

Greek hospitality is put to a religious test

by [Alexandra Markovich](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

For Abdul, a 17-year-old refugee from Afghanistan, and others who arrived in Greece without their parents, this year was their first Ramadan away from their families.

“In Afghanistan, our father, mother, sister all fast—all people are doing it. Here, it’s different,” Abdul said. “It will be difficult for us, but we will not forget our religion.”

Abdul, whose name was changed to protect his privacy as a juvenile, lives in a shelter in Athens with other underage refugees who have found themselves in one of the most homogeneous Christian nations in the world.

Over the past two years, Greece, which is 98 percent Orthodox Christian, has hosted 1 million migrants on their way to other European countries. The vast majority of those passing through were Muslim.

Greece has won high praise for its hospitality toward the migrants. Some islanders on the front lines were even nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize. Greeks point to their history to explain this reception.

A population exchange with Turkey after World War I brought in over a million ethnic Greeks as refugees. When the new migration crisis began last year, there was empathy for the new arrivals, with many Greeks recalling what their grandparents went through.

Yet the nation has long resisted assimilating Muslim immigrants. Seventy-eight percent of Greeks say that being Christian is important to being truly Greek, more than in any other European country surveyed by the Pew Research Center.

“Historically, modern Greek national identity has been built against the other, and the other was Turkey,” said Anna Triandafyllidou, a professor at the European University Institute who specializes in Muslim integration.

Before its independence, Greece endured 400 years of Ottoman rule.

“Islam was the enemy,” she said.

Today, 57,000 refugees like Abdul remain stuck in Greece after Europe closed its internal borders, and many are likely to be forced to remain indefinitely. The European Union's plan, adopted in July 2015, to relocate 160,000 asylum seekers has been moving glacially, to date relocating only a couple thousand refugees.

Angeliki Dimitriadi, a research fellow at the Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy and a specialist in irregular migration, said that, although the situation remains fluid, she expects that significant numbers of migrants will find themselves living in Greece for the long run.

Today, anti-Islam sentiment is on the rise, with 65 percent of Greeks expressing "unfavorable views" of Muslims, up from 53 percent in 2014, before the refugee crisis began, according to a survey released by the Pew Research Center on July 11.

More than half of Greeks believe refugees will increase the likelihood of terrorism in the country, and 72 percent consider them an economic burden.

Some find it surprising that the refugee crisis so far has not brought an uptick in violence against Muslims. Many new arrivals say they have not experienced discrimination based on their Muslim faith.

For Eid al-Fitr, the government opened stadiums throughout the city for prayer. On the first day of the holiday, members of the Pakistani community gathered in a former Olympic boxing stadium in northwest Athens. Although the refugees living in camps and shelters were welcome, none came.

Shahbaz Ahmed Siddiqi, an imam, was one of the last to leave the Olympic stadium after prayer ended. Siddiqi remembers the spike in xenophobia during the 2010 financial crisis, which saw the rise of the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn.

"Our Greek neighbors were afraid," Siddiqi said. "They blamed all bad things on immigrants." —Religion News Service