

Resistance and Reality: The Plight of Syrian Refugees Detained in Greece's Samos Island

Fatima and Ahmad

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Featured image: Fatima and Ahmad with their cake to mark one year detained on Samos. October 2017 (Source: Samos Chronicles)

On Tuesday morning I said goodbye to Fatima. At least for the time being. Some time tonight or in the early morning tomorrow she will be taken from Samos to Lesbos and from there to a closed camp in Turkey. As always accurate information is hard to come by if you are a refugee. When I asked the police officer this morning when she would be leaving he replied that he didn't know yet.

Fatima expected to go Turkey a week ago. Last Monday the police told her that she had to leave her room and come down to the police station with her bags. We went together first having dropped off the keys to her place at the Arsis office. (Arsis is a Greek NGO which acts for UNCHR on housing issues on Samos.) It was all very emotional as she said goodbye to the other refugees who lived nearby as well to the workers in the Arsis centre who had been significant in supporting her over the past 7 months. All her hopes and dreams of finding a new, safe life in Europe had been shattered.

Fatima was kindly met at the police headquarters and unlike the other refugees (men) she was not put in the police cell to await deportation. After 30 minutes however she was told that she would not be leaving for Lesbos the next day and that it could be another week before she was deported. The police did not want the hassle of caring for Fatima for this week and quite rightly told her she would be better off staying in her room and to come back in a week. As one of the duty officers said to me the police cell was a terrible place to be, not least for a single woman. Moreover Fatima posed no risk of escape from Samos.

But for Fatima, the delay was distressing. Fortunately Arsis immediately said that she could return to her house and they took her and her bags back.

So it was that we returned to the police on Monday. This time it was planned that she would leave for Lesbos some time during Tuesday afternoon/night. I went to see her on the Tuesday morning to take her coffee and some breakfast and to say goodbye. As usual I had to be checked in, showing my passport. And for the past month you now have to pass an armed police man on the door who holds some kind of machine gun. Drip drip the screws keep turning. But of course I say nothing. There are no guidelines/rights concerning visiting people held in the police station. You rely on the mood of the police who determine whether you can get in or not.

When I arrived I found her in the reception area, not in the cell and quickly learnt that this was where she spent her entire time. She had been given 4 grey blankets to make her bed on the floor by the chairs in the open reception area. No privacy, no tranquility. There was a toilet but no shower or washing facilities. The breakfast she had been given was untouched. In a small plastic bag there were 4 pieces of stale bread and 2 small portions of strawberry jam. Inedible.

It was impossible for her to sleep. Not only were there police moving around her 'bed' all night, the shouting from the 'prisoners' in the cell which is at the other end of the reception area kept her awake. Then she witnessed a refugee being brought in who had cut his arms and there was blood and screaming before he was taken off to the hospital, but only to be returned a few hours later with his arms bandaged and locked up in the cell. It beggars belief that a young man who had self harmed should be detained and abandoned in such a hell hole.

Fatima was desperate for some company not only to get by during her stay in the police station but also to share her deep anxieties about returning to Turkey. So we were both upset and dismayed when after 30 minutes the officer in charge called me over and said I had to leave. My time was up.

Now it is 7.45 am on Wednesday 13th December and for the last hour Fatima and I have been exchanging whatsapp messages. They took her and 2 others at 3.30am and she is now en route to Lesvos. She has no idea of how long she will be held there before going on to Turkey. I don't think she has eaten or slept since Monday morning. She is exhausted and frightened.

Fatima does not want to go to Turkey. "For six years we lived with the war in Idlib. Of course we thought about leaving for Turkey but we knew enough to know that there was no future there for us". It was only after their house was destroyed by bombs in early 2016 that forced them on to the refugee road.

There is only one reason for Fatima's decision to return to Turkey. A decision which meant she had to abandon her application for asylum in Greece even though she had successfully got through the most important first phase of the process and had been given permission to leave Samos. She is giving all this up in order to rejoin her husband, Ahmad, who was deported last week to Turkey from Samos. They had been together on Samos for over one year. In this time she had two miscarriages. After the first miscarriage UNCHR moved them from the Camp and into a house in Samos town.

Fatima is not prepared to live without Ahmad.

Unlike Fatima, Ahmad's application for asylum had been rejected two times. As far as the authorities and many of the NGOs are concerned that is the end of the line. In Ahmad's case that involved Arsis telling him that he would have to leave the house he shared with his wife, and the lawyer from Metradassi (Greek NGO) saying that his case was now closed and there was no more legal support on offer. He refused to leave Fatima and the house and though no attempt was made to evict him Ahmad was in constant fear of being arrested and deported. For the next two months Ahmad rarely left the house. He felt completely abandoned and with no idea of what to do. This all worsened after the high court's decision in Athens in late September which confirmed that Turkey should be considered a safe place

for returning Syrian refugees. Ahmad felt sure now he would be taken even though he knew of no Syrian refugee who had been deported. Then misfortune struck when on one of the few occasions he went into the town centre with Fatima he was stopped, arrested and taken into administrative detention in the police station. This was 2 weeks ago.

It was the last straw for Ahmad. As soon as he was detained he told the police he wanted to be deported to Turkey. As Fatima told me, after one year on Samos “he has no patience left. He cannot continue in Samos. He is being destroyed”. For nine days Ahmad had to endure the prison cell in the police station. There was no risk that he would escape from Samos. He was volunteering for deportation. But he was held and Fatima suffered the forced separation only able to see Ahmad through the gates of the cell for a few minutes each evening.

Throughout all their time on Samos Ahmad and Fatima were never formally acknowledged as a married couple. This had many implications such as dealing with their asylum applications as if they were totally separate and hence the incomprehensible decision to admit Fatima’s application but refuse Ahmad. As far as Ahmad and Fatima were concerned the fact that their household consisted of 2 wives and 4 children which according to Fatima is not uncommon in Syria was simply of no concern to the asylum authorities. For them, Ahmad could have only one wife – the one still in Syria with their four children, and not Fatima. That Ahmad and Fatima’s marriage had been formally acknowledged and documented by the mosque had no bearing.

Ahmad is convinced that his marital status was a main factor in his asylum rejection. He told me that he was made to feel uncomfortable and anxious whenever this was raised and he never felt relaxed to discuss his household. Quite simply all these experiences were hitting Ahmad especially hard. He was going crazy.

Now it is Thursday morning. I lost contact with Fatima last night. I am not sure where she is at the moment except that she has no access to the internet. Ahmad is now in Istanbul. He was held in the

Adiyaman Camp in Adana Turkey for just 3 days before being released and so able to travel to Istanbul to stay with his brother. Fatima hopes to be with him shortly.

UPDATE:

It is now 9 pm on Thursday, 14 December and a few minutes ago I received this message from Fatima:

“Hi, I am now in a prison in Lesvos. The situation is very bad. The prison is very bad. The bed is made of stone and there is no mattress. The blankets smell foul. There is no light at night. And many insects. It is very scary.”

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