

Refugees in the Centre of Athens

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Bilal is in his mid thirties. He is a refugee from a village close to Hebron in the West Bank. When we met him he had been in Greece for 3 weeks and in Athens for a few days. We met in Omonia Square which is one of the gathering places for refugees especially when they first arrive in Athens. For those refugees who don't already have friends or contacts in the city this is one of the places to head for in search of information. The square is where refugees, especially men, gather during the day. (Women and children on the other hand can often be seen sitting together outside the cheap hotels where they stay.)

Bilal was looking for help in making an application for asylum in Greece. He liked Greece, he had no friends or family elsewhere in Europe so Greece suited him. He was travelling alone, but in the course of his clandestine journey to Athens, coming over in a small rubber boat from Turkey to Samos he had made some friends and they were now sharing a room. But they were like him and did not know much about street survival in Athens.

He was very stressed about not getting anywhere with his asylum application. Like other refugees he had left the detention centre on Samos with his white paper which gave him 30 days in which to leave Greece. He had assumed that in that 30 days he would be able to make his application. The days were running out and he had got nowhere. He was afraid that when his 30 days were over, he would be arrested and then locked up for up to 18 months. He wasn't reassured that this was unlikely given Syriza's commitment to keep refugees out of detention. As far as Bilal was concerned it was a possibility. It frightened him.

So Bilal was looking for help and wanted to know whether we could recommend a lawyer. He desperately wanted to make his asylum application. You can do this in some of the camps such as the one on Samos. But if you took this route you would have to stay in the camp for more days. Alternatively, you get the white paper and leave the camp more quickly and make the application in Athens. Bilal like the vast majority of refugees did not want to spend a second more than necessary locked in the crowded and overwhelmed camp and so did not make his application on Samos.

But the new system created for asylum applications has collapsed. Bilal told us that the new process involves making a Skype connection with the asylum system. Through Skype you then arrange a time for an interview. It is the very first step in the process. But it is not working. Such is the demand, and more importantly the lack of resources to support the system, that refugees like Bilal simply can't get through. Their Skype calls go unanswered. To make matters worse the administration now allots time slots according to the 'nationalities' of the refugees. In Bilal's case he is given 4 hours once a week on a Tuesday. Only in these hours can he Skype the asylum service. This is what he has done for the past

2 weeks and got nowhere. No answer. And the same applies to his friends. The result is utter frustration and anxiety. It also means paralysis for without a submitted application Bilal has no rights at all - to stay, to work, to have a house and so on.



Refugees in Omonia Square

We went with him to the Steki in Exarchia, an enduring and important centre for refugees in central Athens. Here we were told that no lawyer can help Bilal. All he can do, they said was to keep on trying. There was no other way. They also tried to reassure him that he would not be hassled when his white paper expired and that there were thousands like him in the same situation. Neither should he listen to those who had told him that for 50 euros they could get him the interview.

This week we learnt that a Syrian woman in her mid 60s left the camp on Samos with her 2 daughters who are in their 20s. Because she had lost a leg in the war in Syria she was traveling in a wheelchair assisted by her daughters. Their goal is Sweden where her son has settled. With an asylum application, family re-unification procedures would kick in and help secure the necessary papers to get them to Sweden. Whilst in the Samos camp they were advised to submit their asylum application because they would face many problems if they went onto Athens given the problems there with the centralised system. But the camp was packed with over 650 refugees. They had no privacy to cope. It was hell for them. So on Monday 1st June they took the ferry to Pireaus.

On the Streets

The chaos of the asylum system and its cruel consequence that the refugees who want asylum feel totally ignored and have no way of knowing what is going on is not the only issue facing newly arriving refugees in Athens. There are now many, high and low, who feed off the refugees. They include hotel keepers who have doubled their prices as well as the traffickers and those with access to clandestine routes, papers and so forth. Inevitably those refugees with some money carry it on their person. This opens up any number of opportunities to 'scam' and rob them.

And then there is context of the neighbourhoods near to Omonia where many refugees stay. These have become - especially during these crisis years - sites of much suffering and hardship, for both Greek, refugees and migrants who live there. There is little joy in these neighbourhoods. Some people we had met just a few months ago were now staggering around out of their heads on heroin. It is deeply sad. This is what awaits the refugees when they are released from the camps and move on to Athens. There is virtually nothing provided for them. Those without money rely on free meals provided by the church, but these are not available on a Saturday or Sunday. We were told that there are up to 8,000 empty public buildings in the Athens area. But if there is any attempt to occupy these buildings to provide places to sleep and stay, the police rapidly move in to remove the squatters.

It is right to demand the closure of the current detention centres. They are prisons. But simply processing refugees faster in the camps and then moving them onto Athens without any support systems in place is no answer either.

In Omonia we met 2 Palestinian refugees who were sleeping out in the square. One was in his forties and with his wife and 2 daughters. They were sleeping at the Church but he wasn't allowed to stay with them. So he camped nearby in the square, under an olive tree which he had decorated with icons of the Orthodox church to show, he said, that as a Muslim, his heart and arms were open to everyone. He kept a baseball bat next to his sleeping bag. Not to keep off the fascists - nowhere in sight- but some younger refugees who had been hassling him at night.

The other Palestinian man was older in his mid sixties. He had come from Gaza where 2 of his 4 sons had been killed by the Israeli attacks and he himself had been injured - two bullets in his legs and two more in his upper body. He had worked as a civil engineer and was wanting to get to Australia to be with his brother. Five days before we met him he had been robbed of 1,500 euros which he had kept in his back pocket. He had been robbed of all his money whilst at the mosque by 2 younger refugees. He was forced to leave his hotel and move to the streets. 3 days after the robbery his sleeping bag and clothes were stolen from the square.

In the early hours of the morning we sat together talking about their experiences in Greece and listening to their stories of the horrors in both Syria and Gaza which had forced them to flee. They also talked about their reactions to being hassled by a few, younger, refugees. They were sad rather than angry about what was happening to them. 100 metres away there is a large illuminated sign on the side of a building proclaiming 'Welcome to Greece'.

Red Lines

We are lucky to know and be involved with a group of refugees who have stayed in Athens for some years and are inspiring in what they do to help refugees. They are well aware of the ways in which life has become more miserable and stressed in their neighbourhoods. But they live, survive, laugh and love on solidarity. Without it they know they will be destroyed and damaged like many they see around them every day. So it was not so surprising when we met during this visit to find them very angry about incidents of refugees robbing or troubling other refugees. Something which rarely happened 7 years ago is becoming more common. For our friends a red line is crossed when you start stealing from refugees in order to survive or feed your addiction. 'We can only survive as human beings through our solidarity and helping one another as much as we can. There is nothing else.'

We saw what this meant in action when we met a newly arrived Algerian refugee in Omonia. He was 23 and had just arrived. He was looking for help. We took him to the cafeteria where the Algerians met. During the time it took us to walk there we had worked out some of things he needed and what he was like so when we arrived we able to introduce him to the group of about 8 young Algerian refugees who were drinking coffee together. Within a very short time it was decided where he could shower and clean up, where he could sleep and eat. No hassle, no money exchanged, lots of banter and lots of laughter and jokes.

We saw many similar examples in just a few days. There was the young Syrian mother who was taken to the hospital late at night; finding rooms for families with young children; raising the money to get the body of refugee who had died of cancer back home; providing help to the prisoners who are now being released with absolutely nothing from the jails and not least arranging for refugees to leave Greece. The scale of these activities and the speed of mobilisation are both impressive. These 'veteran refugees' of Athens know that some need support immediately no matter what time of day or night. They cannot wait. These solidarities continue outside the rip off refugee economy. The money needed is simply to cover costs. If you have no money then others will find ways of collecting what is needed. Money is never *the* obstacle. And over the years it has led to the creation of an extensive network across much of Europe. The deal is simple. You are helped because you need it. But when you are ok then you have to help others, just as you have been. So for example, if you are heading for Poland, or Germany, indeed anywhere in Europe you are almost certainly going to be given names of those who will be able to help you once you arrive.

Ripping off refugees is therefore completely out of order as far these activists are concerned. When they hear about incidents they demand names and go out to visit them. They make it clear why robbing and troubling other refugees is completely unacceptable and shameful. They warn those involved that if they don't stop immediately then they themselves are going to suffer. They have just this one warning. It is a strategy which seems to work.

For some of the outraged refugees, this was seen as a generational issue. They argued that the kids coming now were more 'selfish' and only concerned for themselves. It didn't help that Athens, or at least this part of it, had become more dog eat dog survival. So there was much in their daily lives that reinforced their individualism.

It is also the case that over the few years we have been writing about these issues we have witnessed a deepening and widening refugee economy which profits from making life near impossible for refugees. The policies and practices of Fortress Europe are responsible for creating a clandestine economy which exploits refugees who are given very few options to move safely and legally wherever their final destination. Take just one example, safe passage for refugees, such as being able to use the existing ferry services would eliminate the smugglers at one stroke. Over the last few years more and more money is being extracted from refugees. To avoid destitution most refugees try to get out of Greece as soon as possible.

Counting for Nothing

When we spoke with Ibrahim last week he was very upset about his friend and room mate. He had disappeared. His friend, from Algeria had got drunk and late at night had been hit by a car. He was injured so was taken by an ambulance to the hospital. He has not been seen since. That was 3 months ago. According to the police, the ambulance service and the

hospital, no one of that name or description was seen, admitted to hospital or taken in an ambulance. There are many looking for him. But nothing. He has disappeared and the silence is ominous for his well-being.

The shadow of official neglect and abandonment is a constant companion for many refugees. That they count for nothing is reinforced in many ways from the moment they land on the shores of Greece. The absence of any sustained support drives many refugees into petty crime as the only way of surviving. If and when they are caught they are punished with prison sentences completely disproportionate to their offences. We have met many refugees recently released from jail who have served sentences of 5 to 7 years for the theft of phones or lap tops and many more who were convicted and imprisoned for crimes they never committed. We don't have to look very hard to explain why two thirds of all prisoners in Greece are foreigners. They are easy meat for the system which rarely has even translators so that the 'accused' know what they are being charged with or what they are signing. Ahmed told us that he was made to sign 10 different papers by the police and he had no idea what any of the papers meant. And of course once branded as a criminal even more doors close for them both in Greece and in the rest of Europe.

The lessons are learnt quickly. Refugees do not expect anything much from authority but hassle and neglect. They don't even expect much from humanitarian organisations which they see receiving funds to 'help' refugees but never speak with them and yet claim to speak on their behalf. Grand announcements from EU governments about their help to refugees usually means more money for surveillance, patrols, fences and prisons. They never hear the same governments apologise to them for being in large measure responsible for them having to flee their countries in the first place. They quickly learn that without the solidarities that they create between themselves and the other poor(est) people amongst whom they live then their own vulnerabilities become even more threatening and corrosive. They know they count for nothing in the system. They know that they can simply disappear without any questions being asked or answered. But amongst the so called worthless we find not just fear and hardship but a generosity and a humanity that shames and exposes the 'timeless civilisation' of Europe.

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