

6-2019

War and Climate Refugees in Lesvos, Greece

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Recommended Citation

Burns, Zachary (2019) "War and Climate Refugees in Lesvos, Greece," *be Still*: Vol. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/bestill/vol3/iss1/7>

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▶ War and Climate Refugees in Lesvos, Greece

Between jobs in September of 2015, I had an opportunity to provide basic life support on the Greek island of Lesvos for refugees fleeing violence in Syria and Afghanistan. War in those countries had spurred an exodus of people heading west and when they reached the west coast of Turkey, they had already been through a life-threatening and challenging journey. Their final obstacle before stepping foot on Greek (and thus E.U.) soil was crossing the ten miles of Aegean Sea between Turkey and Lesvos. Turkish smugglers charged top dollar for a seat in each perilously overcrowded, five-horse-power dinghy. The rough seas often caused rafts to take in water, frightening if not overturning the passengers. Coast guard and volunteer surveillance was inadequate for the number of crossings, and occasionally an entire group—of babies, elderly people, and everyone in between—would drown.

Most groups did arrive, with 50 nauseous or hypothermic voyagers stumbling out of their rafts onto Lesvos beaches. Grown men hugged me, crying in relief; women collapsed in prayer to Allah; and teens used pocket knives to puncture their rafts, gesturing across at Turkey in defiance. Easy crossings produced happy passengers, some of whom took selfies or lit cigarettes moments after reaching dry land. However, treacherous crossings produced acutely ill or injured passengers and they had gory lacerations to clean and dress, and there were many blue-lipped children to warm up.

I was considerably over my head as a newly certified EMT. One girl dry heaved to the point of rupturing her facial blood vessels and fainting. I checked her pulse and wrapped her in rescue blankets as frantic family members screamed in Arabic around me. Fortunately she soon regained consciousness, and something compelled me to force-feed her pieces of banana. Although, I felt significantly under-qualified, at times I was still the most medically experienced volunteer on the scene.



The volunteer relief effort in this seaside village of Sikaminias was somewhat disjointed. International aid organizations like the Red Cross were not permitted to set up here due to local politics, so small organizations and individuals like myself devised makeshift infrastructures. A Norwegian couple cooked chickpeas all night for incoming refugees, and a Palestinian-Danish group set up an outdoor boutique of donated clothing.

The village café became an operations command center for volunteers. We sipped coffee on the patio, debating logistics and how best to utilize personnel and donated goods. Our role in the larger effort was to make wet and exhausted refugees healthy enough for a two-hour walk and one-hour bus ride to Mytilini, the island capital with long-term camps and immigration processing. Some refugees would be cleared to catch a ferry to Athens, while others would be condemned to live in apocalyptic tents indefinitely. Their lives were directly influenced by the conference room decisions of E.U. leaders, several of whom responded to the refugee crisis by closing their borders.

One of the harder things I had to do was abandon an Afghan family at one of these long-term camps. A British volunteer and I had driven them to the hospital earlier to get the little girl's thumb checked out. She had severed it somehow in crossing the Aegean, and calmly sought my attention on the beach in Sikaminias to show me exposed bone and loosely tethered soft tissue. Luckily there was a nearby physician, who gave her medicine but sent us two hours down the winding road to the hospital. Just one of the nine extended family members in our van spoke some English. He had worked for the U.S. military in Kabul before the Taliban found out and sent him a letter explaining two options. Either he could continue working for the United States and be publicly killed by the Taliban, or he could fulfill a jihad suicide mission in Europe and go to 'paradise'. He escaped with his family, and here we were in Mytilini, pleading with the hospital staff to examine the girl's thumb for free.



Other children and teens made the journey from Afghanistan or Syria with no adult guardianship. They grabbed whatever would fit in a backpack and said goodbye to everyone in their lives for what could be the last time. No one chooses to be a refugee, I was reminded; displacement is always the last resort. Though many of the orphaned travelers adapted unbelievably well. On an EMT shift at the bus stop between Sikaminias and Mytilini, I met a crew of Afghan teens who were dancing to Farsi rap and devouring canned falafel balls. They wanted to know about American girls, and seemed genuinely devoid of worries. Yet nothing in their lives was certain. Did they wind up in Germany? Holland? I cringe thinking they could still be trapped in a Greek refugee camp for lack of proper immigration status. If they did settle somewhere, are they finishing high school? Do any of the teachers know Farsi? We can hope that their European classmates appreciate the socio-political mess that they fled, and what it might be like to leave home for good.



Back by the water in Sikaminias, aid workers would crash the café during lulls in raft arrivals and look with binoculars toward Turkey. If we saw a bobbing black dinghy with orange life jackets, we could approximate the time and location of its arrival based on the wind. Sometimes we would zip down the coast by car to meet a raft; otherwise we jogged over goat paths to a rocky cove where rafts landed. Because I have olive skin and dark features, I was mistaken for a refugee dozens of times. Scandinavian volunteers smiled warmly with a “salaam!” and handed me sandwiches. It was funny, but also showed how little removed I am—we are—from being in the soggy shoes of these refugees.



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▶ What can we do as conscientious healthcare professionals? We might choose to work at community health centers or safety net hospitals where immigrants can receive primary care regardless of their legal status. We can also vote for politicians who understand that war refugees are victims of circumstance, and should not be turned away by wealthy countries. Finally, we can recognize the link between climate change and human displacement. It is well established that climate-exacerbated drought and agricultural failure in Syria destabilizes the economy and helped catalyze the civil war. Environmentally aggravated political, and consequent displacement, is considered one of the major reasons that climate change matters. On Lesbos, I saw firsthand that mass migration is a health issue. It is one of many environmental health issues that should compel health professionals to advocate for climate change mitigation.

ARTIST ZACHARY BURNS IS A 2ND-YEAR DO/MPH STUDENT. HE IS A DEVOTED PROPONENT OF PLANT-BASED EATING AND UNIVERSAL HEALTHCARE. HIS PHOTOGRAPHS THAT FOLLOW DEPICT HIS JOURNEY.



*CHEAP LIFE JACKETS COATED MUCH OF THE
COASTLINE*



CALM SEA, PLENTY OF AID WORKERS--A GOOD ARRIVAL



SYRIAN KIDS ENJOYING SOME SNACKS



WE MADE IT



AFGHAN TEENS AT THE BUS STOP



*DRENCHED AFGHAN MEN, ONE WITHOUT
ARMS, ARRIVE ON E.U. SOIL*