My time at a refugee camp in Malakasa

It was easy for me to get to Greece. But Europe's system of borderless travel only applies to some.

by Arianne Zwartjes in the January 18, 2017 issue

Afghan children outside of a tent in a refugee camp in Malakasa, 40 kilometers north of Athens. Photo by Milos Bicanski / Getty Images.

Pulling into a dusty dirt lot an hour north of Athens, all I could see was metal fencing and squat yellow army buildings. As other volunteers greeted each other in Greek, we showed our IDs to the army guards and walked past them along one of the fences.

The refugee camp was on the site of an old army facility. A few steps beyond the barracks, I saw row upon row of white tents, fences strung with drying laundry,

concrete-block warehouses, and everywhere dust and more dust. People walked slowly in the heat: women carrying plastic tubs of laundry, men lounging against railings, children moving in small clusters amid the trees at the edge of the camp. In front of the medical clinic a small line of people had formed, waiting in the beating sun to see the Greek army doctors.

This was my first morning in the refugee camp outside the small Greek town of Malakasa, a camp populated almost entirely by people who had fled Afghanistan. I had traveled to Greece after watching the refugee crisis unfold for months from the vantage point of my apartment in the southern Netherlands. I followed news of it obsessively, and finally decided I had to do what little I could to help the refugees arriving on Greece's shores.

As I walked around that morning with Angeliki, a Greek woman from the nearby town of Oropos who was a volunteer at the camp, I reflected on the ease of my travel to Greece. Flying from Eindhoven, I never showed an ID of any kind. I didn't have a bag to check, and I breezed through security with a quick flash of my boarding pass. And yet, for the thousands of refugees in Greece, waiting in refugee camps, no passage of any kind was possible. *Schengen*—Europe's system of borderless travel—applies only for some.

I had come to Malakasa to volunteer in the medical clinic. I quickly learned that the clinic was staffed by army doctors who worked only one day a month at the camp. There was no consistency and limited record-keeping from day to day. One or two doctors and a couple of medical students or residents would show up in the morning, unprepared, and do their best. Most of them were not general practitioners, so this kind of clinical setting was far outside of their training and range of experience, particularly with language and cultural barriers added in—as well as the stark physical realities of life in a refugee camp, which the doctors knew little about. Many of the camp's inhabitants desperately needed pediatricians and OB/GYN care, specializations that do not exist in the army medical corps.

It became clear after a day in the clinic that I could be of more use out walking around the camp, going from tent to tent. With the help of a young woman named Gulcheen, I ended up going around to find all the pregnant women in the camp, collecting their names, gathering information on their pregnancies and health risks, and giving out prenatal vitamins that had been donated from Germany. These vitamins with folic acid and iron were an important resource for the pregnant

women; the diet in the camp was not great—gloopy rice with a sauce or chicken on it—and the army wouldn't allow donations of meals from outside because they feared that anti-immigrant groups might send in poisoned food.

Going from tent to tent, Gulcheen and I were often invited in; the families gave us tea and biscuits and boxes of juice that they'd been given by the volunteers. They told us their stories: how and why they came to this place, the travails they'd experienced in their journeys through the mountains of Afghanistan and Iran, Iraq and Turkey, and then crossing the sea to reach Greece.

They had made their tents as homey as they were able: blankets, which they also slept on, lined the floors, and clothes and any other belongings were stacked in corners of the tent. Some of them had small trinkets hanging from the ceiling; none had lights, and at night the camp was pitch dark.

One afternoon, a young woman I will call Salima invited me into her family's tent. Her parents and siblings graciously scooted farther back into the shelter so I could slip off my shoes in the entrance and duck inside. We sat cross-legged in a circle on layers of rough gray blankets—the ubiquitous gray blankets that every aid organization gives out—and they offered me tea and cookies.

Salima had worked in Kabul for the Afghanistan Workforce Development Program, a project of the United States Agency for International Development. She had applied to come to the United States through a program available to Iraqi and Afghan interpreters and others who work for the U.S. military. She and her family had fled before the process was complete, when their circumstances turned dangerous.

She pulled out her preciously guarded, somewhat worn file of paperwork, with several letters from her supervisors at USAID extolling her virtues as an employee. Her parents smiled and nodded at me, the corners of their eyes crinkling. My Dari is limited to a few simple words such as *salaam* (hello) and *tashakur* (thank you), and their command of English was about the same.

Then Salima pulled out her phone. Her younger brother, she said, had been killed by the Taliban in retribution for her work for the United States—that was the reason they'd had to escape the country. She brought up a photo of him and held it out to me: a young man, younger than she, lay supine, pale, his chest bare and bloody and scored with open wounds. Salima scrolled through photo after photo of his body—pointing out his wounds, describing how they'd killed him in the street. The

photos seemed a tribute and a way to mourn, but also invaluable evidence to support the family's refugee status and claims for asylum.

Before I left the Malakasa camp, I jotted down a list of what refugees needed there: they desperately needed a pediatrician and an OB/GYN to make consistent visits and access to a dentist. They needed better shade or air-conditioned indoor spaces, for it was clear that the summer heat was going to become nearly unbearable for the many elders, small children, and newborns. They needed education about their legal rights, which the army was keeping under tight wraps. They needed more showers and toilets; there were only seven showers and 11 toilets for a camp of over a thousand people. At another makeshift camp, at the Port of Piraeus in Athens, which I also visited, the squalor and chaos were much worse: there were few toilets, few or no showers; hundreds of people living inside the terminal; hundreds more living outside in dirty, somewhat ragged tents.

While camp conditions were not ideal, I was struck by the generosity and hospitality of the Greek people, particularly given the current levels of economic hardship in Greece. Several times at Malakasa I saw young soldiers sneak up to one of the Greek volunteers and hand them bags of food they'd brought from home to share with the people in the camp; they didn't want to be seen by the higher-ups giving it out themselves. And people from nearby communities sent medications and other supplies with the Greek volunteers almost every day—razors, a trash bag of T-shirts, a basket of apples if they could get them past the guards. I heard stories of elderly Greek people who had driven hours just to deliver a small box of food to one of the camps. Nonetheless, there are immense structural and organizational challenges in all the camps and squats and a very limited sense of agency for any of the people living there.

The Greek volunteers I met thought that the Greek government could be far more effective than it was. The problem is not capacity. The problem is political at its root: no one wants to absorb the refugees, in part because no one wants to encourage more people to come.

The intended discouragement, however, seems not to have prevented the flow of boats into Italy and Spain. Since my visit, there have been slow steps forward: almost all the residents of Malakasa have been "preregistered" by the Greek Asylum Service and the UNHCR, and some of them have actually begun the process of registering for asylum in Greece (though registering by no means guarantees that

asylum will be granted). The process continues at a glacial pace, and the prospects for thousands of people to find jobs in a Greece that has already been brought to its knees by EU austerity policies are not promising.

Malakasa is almost exclusively populated by Afghans, for example, while the broader refugee populations come from Syria and Iraq, among other places. Of these, Afghans face a particularly difficult path. Afghans have recently been excluded from the list of nationalities eligible for the European Relocation program. And since October, an EU-Afghanistan "Joint Way Forward" agreement allows countries in the EU to deport Afghan asylum-seekers back to Afghanistan. Only people from Syria, Eritrea, Burundi, Mozambique, Bahrain, Bhutan, Qatar, and Yemen are eligible for relocation in Europe; the rest have, until now, had the option of attempting to claim asylum in Greece or of being returned to Turkey, which has been accused of some very troubling actions against refugees in recent months, including arrests, beatings, and forced relocations.

Many people in Malakasa told me of the violence that had forced them to leave. Like Salima and her family, they fled to preserve their lives after a direct threat or the killing of a family member. Many of the Afghans I spoke with at Malakasa were Hazara, a Shi'a minority group in Afghanistan that is specifically targeted by Taliban and al-Qaeda forces. These were not "economic migrants."

Even if they had been, the line between an economic refugee and one fleeing violence is very thin. Being deprived of food, shelter, and opportunities to work are certainly another form of violence. And those without economic means are at a much higher risk of experiencing physical violence. Current international agreements on refugees do not acknowledge these realities, nor do they address historical exploitation of certain populations.

Trying to help in a situation like the one in Greece raises a pyramid of questions, one built atop the other. I began by asking *How can I, in an immediate sense, best help the people here?* but that quickly turned into *Why are they stuck here in this camp, and how can we change that?* That question grows into *Where does Europe draw the lines about who can seek asylum and who cannot?* which spirals into *Why are we privileging the devastation of war on people's lives over the arguably just as devastating effects of economic privation?* and *What do we do with this world constructed on such massive global systems of inequality?* Each question seems overwhelming in its own right, but each is necessary—even critical—to ask.

The worldwide refugee crisis is not likely to get better anytime soon. Last year, global levels of forced displacement reached the highest level ever recorded. According to 2015 UNHCR statistics, “one in every 113 people on earth is either an asylum-seeker, internally displaced, or a refugee.” With such high levels of instability in the Middle East, south-central Asia, and northern Africa, the trend is unlikely to end. The UNHCR and other researchers have also warned that severe weather, disasters, drought, and food shortages due to global climate change will create a drastic increase in displaced communities. The issue of how to help refugees will only become more salient in our near future. And with the election of Donald Trump, it will almost certainly become more difficult for refugees to come to the United States.

In recent months, many people have become deeply disheartened or even cynical about the prospect of change being made within government, and we also, perhaps, are a little disenchanted with old-school activism: protests in the streets, petitions, letter writing, and so on. But so much of creating political pressure has to do with building networks that often take years to build—and this is an area that our religious communities can excel in.

The need for creative and sustained response to the global refugee crisis is stronger than ever. The answers will not be simple and will not come from only one place: we must keep asking the questions.

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