

# Surviving Lies, Shame and Cruelties. Chris Jones Reporting From Greece's Samos Island

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*Where to start? The earthquake of last autumn? The floods in the winter? The impact of Covid? The heatwave this summer? The destructive fires of June? As ever those hit the hardest are the poorest on Samos. In common with the refugees here they live with the word WAIT ringing in their ears. They know it will be years before they get any state help with repairing their damaged houses and lands just as they wait for years to get their pensions. There is a general resignation to this reflected in the comment ‘this is Greece’.*

But as is so often the case this is not the full picture. In many senses it is a lie endlessly recycled to induce acceptance of the unacceptable. Those Greeks at the bottom of the heap share a fundamental experience with the refugees. They count for nothing. It is an experience repeated daily. How do you live with this reality? How do you stay sane?

So ‘this is Greece’ reflects both a sense of powerlessness and a way of surviving cruelties, of living in enduring darkness with no glimmer of dawn. Our refugee friends suffer greatly. Most of them do not have networks of friends and family here in Greece who can sustain them. Their endless wait as others decide their future, never knowing when they will be told, is cruel. As one Somalian friend told us as he waits to hear whether he is to be deported to Turkey (now a safe country for Muslim refugees according to the Greek government!!!!) his mind is being ‘fucked up’. Many here are just about getting by, some are being destroyed and the majority are simply demoralised and exhausted. All of which make life easier for the powerful.

For both Greeks and refugees their agonies are made so much worse by the incompetence, corruption and lies of the authorities. The slump in tourism due to Covid has been presented as a major problem for Greeks. This year, despite Covid, tourism has improved with greater numbers coming to Samos. But for our friends who work in the cafes, bars, hotels and restaurants the return of tourists has meant a return to 7 day working weeks, long hours and poverty wages. At least last year they could get to the beach. Many now don’t even have that possibility.

In Samos alone millions of euros have flowed in to ‘deal’ with the refugee ‘problem’. But there is no accounting. But we all know that it has gone into the pockets of the parasites just as it is with much of the tourist industry here; “All for us and nothing for you.” This is a

widespread understanding here. And be clear, there is much anger at the impunity of the thieves. The challenge here at least is not so much in revealing these truths – most know – but in doing something about it. How? What? Who?

Great swathes of the Greek population are ashamed of ‘their’ country and of the elites who press for their advantage in total disregard for the majority and this is sharply revealed in the current relationship between Israel and Greece. The Greek people have a long history of solidarity with and support for the Palestinians. But the Greek state has become one of Israel’s staunchest allies over the past decade as Israel has moved away from its earlier close relationship with Turkey and shifted its attention to Greece. Earlier this year Greece made its largest ever arms deal with Israel worth over \$1.6 billion. This is in addition to other recent weapons deals including surveillance systems and drones for monitoring and defending the Greek borders from refugees. Now we are told that the Greek army is going to be modelled on the Israeli army. Joint air-force facilities between the 2 countries are now being built in Greece and the joint naval and air force exercises (*Noble Dina and Blue Flag*) initiated a decade ago continue on an annual basis. On Friday August 20, 2021, Nikos Dendias foreign minister of Greece and his Israeli counterpart, Yair Lapid, affirmed in Jerusalem their countries’ close ties, **“based on shared values....promotion of peaceful coexistence, moderation, prosperity, international law”**. (*Ekathimerini 23/8/2021*)

Shameful words. The only reference Dendias made to the Palestinians was to condemn them for firing rockets from Gaza into Israel. At a time when Israel is haemorrhaging international and indeed internal support, precisely because of its brutal oppression of Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and within Israel itself, the Greek government makes no comment.

In the past week the government has been pressing for more bilateral economic ties with Israel in addition to the already established consortium which includes Cyprus to extract gas from the east Mediterranean. Areas identified as ripe for Greek investment in Israel include food, wine and spirits and cybersecurity. It would appear that Greece’s obsession with its armed forces (it is one of very few NATO countries to spend over 2% of its GDP on the military) trumps all other considerations. The result is that whilst many across the globe are becoming more wary of investment in Israel as the boycott movement grows and mindful of the fate of apartheid South Africa, the Greek government is once again demonstrating its incompetence. Do they really believe that trumpeting your shared values with such a tainted country and by refusing to acknowledge the suffering of the Palestinians is going to succeed? Do they mind that such values attract the likes of Priti Patel the British Home Secretary (Interior Minister) to visit Samos for 2 days at the beginning of August. Patel’s antipathy to refugees is well known in the UK so it was no surprise that she spent her time on the island visiting the new camp/prison for refugees which is scheduled to be opened in late September and talking with those responsible for patrolling the sea border with Turkey and keeping refugees from landing on Samos. Her junior minister( Chris Philp) was also on Samos in June; activists in the UK are concerned:

*“The Independent* understands that Ms Patel was interested in seeing the centre to inform the implementation of her own plans to create “reception centres” for asylum seekers in Britain. Campaigners have described the structures as “prisons-like” and “inhumane”, and said the idea of them being replicated in the UK was “deeply concerning””. (*Independent* , 4 August 2021)

It was not so long ago that the Greek people had to endure the fascism of the *Junta*. There are many now predicting a similar drift to right wing oppressive authoritarianism in Israel given its current trajectory of international lawlessness, violent suppression of dissent and not least the widening divisions within the Israeli Jewish population. De-coupling Greece from Israel is a necessity but to do so needs support from without as within. As noted above, many here are feeling vulnerable and powerless. We need help and energy. But where from?

It is time now on Samos for us to think about what the refugees have brought to the island over the past decade. Now that arrivals have virtually halted and thousands of refugees have been moved off the island, it has become clear to many how much vitality they brought to Samos Town the island's capital. Streets and squares that once buzzed with the presence of young refugees are now largely empty. Shops which flourished from the refugees now face closure. The play areas that were filled with the laughter of refugee children are now silent. The few refugees who remain in the town are soon to be shifted 9 kms away to a closed camp. There is no general delight in these developments although for years successive mayors and other leaders of the town were for ever demanding that the refugees be moved out of the town. Their message was ever consistent - they are alien, they pose multiple dangers, they simply don't belong. But over time the presence of the refugees changed the perceptions of many locals. In a peaceful co-existence the locals ignored this clamour of their leaders as they saw the refugees as human beings with whom they shared a common place. They brought a vitality and energy to the town. Now they are missed. Although few in numbers, some refugees once granted asylum have decided to stay and make their lives here. It is struggle as they are given no help to rent a home and jobs are hard to find. But they want to try because they love living here. They feel safe. In these dark days such changes are to be celebrated.

Despite the problems facing the people on Samos the changes wrought by the presence of refugees is opening opportunities for new challenges. Myths and lies have been exposed as vacuous and harmful. The new camp built for 7000 refugees is simply seen here as a cesspool of corruption. When you live alongside refugees you directly see the way which the EU has been content to let Greece get away with lawlessness and coercion against refugees in return for holding the refugees at the EU borders. After all it is the EU's insistence on deterrence that has created the context for the Greek state's policies and practices. But neither the EU nor Greece are invulnerable.

Take tourism for example. As already noted, tourism is a huge part of the economy. It is been battered by the Covid pandemic and although there has been some revival in 2021 the figures are still well below those of 2019. There is now a growing recognition that climate change could pose an almost existential threat. These include the enduring threats of huge wild fires which this summer saw holiday villages evacuated. Then there is the weather. Record heatwaves this summer have exposed the tourist industry to new costs and problems, especially with respect to staying cool, needing to secure additional electricity for air conditioning and water security as people shower more to manage the heat. Can Greece continue as a major tourist destination especially if the countries who send the most tourists (northern Europe) warm up to make their summers attractive for holidays. This historic pillar of the Greek economy could soon become its Achilles heel.

Imagine then if tourists began to talk of Greece's shameful alliances with Israel as giving them second thoughts about coming here. The same applies with respect to Greece's treatment of refugees. One of the reasons there are few refugees now coming to Samos and

the other frontier islands is because of the push-backs. This is against international law. But Greece learns from Israel; ignore and lie. So against a backcloth of video films (often shot using mobile phones) showing Greek coastguards attacking, intimidating and pushing refugees away from Greece we have the Greek minister of migration shouting that such accusations are utterly baseless and insulting. He lies. He is a liar. (See <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-europe-57809909>). Is this the place where you want to have a holiday? Is this a country which uses income raised from your visit to ally with Israel or to ensure that refugees face death or injury trying to get to the shores of Samos?

Say not a word about any of this, or the conditions of the workers who feed and care for you then you are complicit in on going cruelties. Even as a tourist you can try to do something. Tourism is a vulnerable spot for Greece. Boycott threats are sure to be taken seriously and may just do something positive for all those who live here. Surely it's worth a go for all our sakes.

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*This article was originally published on [Samos Chronicles](#).*

*Featured image: Patel on Samos looking at the plans of the new camp (Source: Samos Chronicles)*

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