legal avenues available to them are arbitrary and rarely result in international protection. Alkistis Agrafioti from the [Greek Council for Refugees](#), a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Greece that has advocated for asylum, refugee, and human rights since 1989, emphasized the need for safe and legal routes for migrants and asylum seekers to come to Greece. Jean-Baptiste Metz from a [Drop in the Ocean](#), an organization that provides hygienic and laundry services to the Closed Controlled Access Centre (CCAC) on the Greek island Lesbos, locally referred to as the “Kara Tepe” camp (Turkish for “black hill”), reiterated the need for safe passages. He stated that “we are working in an outdated system, and [we] shouldn’t make people risk their lives for humanitarian protection.”

Most, if not all, asylum seekers are transported on boats manned by smugglers. The crafts that carry asylum seekers and other migrants are severely overcrowded and unfit for trans-Mediterranean travel. However, the fact that asylum seekers embark on such a perilous journey should be a testament to the conditions that they are fleeing, or at the very least, it should speak to the shared hope of many asylum seekers that there is something better awaiting them should they just trust a smuggler, board the rickety boat, and travel across the sea.

Through various discussions, USCRI learned more about the role that misinformation plays in painting Europe as a place of freedom and opportunity. Jumana Aba Oxa from [Elpida Home](#), a non-profit based in Thessaloniki, Greece that provides social integration services to refugees and other local vulnerable populations, stated that asylum seekers buy into the myth that “the more western you go, the better off you are. It’s like a new version of the City upon a Hill, where Germany and not Washington is the City.” She also said that “smugglers play a massive role in misinformation.” An asylum seeker whom USCRI met on Lesbos and asked to go by the name of RDK shared how the lie of smugglers brought him to Greece from Türkiye.

The Lie of Smugglers

“After traveling from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) to Türkiye, my first smuggler treated me very nice. At that point, I didn’t know what a smuggler was. They treated me with whatever I wanted, with things that I never had. They put me into a hotel, gave me good food, and gained my trust.

The smuggler told me that I could either stay in prison in Türkiye, or that I could go from Türkiye to the Greek islands and once in Greece, to Athens and on to France within a matter of weeks. Why would I expect anything different? I trusted them. So, when they told me to meet a van for a handoff to facilitate my journey to Greece, I did.

There were other people at the handoff. People seemed confused, but when we tried to ask questions, we didn’t get any answers. Ultimately, we were all stuffed into a van. A van for nine fit 65 people. We were all piled on top of each other. There were children in the van with us also.

On the way to Lesbos, we had a shipwreck. European boats saved some of us, and luckily I was one of them. I was processed as an asylum seeker and placed in the Moria camp. At the time, I didn’t know what that meant.

The police who processed me treated me well, which gave me hope because this was a first. In the DRC, I was never treated well by the police and was afraid to interact with them. However, the hope that I had felt soon left as I experienced the conditions of the dreaded Moria camp. There were three gates that shut us into the ‘refugee camp.’ We were surrounded by police and the military. It felt like prison. But what had I done?”

More than six and a half years later, RDK is still an asylum seeker and remains confined to Lesbos.

Conversely, a representative of the [Danish Refugee Council](#), an organization that provides support services in multiple temporary accommodation facilities, said that they believe that misinformation is more organic. They cited several reasons such as different expectations and language barriers as a cause of misinformation. They stated that there is a perception that “Western is better,” but when asylum seekers and other migrants “reach the west, they are disappointed.”

They further described that there is high unemployment, particularly for youth under 25, which becomes a “toxic situation” when people arrive with different expectations of work and protection. They did note, however, that Greek officials attempt to make coming to Greece look “un-shiny,” or less attractive through deterrence policies and portraying the Eastern Mediterranean route as dangerous.

For many asylum seekers, going to Europe is safer than staying where they are. As a result, people in already vulnerable situations perceive being smuggled as the only viable option for protection, while the smuggling often turns into human trafficking or other exploitation.

Initially, it may be difficult to distinguish between smuggling and trafficking. Trafficking can include an element of smuggling, specifically, the unauthorized crossing of an international border. It is possible for an individual to initiate a smuggling transaction that results in a situation of trafficking. For example, there have been cases where foreign-born adults have arranged travel with a smuggler with the intent to work informally under pre-established conditions of compensation and accommodation, but after they arrive in the new country, the established terms change without their consent or input. They are then confined to harsh living conditions and threatened with deportation if they do not work. This example shows that an individual who knowingly uses a smuggler can still become entrapped in a trafficking scheme.²

Nearly all trafficking stems from some sort of vulnerability. The lack of legal status of many smuggled migrants leaves them vulnerable both in [transit](#) and after arrival to the destination country. Desperation and the lack of financial resources to pay for passage can also increase the risk of falling prey to exploitative situations. Unaccompanied minors in particular can feel pressured to embark on the initial journey and then additional pressure to pay back the investment made by their families to pay smugglers for their journey, which can lead to exploitative working conditions and human trafficking.

² To learn more about the intersection of human smuggling and human trafficking, *read the USCRI policy brief, [The Nexus of Human Smuggling, Trafficking, and Labor Exploitation](#).*

Considerations for Unaccompanied Minors

Lawyers from ARSIS explained that parents and other family members often push and encourage their children or minor relatives to go to the EU and seek protection in countries other than Greece, such as Germany, to bring the family member there through the family reunification processes. This is another type of misinformation that puts minors at risk because the family reunification process in the EU is not straightforward and often leaves minors navigating a complex system alone.

The [Family Reunification Directive of the European Union](#), which establishes the rules under which non-EU nationals can bring their family members to the EU country in which they are legally residing, is applicable to all Member States except two that opted out – Denmark and Ireland.³ However, the implementation of its provisions varies widely across the EU. Instead of encountering standardized procedures for family reunification, refugees find themselves navigating diverse requirements set by individual States. These requirements include varying regulations for establishing family relationships, differing levels of flexibility in determining which family members qualify for reunification, and various standards by which unaccompanied refugee minors “age out” (i.e., reach an age at which they are no longer considered a minor) of being eligible to apply for family reunification.

In EU Member States adults can typically seek to bring their spouses or underage children, while child refugees who arrived in the EU unaccompanied can apply for their parents to join them in certain instances. However, practices diverge across the EU concerning other family members. Unmarried partners, siblings, parents of adult refugees, and grandparents usually do not qualify, even if there is a dependency between the individuals in the EU and those outside.

For an unaccompanied minor to even begin the family reunification process, they must have already received refugee status in the country they petitioned for asylum. According to ARSIS, many Pakistani children are pushed by parents and family to work in the EU to be able to send remittances home. There is often a similar profile of an accompanied minor who is nearly 18 and intends to work somewhere in the EU. Due to the long asylum process, minors “age out” before they can receive international protections. When children learn that family reunification is highly unlikely or not possible, they are not sure what to do and are often left homeless and without a plan. Additionally, the availability of legal assistance to guide individuals through the process is extremely limited.

³ At the time of the directive being issued, the United Kingdom also opted out.

“Aging out” of Care

Katsikas Refugee Camp is about five and a half miles outside of Ioannina, Greece. There, USCRI met with nearly 15 asylum seekers and refugees, along with staff from [Second Tree](#), a grassroots NGO working with refugees in Northern Greece. Staff from Second Tree and USCRI sat in a small clearing that Second Tree usually uses to conduct activities for children, located across the dirt road from the camp, to meet with asylum seekers. Second Tree provided blankets and tea so refugees could feel comfortable and come and go as they pleased.



The camp itself looked like a prison, as it was surrounded with concrete walls and barbed wire fences. There were guards monitoring the front gates who became alert when we set up across the road. It was during this occasion that USCRI met a former unaccompanied Afghan minor.

He talked about his experience of “aging out” of the child welfare system in Greece and how he feels lost. He repeatedly said that when he was under 18, he could study but is now unsure what he can do. He appeared anxious, and when asked by one of Second Tree’s staff if he knew his social worker, he responded that he did not even know that he could have had a social worker.

This story highlights the lack of support for youth just turning 18. This is a sentiment that was echoed by the Danish Refugee Council, ARSIS, and Second Tree. The Greek government’s National Emergency Response Mechanism ([NERM](#)) for the protection of unaccompanied children does well with minors, but there is a gap when caring for youth after they turn 18. This young man did not even know that he could receive case management inside of the camp, much less assistance with the legal process and with family reunification.



A plethora of risks arise from being smuggled as a child. ARSIS explained that all unaccompanied minors come with smugglers and that most enter Greece on the seventh or eighth time with fifty percent reporting they had been pushed back to Türkiye. Enroute, unaccompanied minors are forced to work and steal and are placed into other exploitative and labor trafficking situations. Many also face sexual abuse and are at risk of sex trafficking. Those who make it to Greece are often kept in warehouses where smugglers demand more money from their parents.

Gender-Based Violence

Is Lesvos, USCRI met with [Doctors Without Borders](#) (MSF), one of the few remaining organizations that is allowed to provide medical services to asylum seekers when they first arrive on the shores of Lesvos. According to MSF, gender-based violence (GBV) is a particular concern for migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Greece. Staff from MSF stated that many migrants and asylum seekers have experienced GBV and persecution in their home country, which is an initial cause for seeking refuge. Once in Türkiye, many survivors experience revictimization. There is an added layer of vulnerability because many times survivors are in close proximity to their abusers for the entirety of the journey. Others experience GBV for the first time in Greece. In addition to the physical and emotional scars that result from GBV, survivors often contract HIV due to their victimization.

Pushbacks and Shipwrecks

Amidst the many reports of pushbacks⁴ from journalists and NGOs, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) [verified evidence of pushbacks](#), which includes:

- Confirming the use of third-country nationals – asylum seekers and migrants themselves – in pushback operations by Greek authorities.
- A Greek coast guard vessel's purposeful sinking of a fishing boat that was transporting 27 foreign nationals in the Aegean Sea, resulting in the deaths of 11 people.

So far, in 2023, nearly [200,000 people](#) have crossed the Mediterranean in search of asylum in Europe. Pushbacks, drift-backs, the practice of being abandoned at sea, and plain disregard for human life have put these asylum seekers and migrants at risk and

⁴ Pushbacks- Various measures taken by states which result in **migrants, including applicants for international protection**, being summarily forced back to the country from where they attempted to cross or have crossed an international border without access to **international protection** or asylum procedures or denied of any individual assessment on their protection needs which may lead to a violation of the principle of **non-refoulement**. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary/glossary/push-back_en

have caused numerous deaths. According to IOM, nearly 2,500 individuals have died crossing the Mediterranean by boat from the coasts of Africa and Türkiye, marking the deadliest first quarter since 2017. According to the latest figures from [IOM's Missing Migrants Project](#), four in every 100 deaths in the Mediterranean are children.

According to various Greek civil society members who spoke with USCRI, these figures are only a portion of the real tragedy occurring in the Mediterranean, since many shipwrecks never make the news. Christos Nikolaidis, Country Coordinator, from [Light House Relief \(LHR\)](#), an organization that fills the gaps in humanitarian protection for people seeking refuge in Greece, stated that "shipwrecks happen every day. However, there have only been 15-20 reported cases this year," with only one of them making international headlines. A tragic example of this is the sinking of the fishing boat Adriana.

The Tragedy of the Adriana

The Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (MRCC), which is part of the Italian coast guard, first notified the Hellenic Coast Guard (HCG), which is the national coast guard of Greece, about the ship in distress. After more than four and a half hours, an HCG helicopter arrived at the site of the sinking ship to assess the situation. More than 11 hours after the initial call from the MRCC, the Greek coast guard finally arrived at the scene, but the rescue vessel did not have sufficient capacity to hold the number of people who were on the sinking ship. During the time it took the coast guard to arrive, two merchant ships were ordered not to intervene and to simply provide the passengers of the sinking Adriana with food and water.

The sinking of the Adriana left over 600 Pakistani, Syrian, Palestinian, and Egyptian asylum seekers dead. Survivors state that the Greek coast guard attempted to pass on the responsibility of rescue to Italian authorities by towing the sinking Adriana to Italian waters. As terrified passengers called and pleaded for help, the boat ended up capsizing and sinking in the presence of a Greek coast guard ship. Greek authorities have claimed that they did not want to embolden smugglers who take advantage of people in vulnerable situations, but there is no excuse for the inaction that caused so much death.



Picture taken by USCRI Policy Analyst at the 3rd International Symposium on Migration and Border Violence hosted by the University of the Aegean in conjunction with the Technical University of Applied Sciences Würzburg-Schweinfurt in Lesbos.

The Adriana tragedy is an example of an ongoing standoff in the Eastern Mediterranean; EU countries do not want to take responsibility for the lives of individuals who make it to their shores. The incident garnered international attention and raised urgent questions about illegal pushbacks, the safety of sea routes, and the vulnerability of those undertaking perilous journeys in search of humanitarian protection. It stands as a poignant reminder of the human cost of border enforcement policies. Nikolaidis from LHR emphasized the prevalence of pushbacks by stating that for Greek civil society, they “are an open secret that we are all aware of.”

The incident also underscores the ongoing challenges and complexities surrounding migration through dangerous sea routes such as the Eastern Mediterranean, which is a critical pathway for those seeking asylum, with Greece standing as a gateway to Europe. Without coordinated efforts to establish safe pathways for migration, address the root causes of forced displacement, and provide effective safeguards for those who undertake these journeys in search of safety, the Mediterranean will only serve as a moat or continued barrier to international protection. Those who are lucky enough to make it to Greece face additional challenges, such as legal barriers, deplorable camp conditions, and protection concerns.

A Not so Warm Welcome to the EU

European Policies Affecting People in the Eastern Mediterranean

The EU has a longstanding agreement – the [Dublin Regulation](#) – that determines which country is responsible for processing asylum applications of arrivals in the EU. It states that the first EU Member State in which an asylum seeker arrives must process the asylum application and provide services and protections as dictated in the 1967 Refugee Protocol. However, in practice, this has not been followed, as many asylum seekers arriving in Greece, Italy, and Spain travel farther north in Europe to seek asylum.

At the height of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2015, the EU adopted an [emergency relocation](#) scheme, which required other EU countries to receive asylum seekers from Greece and Italy. The decision was met with great opposition from countries who refused to accept the number of refugees imposed on them. Moreover, there was no permanent mechanism when the temporary agreement expired in 2017, which largely left Italy and Greece to manage the majority of arrivals. While some EU countries have voluntarily chosen to accept some asylum seekers, most continue to refuse.

Still reeling from the large number of Syrian refugees, the EU attempted to push its responsibilities of providing humanitarian protection to Türkiye in what is known as the [EU-Türkiye deal](#). The 2016 agreement between the EU and Türkiye held that:

- Türkiye would take any measures necessary to stop people traveling to the Greek islands irregularly.
- Anyone who arrived on the Greek islands irregularly from Türkiye could be returned.
- For every Syrian returned from the Greek islands, EU Member States would accept one Syrian refugee who had waited inside Türkiye.
- In exchange, Türkiye would receive €6 billion to improve the humanitarian situation faced by asylum seekers in the country, and Turkish nationals would be granted visa-free travel to EU countries.

While the deal in part contributed to an initial, sharp decrease in irregular arrivals using this route, one individual who spoke with USCRI and asked to remain anonymous stated that the 2016 EU-Türkiye deal did not work from its inception, and it was a political issue not a humanitarian one. Because Greek courts [acknowledged](#) that Türkiye was not a safe country to return individuals, it proved difficult for Greece to return asylum seekers and consequently, arrival numbers rose again.

In 2019, more than 80,000 asylum seekers traveled via the Eastern Mediterranean route from Türkiye. However, in 2021, Greece issued a [Joint Ministerial Decision \(JMD\)](#), which established Türkiye as a safe third country for individuals from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria.

The JMD applies to all of Greece and not just its islands, as was the case in the EU-Türkiye deal. Essentially, this means that individuals from the five aforementioned countries cannot seek asylum anywhere in Greece but should receive protection in Türkiye unless it is proven not to be safe based on their individual case. However, because Türkiye has [not been accepting](#) returns since 2020, individuals who were deemed unable to seek asylum in Greece are stuck in limbo; in Greece, they do not have any access to services nor have the ability to work, yet Türkiye will not accept them.

As a [result](#) of the 2021 JMD, the examination of the safe third country concept, which had previously only applied to Syrians since 2016, expanded to include applicants coming from Afghanistan, Somalia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The 2021 JMD declaring Türkiye as a safe third country was [amended](#) in late 2021 to include Albania and Northern Macedonia as safe third countries for all individuals entering Greece from the five countries listed above. In addition to the list of safe third countries, a [decision](#) was made in 2022 regarding the national list of safe countries of origin, which includes Egypt, Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Georgia, Ghana, The Gambia, India, Morocco, Bangladesh, Benin, Nepal, Ukraine, Pakistan, Senegal, Togo, and Tunisia. In December 2022, nearly a year after the onset of the war in Ukraine, Ukraine was finally removed from the national list of safe countries of origin. Expanding the scope of inadmissibility creates additional hurdles for the majority of individuals seeking refuge in Greece and forces many to face the unknown.

[Getting Trapped in Inadmissibility](#)

Asylum seekers coming to Greece from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Somalia, and Syria through Türkiye, Albania, or Northern Macedonia are directed into the admissibility process to assess whether the respective country of transit is a safe country for them to be returned to before it is determined whether their cases should be examined on their merits.⁵ During 2023, the majority of [new arrivals](#) (88%) were received by the Greek islands of Lesbos, Dodecanese, Samos, and Chios from Türkiye, with nearly a quarter of them traveling from one of the five countries. If an individual is found inadmissible, they are unable to plead their case. This, in turn, has led to the Greek government categorically

⁵ The merits of an asylum case demonstrate the validity and strength of the asylum seeker's claims for international protection.

disenfranchising many arrivals of their right to seek asylum, which places the Hellenic Republic out of compliance with its obligations under international and EU law. Placing arbitrary parameters around where people can come from to petition for humanitarian protection strips away what is essential to this right.

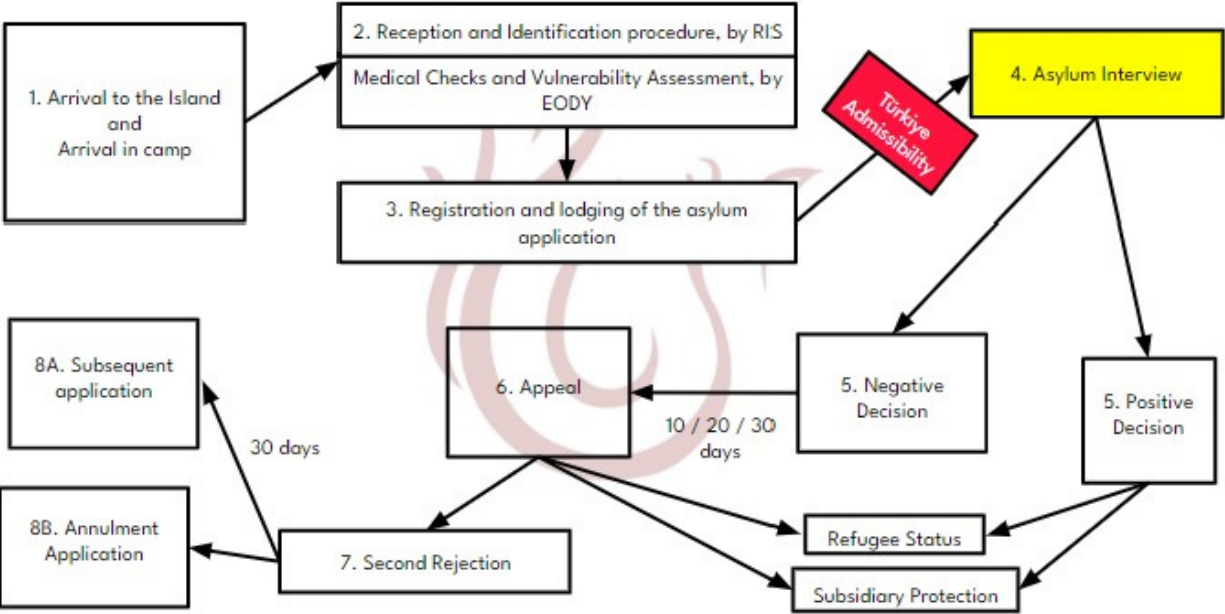


Figure 1 Asylum Procedure Graphic provided to USCRI by Fenix Aid

While admissibility is a small part of the process, it creates a major challenge for thousands who never make it to the next steps. According to various members of Greek civil society, the majority of people found inadmissible come through Türkiye. However, since Türkiye has not been accepting returned individuals since 2020, a large population is stuck in legal limbo. Appeals at any stage of the asylum process can also cause people to fall into this situation. Unfortunately, the scale of the problem is unknown because there is “no public data on the numbers because the Ministry [of Migration and Asylum] doesn’t publish it,” said Nikolaidis from LHR, an organization that fills the gaps in humanitarian protection for people seeking refuge in Greece. Even the numbers reported by IOM and UNHCR do not match up.

What happens to these individuals who have not received humanitarian protection in Greece and are unable to be sent back? USCRI posed this question to multiple organizations while in Greece.

The Ghosts of Greece

“People in this legal limbo are ‘ghosts’ who do not have rights or identity in Greek society. They are not asylum seekers or refugees, but we don’t send them back. Officially, they are not able to work, receive food from the government, and do not have any benefits. By law, they must leave refugee camps, but unofficially, many continue to live there because they can’t afford housing. Some even continue to receive food from the distribution centers.”

– *Danish Refugee Council*

“Depending on their nationality, they can be kept in detention centers for up to 18 months after their asylum rejection. The idea is that they will keep them until they ask for ‘voluntary return.’”

– *Elpida Home*

“We’ve seen advertisements for ‘voluntary returns’ on bus stops in areas where there is a high concentration of certain populations of asylum seekers. – ‘Missing Home?’”

– *Fáilte Centre*

“Formally, after a denial, individuals receive a letter, which they can appeal, stating that they need to be out of the country within a month. Since people cannot return to Türkiye or their home country, they have two options, attempt to move north in Europe, or stay illegally in Greece and work in the gray economy.”

– *Light House Relief*

IOM’s voluntary return program is not really used.

– *Anonymous*

Individuals in this situation are left to choose between bad or worse. Regardless of their decision, people are forced to start again in their journey to safety and security. “People are losing too much time in this process,” said Colleen Bromberger from [The Fáilte Centre](#), a welcome center in Athens that focuses on providing learning opportunities and mental health and psychosocial support.

“The question of leaving one’s country for something better but being met with limbo is cruel,” said asylum seeker M.F. “A family can’t wait for five to six years for the asylum process; it is too long.”

Safeguards, such as information provision and vulnerability screenings, are built into the admissibility step. The safeguards are meant to protect individuals with valid asylum claims from being screened out too early in the process. Unfortunately, they often do not work.

Preventable Vulnerabilities

During the reception and identification process, the Greek National Public Health Organisation (EODY) should conduct a vulnerability screening. Article 1 of the [Greek Asylum Code](#) considers the following groups as vulnerable: ‘children; unaccompanied children; direct relatives of victims of shipwrecks (parents, siblings, children, husbands/wives); disabled persons; elderly; pregnant women; single parents with minor children; victims of human trafficking; persons with serious illness; persons with cognitive or mental disability and victims of torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence such as victims of female genital mutilation.’ Vulnerable individuals are considered to have special reception needs and thus benefit from the special reception conditions. For example, unaccompanied minors should have their own shelters and should not be housed with adults or with the opposite sex.

According to the [Greek Council for Refugees](#), the low quality of the process of medical and psychosocial screening, if conducted at all, is a significant cause for concern. Frequently, vulnerabilities are overlooked, leaving asylum seekers to navigate the asylum procedure without undergoing a proper assessment. There are also severe delays in conducting vulnerability assessments even after the formal conclusion of reception and identification. These delays can span from ten days to over three months in certain instances. Despite this, authorities persist in processing asylum claims before individuals undergo such an assessment. They consistently disregard or reject special procedural guarantees provided by Greek and EU law, even when explicitly requested by applicants in writing or verbally prior to the interview. Instead, they insist on proceeding with the interview under normal border procedures. In some cases, asylum seekers are issued medical cards before receiving a medical examination or vulnerability assessment.

Various individuals expressed frustration at the Greek authority's inability to adhere to established laws and policies.

At Least Follow your Own Laws

Kayleigh Jackson from [Fenix Aid](#), an organization that offers holistic legal aid to asylum seekers, explained that there is a major difference between law and practice. "At least following your own laws would make things predictable and consistent," Jackson said. "Instead, there are changes on what seems like a daily basis."

Nikolaidis from LHR further illustrated this point by saying that "there are conventions that we have all signed," referring to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Refugee Protocol. "We have it. Let's follow it. Let's stick to it. We do not need to reinvent the wheel."

Chrisa Giannopoulou from HIAS Greece explained how this challenge is compounded on Lesbos because it is a main point of entry with the most arrivals and changes happen all the time. "It's like a pilot island for whatever changes authorities feel like implementing" on any given week.

Greece's limited capacity to process asylum applications exacerbates the gap between law and implementation and has led to longer processing times. As a result, individuals in process centers across Greece live in camps beyond capacity and under [appalling humanitarian conditions](#), which include limited access to clean water, overcrowded living conditions, limited mobility, inadequate heating and cooling, isolation, and the inability to work.

Camp Conditions

The worst conditions were in the Moria camp on Lesbos. The camp was designed to hold 3,000 individuals but at times housed more than five times that amount. In September 2020, there were nearly 13,000 individuals living there when the camp burned down, resulting in the near-complete destruction of the facility. This event left asylum seekers homeless and without access to basic necessities, such as shelter and food.



Figure 2

USCRI visited the old site of Moria and can bear witness to the destruction and unfavorable conditions of the infamous camp. Figure 2 depicts the section where unaccompanied minors were housed. In addition to the outer walls that enclosed the larger camp, the section for unaccompanied minors was further enclosed with barbed-wire fencing. It was a prison within a prison. Metz from *A Drop in the Ocean* said that children were held with older teens and there were many reports of stabbings and rape. He further explained that there was only one square meter of space per person at the site, a violation of humanitarian standards, which require four square meters per person.

The fire drew attention to the dire conditions in many refugee camps in Europe and spurred calls for reforms in the treatment of refugees and the handling of migration on the continent. The fire led the EU to speed up the launch of a proposal for a new agreement to replace the Dublin Regulation. The [new asylum and migration management regulation \(AMMR\)](#), passed in June 2023, is set to replace the current Dublin Regulation and change how asylum seekers are processed at the EU's borders and how they are relocated.

Lesvos Art Activism



The pictures on the left say, **“Welcome to Europe’s Human Rights Graveyard.” -The Moria 35.**

Following peaceful protests in 2017, 35 men were arbitrarily arrested and subjected to police violence in a raid of Moria camp. A year and three months later, the men were finally released.

The bottom right picture shows the words of a long-forgotten author written on a crumbling wall near the entrance of the deserted Moria camp:

Do you remember us?
Wherever you are...
Resist as they raped your “home”.
Do no go easy into that good night.
If you are here,
You are one of us.

The Saviors.

Many hoped that the AMMR agreement would contain a binding division of responsibilities, but they were disappointed. The agreement merely stipulates that individual countries can contribute in different ways. Countries that do not want to receive asylum seekers can instead contribute financially by providing support to those that do and undertake the return of asylum seekers who have been rejected. Even under the AMMR, countries like Greece and Italy are left to bear the majority of the responsibility of providing protection to asylum seekers, which is especially concerning as arrivals begin to increase. USCRI was told that the field visit was coming at a very interesting time, as the number of arrivals between January and May 2023 [increased](#) by 145% compared to the same period in 2022.

Many of the organizations that USCRI spoke with believe that the increase in arrivals is in part due to the increased scrutiny on Greece after the Adriana shipwreck. Nikolaidis from LHR said that Greek authorities have stopped conducting pushbacks because of the international media attention, and as a result, arrivals have begun to increase. He further stated that the Hellenic Coast Guard issued public-relations materials of them rescuing survivors from shipwrecks soon after the Adriana incident. Metz added that other evidence of pushbacks has also caused the Ministry of Migration and Asylum (Ministry) to “be less obvious” when conducting them. He also said that there is a rumor among asylum seekers that asylum applications for Palestinians, Eritreans, Yemenis, and Sudanese will be fast tracked, which may also be impacting the number of arrivals.

Prior to the field visit to Greece, USCRI requested permission to visit eight facilities in different regions of Greece, including Thessaloniki, Alexandria/Veria, Athens, Ioannina, and Lesbos, but all of these requests were denied. The authorities stated that this was “due to excessive workload and the continuing arrivals of third country refugees.” Unfortunately, during this period, this was not an uncommon response from the Ministry. Other professionals and organizations, including the Austrian Embassy, were also denied entry to the facilities.

The inability for outside parties to access camps raises concerns about camp conditions and what is being hidden from the public. Aid workers on Lesbos could not help but recall the deplorable conditions of Moria and feared that if things continued at the current rate, the horrible conditions would reappear. A preview of this is the new Kara Tepe camp on Lesbos, which already houses more than 5,000 people although it was designed to hold only 2,000.

Metz questioned where the billions of euros that had been sent to Greece had gone, and both he and MSF alluded to concerns of corruption.

The Different Camps

Each camp presents a unique set of challenges depending on the camp managers and where they are in Greece.

Katsikas Refugee Camp

During meetings facilitated by Second Tree, asylum seekers described their experiences living in the Katsikas refugee camp located outside of Ioannina, Greece:

Poor Conditions

"There are too many people living all together in the same camp. Two or three families are all forced to live in one container."

"People say that camp conditions have improved. Yes, the bathrooms have gotten better, but you're still living in a prison. It really affects you mentally."

"The food is not good. It is not what we would normally eat in our culture. Most people throw it away because the quality is so bad."

"There used to be small business in the camp, such as a barber, grocery store, café, but those all closed about a year back."

"The education system is bad. There are no activities for children."

Prejudice and Neglect

"In our country, they said we wouldn't experience racism, but we do. It happens a lot."

"Children leave the camp to go to school, but sometimes the teachers don't even talk with them. One time a teacher told my daughter to take off her hijab."

"Emergency problems take two to three days to resolve. No one listens to us."

"Camp leadership doesn't listen to us. We wait for two hours for five minutes of attention from the camp managers who say that we make them nervous by being so demanding. In reality, it causes us stress and depression not to be heard or seen."

"When stuff is broken, they don't come and fix it anymore."

“The camp is 9 kilometers (about 5.6 miles) from the city and people walk it every day. There is a bus, but sometimes the driver ignores us. We have to either walk or wait for the bus to maybe arrive to go to the hospital.”

Feelings of Hopelessness

“There is so much confusion and uncertainty in navigating the legal system. There is never a lawyer in the camp to assist us.”

“I’ve been here for five years. I saw the wall being built around me. It felt like slowly being built into a prison.”

“I have been taking medicine for 10 years and they took my asylum-seeker card⁶ for asking for my prescription.”

“Greece is a real hell for refugees.”



Malakasa Camp

Malakasa camp, located approximately 40 kilometers (about 25 miles) north of Athens, is surrounded by wooded hills and barbed-wire fences. The temporary accommodation site was constructed on former military land and is next to an army base. Only a fence separates often traumatized asylum seekers from soldiers. A representative from the Danish Refugee Council said that since Malakasa is near a larger city, residents have access to more accommodations, such as health care, job opportunities, and transportation.

⁶ An asylum-seeker card allows for individuals to access certain health care, such as medication.

Unlike Katsikas, doctors visit the camp two times per week to conduct primary screening. If a resident has more urgent needs, they must go to the hospital, which is easier because of the access to public transportation. However, many asylum seekers still risk walking along the dangerous highway to get to nearby stores and other facilities.



Kara Tepe Camp

Like many camps, Kara Tepe uses large, prefabricated structures called rub halls to house asylum seekers. Some residents complain that the manufactured white paint hurts their eyes and causes headaches in the bright sun. The surrounding landscape does little to offer protection from the elements.

The camp is located on a hill on the edge of the island. The property protrudes into the sea, surrounded by a perimeter of barbed-wire fences. USCRI observed police coming and going from the camp in trucks with automatic rifles slung across their shoulders. Police outfitted in protective gear also stood guard at each of the camp entrances.

There are also concerns of corruption, waste, and mismanagement at Kara Tepe. Metz explained that the camp is not connected to the power grid and uses gas generators for

electricity. Gas is not only very costly, but it is also harmful for asylum seekers who live in proximity to the fumes in addition to being harmful to the environment. There are reports that the gas company is tangentially related to camp officials.

The food provider in Kara Tepe is also said to be related to camp officials. The caterer serves poor quality food that is often not halal, a requirement for many asylum seekers in the camp. There are also reports of meals being delivered with bugs inside of the wrapping. Food portions have been cut in half recently. Unregistered asylum seekers are not allowed to leave the camp and do not have access to food rations, which exacerbates food insecurity. As a result, NGOs provide food to both unregistered and rejected asylum seekers. At the time of the visit, there was a two-month backlog in registering asylum seekers.

Cycling or walking are the only reliable sources of transportation from the Kara Tepe camp. For many, bicycles are a lifeline to get to the hospital, the store, or a nearby welcome center that offers a decent meal. Former asylum seekers who have moved on often leave bicycles behind, which helps perpetuate mobility on the island.

Asylum seekers from the Kara Tepe camp are received with mixed feelings from locals. A student presented preliminary findings at the *3rd International Symposium on Migration and Border Violence* hosted by the University of the Aegean in conjunction with the Technical University of Applied Sciences Wurzburg-Schweinfurt on the perceptions of locals towards asylum seekers and migrants. Notable findings include that respondents:

- Felt that migration is a symptom of a larger issue and that as a society, we should remove the middleman and give money directly to refugees;
- In general, felt helpless and sad about the ongoing migration situation;
- Expressed that they are in a difficult situation themselves, so it's hard to fully sympathize with migrants and asylum seekers.

USCRI spoke with locals who lived in communities near the destroyed Moria camp and the current Kara Tepe camp who said that people were empathetic at first, but as the situation wore on, they have become numb to it. Jean-Baptiste Metz, from a Drop in the Ocean, explained that locals built large walls and fences around their property to keep migrants from picking their crops. There were even acts of violence against migrants and NGO workers.

Like most of the refugee camps in Greece, Kara Tepe is located on old military land, which raises concerns about lead exposure and poisoning from the abandoned shooting ranges. Sexual exploitation in Kara Tepe is a reoccurring concern, as it is in other Greek camps.

Due to its being connected to generators, Kara Tepe often experiences long-term power outages, which occur even at night. According to Giannopoulou, women have been assaulted on their way to the toilet at night when the electricity is out. Other concerns that arise from inadequate infrastructure include people having to bathe in the sea during winter. Moreover, as mentioned prior, while unaccompanied minors should not be housed in camps with adults under the NERM, that is often the case. At the time of USCRI's visit, there were 250 unaccompanied minors in Kara Tepe, many of whom reportedly share living spaces with adults who are not family members.

Children

The National Emergency Response Mechanism (NERM) is ill-equipped to address the specific needs and vulnerabilities of unaccompanied minors that have been exposed to smuggling, exploitation, and human trafficking. Following solo journeys spanning hundreds or thousands of miles, minors find themselves navigating a complex system with no guaranteed right to legal representation. Without the needed assistance, they often struggle to identify the channels to pursue their claims for legal relief. Moreover, children do not have the proper support to address the trauma from dangerous home situations they are fleeing as well as the added trauma faced from the dangerous journey to Greece. Without addressing the trauma, a cycle of violence is often perpetuated.

ARSIS explained that smuggled children often become smugglers themselves. They see themselves in a better position than back home and do not see an issue with “helping” other minors arrive the same way they did. It is also easy money and lucrative. Consequently, children or young adults even attempt to smuggle from inside facilities and shelters, often leading to dangerous car journeys that result in accidents and the deaths of youth and families. Lawyers from ARSIS said that there is a major need to improve the situation for youth between the ages of 18 to 24 who are often in limbo and do not have access to integration benefits under the NERM.

The NERM included incentives to help keep unaccompanied minors in school, such as the creation of a distinct residence permit that allows them to stay in Greece for up to 10 years after completing three years of high school. Even with such incentives, major challenges, such as the ability for schools to accommodate language barriers, still negatively impact academic success and school attendance.

Jess Webster, who currently works for [Forge for Humanity](#) but previously led an NGO that provided services to asylum seekers in Greece, added that children without support become involved in dealing drugs as well as smuggling. “It gives them power that they’ve never had,” she said. She also explained that by the time minors reach 18, it is often too late. “Youth are not succeeding because they did not get the adequate support before 18.” As such, she emphasized the importance of education, of which unaccompanied minors are often deprived.

“Asylum seekers are in a room, where a teacher talks at them in Greek for a bit and then leaves,” Webster said.

The concerns around education are not unique to unaccompanied minors but also extend to accompanied children seeking asylum. Nearly every organization that USCRI spoke with talked about the lack of adequate integration services for minors. These programs either do not exist or are very rare. Webster offered an explanation for this: while there is limited funding for integration programs, it only covers programs that last for three months, which many organizations found ineffective.

Missing Children and Childcare

As a result of an incident involving a missing child in the Epirus camp, a new rule was implemented by the camp manager that prohibits single parents from leaving the camp without their children who are under 18 years old. Children also cannot be left alone in living spaces without their parents. This has meant that many single mothers cannot work. Since many residents do not receive food or money, the inability to work has led to hunger and malnutrition inside the camp. Some single parents have resorted to doing agricultural work while taking care of their children. There have been examples of single mothers working in a field while holding her child.

The single mothers in the camp have asked for childcare, where mothers would take turns watching the children. The idea has been rejected by camp management, stating that anyone doing such an activity inside the camp would have to be qualified and approved by the Ministry. Currently, childcare services are not available in the camp. There is also a need for hygiene products, baby diapers, baby formula, and food, as well as an approved and qualified entity to provide childcare.

Gender-based Violence and Human Trafficking

Concerns of GBV and human trafficking do not cease once an individual arrives in Greece. MSF, who provides scar mapping and mental health services to survivors, stated that due to the organization of the camps, survivors often remain in close proximity to their abusers. MSF reported that there is inherent distrust with providers and that any trust built is difficult to maintain owing to a lack of services for those who are identified as survivors.

“Organizations do not conduct human trafficking screenings because there are no services to support the survivor if they are identified.”

To exacerbate this difficult situation, there are less than a handful of protection officers and vulnerability officers in each camp to support the protection needs of thousands of

residents. While there is a mechanism in place for survivors to submit complaints to protection officers, Alkistis from the Greek Council for Refugees stated that individuals are afraid to submit a formal complaint. However, without a formal complaint, survivors cannot change camps. As a result, many survivors are either never identified or choose not to come forward, which perpetuates their vulnerabilities.

Disparate Treatment

Many organizations that USCRI spoke with described the disparate treatment between Ukrainians and other asylum-seeking and refugee populations. Bromberger from the Fáilte Centre said that Ukrainians are able to work sooner, do not need a visa to enter Greece, and receive more humane housing outside of refugee camps. Aba Oxa from Elpida Home stated that “It shows [that] when the system wants to work, it does.”

Giving preference to certain nationalities creates unnecessary divisions within refugee communities. MSF said that tensions can arise because people do not understand how someone from a different nationality who arrived in Greece after them can receive asylum first. It can also affect asylum seekers’ psyche when they observe that there is a better process and that it is possible to receive better treatment, said Bromberger. Asylum seekers who USCRI interviewed reported experiencing racism in Greece and often feeling isolated from the larger community. In the face of this isolation from Greek society, most try to leave.

“They said we wouldn’t experience racism [in Greece], but we do. After seeing who we are, bus drivers often do not stop for us – it happens a lot.”

This is just one example of the discriminatory actions that asylum seekers face.

Many organizations have completely pulled or drastically reduced funding in Greece and reallocated funding to support organizations in Poland that are serving people who have been displaced by the war in Ukraine. This is compounded by the handover of the responsibility of providing migration services by NGOs to the Greek government, which has not gone smoothly, as many organizations expressed. Reportedly, many service gaps that are left unaddressed by the Ministry were once available services provided by NGOs. Due to lack of funding and staff from Greek authorities, there is not capacity to take on these responsibilities. The increasing hostility of the Greek authorities towards NGOs and their inability to operate in camps worsens the issue.

Greek authorities have attempted to criminalize migration and solidarity towards migrants, which make providing services more difficult, said Silvia Lucibello from [Paréa Lesvos](#), a vibrant community center in Lesvos. In 2015, Lesvos was home to many organizations, such as the Emergency Response Center International, that participated in search and rescue operations at sea. However, several high-profile cases where Greek authorities arrested volunteers and charged them with money laundering, human trafficking, human smuggling, and other crimes brought fear to the island's previously vibrant civil society. Consequently, there are not many NGOs that work in this area.

An additional barrier to serving asylum seekers is the registration of NGOs through the Ministry. Some stated that this is a tool that the Ministry uses to control which organizations have access to camps and can be used to influence how individual organizations act and speak. Organizations such as LHR and [Boat Refugee Foundation \(BRF\)](#), both of which had been allowed inside of refugee camps to provide needed services since 2015, are now unable to enter camps this year because of the lack of formal registration through the Ministry. Organizations must choose whether to attempt to navigate the lengthy bureaucracy or provide services in a different way.

LHR has been attempting to navigate the registration process for over a year and told USCRI that they will continue to do so. On the other hand, BRF has chosen not to undergo this process. In light of the health needs in the Kara Tepe camp, BRF was invited back by the Ministry to provide services, only to be kicked out of the camp again in September 2023, the week before USCRI's visit, due to lack of registration.

As a result of the handoff, the barriers placed by the Ministry, and the international community's focus on Ukraine, large international organizations are leaving Greece. The Danish Refugee Council has an exit strategy to leave Greece by 2024. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has already left Greece, leaving a noticeable gap in child-protection needs. According to Fenix Aid, UNHCR has reduced capacity in Greece. These organizations' actions highlight the dwindling support for asylum seekers in Greece, which leaves them searching for opportunities in risky situations.

Labor exploitation

As USCRI spoke with asylum seekers at the Katsikas camp, large vans stopped in front of the entrance to drop off a shift of asylum seekers who worked at a nearby poultry factory. The vans proceeded to take a group of asylum seekers for the night shift at the factory.



One of the asylum seekers stated that “refugees work in the worst places where no Greeks work.” According to Second Tree, “they work hard, for 12 hours a day, and there are many instances where they do not get paid.” This is not the only situation where asylum seekers work in difficult and dangerous conditions with minimal protections. Asylum seekers can be found working in agriculture, construction, and other areas of manual labor. One individual, who asked to remain anonymous, stated that employers do not have to pay for health care, disability insurance, or sick leave for asylum seekers. This is the unfortunate reality in which asylum seekers work and leaves them at risk of exploitation. With the many protection concerns and challenges, it is difficult for asylum seekers to fully integrate into Greek society.

Integration

As part of the field visit to Greece, USCRI conducted surveys on asylum integration and the services offered to asylum seekers and refugees. In administering research through a survey, important data was produced that provides USCRI with a foundational analysis of asylee registration and integration in Greece.

Methodology

A systematic review of social service programs serving refugees revealed over 60 peer-reviewed articles analyzing different programs. An analysis of the types of services in these articles yielded 10 different dimensions of services needed for successful integration: financial assistance, medical assistance/health care, employment preparation, language readiness, mental health/coping, housing, legal services, basic needs, cultural adaptation, and transportation access. These dimensions served as subject areas for the questions in

the survey. Some of the questions were derived from the Immigration Policy Lab (IPL) Integration Index, developed by Stanford University and ETH Zurich as a comprehensive measure of immigrant integration. In developing the survey, IPL consulted 52 previously conducted studies, tested more than 200 questions, and conducted almost 4,000 interviews. USCRI's questionnaire also draws from the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, which measures nonspecific psychological distress in order to gauge mental health determinants and recovery from trauma. This scale has been validated with multiple minority populations. By using peer-reviewed research and an established survey, the data will have higher reliability and validity.

The survey was completely voluntary, and individuals who responded to the survey could choose whether to answer any or all of the questions. Respondents could also choose to identify themselves or remain anonymous. Respondents were notified that the information from the survey would not be used to impact their asylum claim in any way and that services from NGOs were not dependent on taking the survey. The survey was not compensated, and respondents were informed that information from the survey would be used in a report to uplift the challenges that asylum seekers face in Greece and to advocate for solutions. Furthermore, respondents were informed that while the survey and subsequent advocacy may not directly impact them and their situation, it could help improve conditions for future asylum seekers.

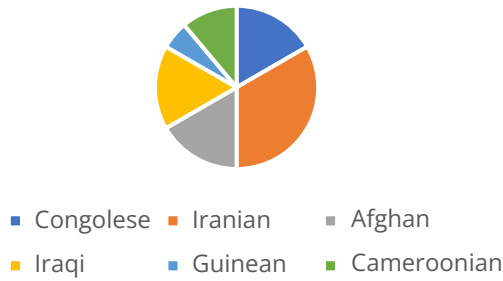
Data Collection

Surveys were collected from asylum seekers in Athens, Lesbos, and Ioannina. NGOs in the three locations assisted USCRI in administering the survey to asylum seekers. The survey was only available for adults over the age of 18. USCRI administered some of the surveys while in Greece and the remainder of the surveys were administered by NGO workers over the month following USCRI's visit. The survey was available in English, French, Arabic, and Farsi and can be viewed in Appendix 1.

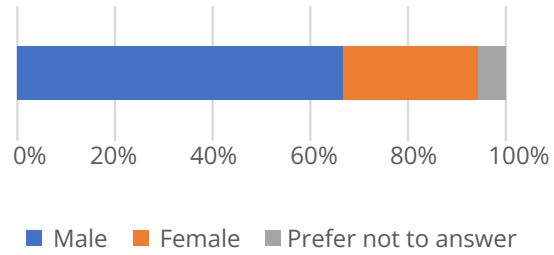
Results

A total of 18 people responded to the survey. Respondents were between 19 and 40 years old with the average age being 29.9 years. 77.8 percent of respondents said they had lived in Türkiye prior to traveling to Greece and 22.22 percent preferred not to answer. Over 50 percent of respondents said they were married and traveled with family to Greece; 18 percent traveled with friends or strangers of the same nationality. Of those who traveled with someone, nearly half of them are no longer with the individuals they travelled with.

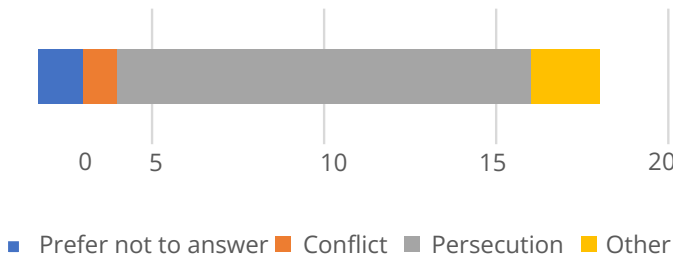
Nationality



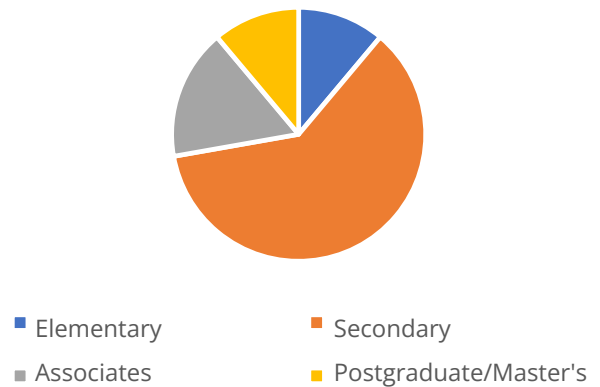
Gender



Reason for Leaving Home Country



Education Level



Every respondent said that they passed through Türkiye on their way to Greece, with more than 10 percent adding that they traveled through Iran or other countries as well. **100 percent of respondents also reported traveling to Greece by boat across the Aegean Sea.** Those who shared the location of their arrival said Lesvos, Chios, or Kos, which are all Greek islands in the Aegean Sea near Türkiye. Multiple respondents said that they were pursued when they first arrived in Greece, with one stating that they were attacked by five people. Others reported living outdoors before being arrested by police and being placed in camps. One respondent reported unsuccessfully traveling to Greece a first time but making it the second time. Respondents ranged from being in Greece for seven months to over five years.

When asked if there was anything else they would like to share about their asylum experience, there were some notable responses:

"Camps are not safe for women."

"The asylum service is not correct for everyone. There is injustice in high levels." "We were neglected in the camps. They considered us to be prisoners."

"From my childhood, I was rejected by my family because of my disability."

Dimensions of Integration

The questions on integration were measured on a three-point scale: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. Respondents were also able to select “Prefer not to Answer.” Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses across the various dimensions. The lighter color represents a lower number of responses for the respective question and the darker color represents a higher number of responses.

Figure 3

Dimension of Integration and Relative Question(s)	Prefer not to answer	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Financial Assistance				
I can support myself financially				
Greece is my intended final destination				
I have debt related to the asylum process				
Medical Assistance/Healthcare				
My medical needs are being met				
Employment Preparation/Skills Training				
I know how to apply the professional skills that I have				
Language Readiness				
I can speak about familiar topics and express personal opinions with other individuals in Greece				
Mental Health/Coping				
I feel out of immediate danger				
I often feel nervous				
I feel hopeless most of the time				
Housing				
My living situation is stable				
Legal Services				
I have reliable information about my asylum process				
I know my rights as an asylum seeker				
I have legal representation for my asylum case				
Basic Needs				
I know what services I am eligible for				
I know how to access the services that I am eligible for				
I worry about where I will get my next meal				
I know where to access clean water				
Cultural Adaptation				
I participate in a group related to my religious beliefs or hobbies I				
know where to find community that looks like me and my family I				
understand my children’s school system				
Transportation Access				
I have access to reliable transportation (public or personal)				

The dimensions with the greatest areas for improvement are Financial Assistance, Mental Health/Coping, and Basic Needs. The majority of respondents felt that they could not support themselves financially and indicated that Greece was not their intended final destination. The highest level of agreement for any single response was for “I often feel nervous,” which indicates that asylum seekers were struggling with mental health concerns, such as anxiety. Moreover, a significant number of respondents indicated that they felt “hopeless most of the time,” which may indicate high levels of depression among asylum seekers. Respondents also noted that they felt that their medical needs were not being met. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents indicated that they both did not know what services they were eligible for or how to access these services. There was also a high number of people indicating that they worried about where they would find their next meal. One positive finding, however, was that individuals indicated that they had access to clean water.

The dimensions where respondents felt the highest levels of support were Employment Preparation, Cultural Adaptation, and Transportation Access. Interestingly, respondents felt that they knew how to apply their professional skills. This may indicate that the economy is easily accessible for migrants who provide cheaper labor. Respondents indicated that they had access to reliable transportation, which may be a result of the size and infrastructure of the city where they live. Respondents also indicated that they knew where to find community that looked like them and participated in groups related to their religion or hobbies. This may be a result of the inherent interconnectedness in refugee camps that house large immigrant populations but may not necessarily speak to the larger Greek community. Notably, when asked directly about interacting with the Greek community, parents indicated that they did not understand their children’s school system.

The responses from the survey on integration largely corroborated what USCRI learned qualitatively from speaking directly with asylum seekers and civil society during its field visit. Asylum seekers indicated that language readiness should improve, legal representation and know your rights trainings were lacking, housing was not suitable, and the education system was poor. Major areas of concern were the gaps in medical and mental health care.

However, it is necessary to not only focus on the challenges, the gaps in services, or the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers. There is another side to stories of displacement: triumph in the face of adversity, healing in the wake of trauma, and selfless service as an act of gratitude. Lucibello from Paréa asked USCRI to uplift positive stories and ensured that it is possible even in the face of many obstacles.



Technical Skills for a Brighter Future

Up on a hill, in stark contrast to the bleak setup of Moria and the Kara Tepe camp, stands a vibrant community center, [Paréa Lesvos](#). Paréa provides a safe space for asylum seekers to escape from the gruesome reality of their situation. The center is painted in bright colors with the purpose of fostering a warm and welcoming environment. This is a space where asylum seekers have the opportunity to paint murals and create the art that splashes life into the surrounding area. The center is located within walking distance of the Kara Tepe camp and is visited daily by camp residents. At the time of USCRI's visit, there were over 75 asylum seekers using the space.

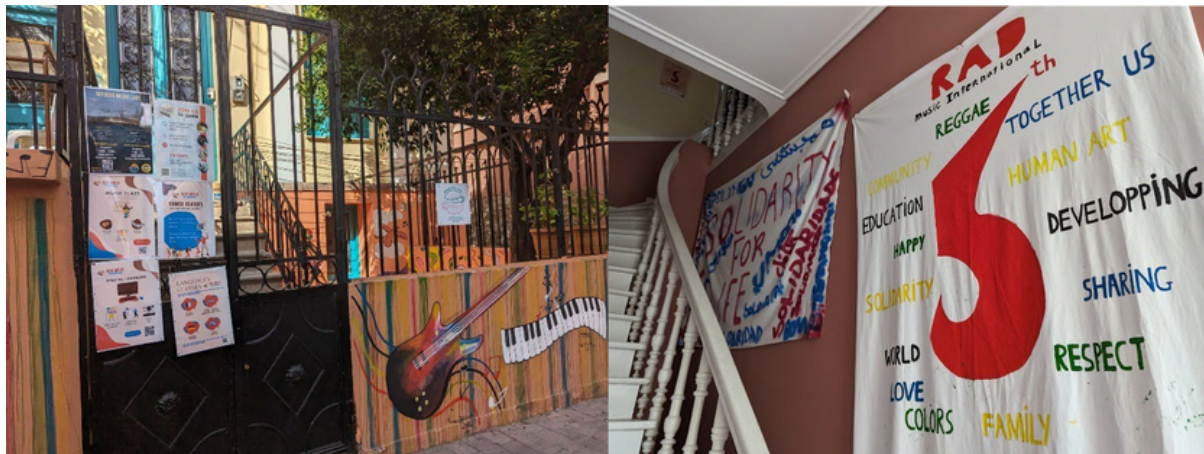
A recognized refugee by the name of M. is an integral part of ensuring that Paréa stays open for the many asylum seekers who find solace there. M. oversees Makerspace, which offers maintenance and repair services for electronics, such as cellphones. Cellphones are necessary tools for asylum seekers because they hold important information, pictures of documents, in addition to allowing them to connect with loved ones back home and their contacts at their destinations. Phones are often damaged on the strenuous journey to Greece, thereby leaving asylum seekers in an even more precarious and vulnerable situation. Makerspace also repairs bicycles, the only reliable form of transportation for asylum seekers on the island. M. also oversees a shop with tools for welding and woodworking.

Like many other asylum seekers arriving in Greece, M. waited for years to become a recognized refugee, when his asylum case was approved and he received international protection. Instead of leaving the island, like most individuals who receive asylum there, M. decided to stay and share his skills with the center that helped him. Before traveling to Greece, M. had received training to work with electronics; however, he taught himself how to work with bicycles, woodwork, and weld while on Lesbos – skills he uses to build and maintain buildings at the center. Asylum seekers at Paréa also have the opportunity to practice and learn these skills at Makerspace. M. is an invaluable part of a community that serves hundreds of asylum seekers a year.

Using Dance and Music as a Cure

RAD (Refugees African Dance) Music International Cultural Club was founded in 2018 by RDK, an asylum seeker from the DRC and living on Lesbos.

“The idea of RAD Music International came to me because of the living conditions inside the Moria camp,” said RDK. After surviving a shipwreck between Türkiye and Lesbos, RDK was processed as an asylum seeker in Greece and placed in the dreaded Moria camp. He described the conditions as prison-like, surrounded by “large gates and guarded by the police and military.” All he could do was “smile through the pain.” Music and dance became the means to reclaim his dignity.



Since 2018, RAD, born from the pain of the Moria camp, has evolved into a community-driven collective in Mytilene, Lesbos. Comprising refugees, locals, and international volunteers, RAD extends support through food and clothing while uniquely fostering creative connections via music and dance. This fully refugee-led organization collaborates with various island entities and has cultivated an international community backing its

efforts. From day one, RDK continues to lead the organization as its reach extends beyond Lesvos.

RDK has been stuck in Lesvos, seeking asylum for over six-and-a-half years. He feels as though he died in the shipwreck years ago and that the purpose of his life “is to give hope,” stating that because many people helped him, he now needs to help many people. He explained that as someone who was not educated in the field of human rights, he continues to learn and partner with organizations that can help teach him and his community how to advocate for themselves. Ultimately, he hopes to return to the DRC in a safe and dignified way to help children there receive new opportunities.

Leading through Experience

In the Katsikas Camp, a former asylum seeker from Guinea who received refugee status and international protection after years of living in the camp still chose to remain close to it and the asylum-seeker population. Due to the lack of legal aid in the camp and because he had already gone through the process, he supported other asylum seekers in navigating the intricacies of the legal system as well as the other processes inherent to the asylum system. USCRI observed him offer advice in how to navigate the health care system, receiving assistance from camp management, and emotional encouragement. Staff spoke highly of him and how he used to serve as a leader for asylum seekers when he lived in the camp. They also said that he continues to help the community as much as he can.

These are just a few examples of how asylum seekers and refugees have improved the lives of many. Their impact reaches far beyond Greece and Europe. It begs the question, what other wonderful work is being warehoused in refugee camps across Europe and the world that is unable to become realized?

The United States Trending Towards Pushback Policies

On the other side of the Atlantic, the United States has increasingly relied on the use of border externalization policies and pushbacks, such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), the use of Title 42, and the asylum ban to push asylum seekers and other migrants to Mexico.

Under [MPP](#), individuals who asked for asylum via the southern border were given notices to appear in immigration court, sent back to Mexico, and were instructed to return on a specific date, time and port of entry for their court hearing. The Biden Administration attempted to [end MPP](#) in June 2021 but was [forced](#) to continue it due to ongoing litigation. Ultimately, on June 30, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court allowed the Biden Administration's efforts to end MPP to continue. On August 8, 2022, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) [announced](#) that it would no longer enroll individuals into MPP.

Title 42 is a [provision](#) of public health law implemented in March 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which allowed border officials to rapidly expel asylum seekers to Mexico or their home country without due process. The Biden Administration [increased](#) the use of this authority to turn individuals away more than 2.3 million [times](#). After ongoing [litigation](#), the Title 42 public health order was finally lifted on May 11, 2023.

Since the use of Title 42 has ended, the processing of migrants and asylum seekers has returned to [Title 8](#) authority and a new rule – "[Circumvention of Lawful Pathways](#)" – is in effect. The rule, known as the [asylum ban](#), which presumes noncitizens who traveled through a country other than their own before entering the United States via the southern border and maritime arrivals are ineligible for asylum unless they meet one of several exceptions, was finalized on May 10, 2023 and went into effect on May 11, when the Title 42 public health order lifted. The policy again faces [legal](#) uncertainty yet remains in [effect](#) at the time this report was written.

An asylum seeker who travels through a third country before arriving to the United States cannot petition for asylum unless they have petitioned for and have been denied asylum in a country through which they passed. This essentially establishes Mexico as a safe third country for asylum seekers coming to the United States and requires them to seek asylum in their first country of arrival, which sounds like a combination of the Dublin Regulation, the EU-Türkiye deal, and Greece's Joint Ministerial Decision.

As with Greece, access to asylum and international protections in the United States is shrinking.

Since May 12, the day after the start of the asylum ban, the Administration has returned over 250,000 individuals to 152 countries. Notably, the Administration has returned 36,000 family members and over 17,000 non-Mexicans to Mexico in the same timeframe. These new U.S. policies fundamentally compromise refugee protection because they withhold due process and lack other basic safeguards to ensure that refugees will in fact have access to a comprehensive and fair asylum procedure in Mexico. Like with Greece, fast moving asylum processes have tremendous implications for refugee protection and asylum, potentially setting in motion "chain deportations" that could result in forced repatriation of refugees (refoulement) without ever affording them the opportunity to have their claims heard on the merits.


A streamlined process does not necessarily mean a human-rights focused process.

Recommendations

- 1) In accordance with internationally established norms on refugee protection, governments should accept responsibility for deciding asylum claims.
- 2) Governments should concentrate on creating efficient asylum procedures that do not compromise fairness or quality, instead of erecting barriers to refugees and migrants.
- 3) The high seas should be recognized as a humanitarian space and nongovernmental organizations that play a vital role in rescue operations in the Mediterranean should be legitimized and not criminalized.
- 4) The European Union should establish safe and legal routes for migrants fleeing persecution to mitigate the asylum seeker's need to cross dangerous sea routes through smugglers.
- 5) Additional safeguards should be established to ensure that survivors of human trafficking have adequate protections and services once in Greek camps.
- 6) Greek authorities should streamline the process for NGOs to operate and provide necessary services in Greek refugee camps to improve asylum-seeker and refugee protection and integration.

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), established in 1911, is a nongovernmental, not-for-profit, international organization dedicated to protecting the rights and addressing the needs of refugees and immigrants. USCRI, working with its affiliates, provides legal, social, and health services to refugees, unaccompanied migrating children, trafficking survivors, and other immigrants in all 50 U.S. states, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, and Kenya. USCRI advocates for the rights of refugees and migrants both nationally and globally, helping to drive humanitarian policies, practices, and law.

U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants

 703-310-1130

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 [Refugees.org](https://www.refugees.org)

