

Lesbos (Greece): Misery in Moria is Europe's migration policy

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Political calculus that created dangerous conditions at refugee camp will survive the fire. Daniel Howden is a migration expert and managing director of the investigative journalism organization Lighthouse Reports.

ATHENS — Five years ago, when the refugee camp at Moria was still just a bad idea, a local army officer was asked to assess the site. Surveying the hillside of olive groves, Stavros Miroyiannis warned the authorities they were going to “build a favela.” If they had to choose this site, he said, they should at least plan the camp as they would a village. They ignored him on both counts.

Miroyiannis would go on to put his own advice into practice a few kilometers away as the camp manager at Lesvos' much smaller and more humane Kara Tepe camp.

Meanwhile, Moria, which burned to the ground this week [1], came to resemble a detention camp and function like the slum he predicted.

And yet, while the ashes of Moria are still smoldering, the one certainty is that it will be rebuilt.

“People trying to access asylum in Europe are cast not as “people like us” but an invading horde — weapons in an asymmetric war.”

Moria, in all its miserable, dehumanizing squalor, was designed to be that way. It was not a mistake. The camp was the product of political calculations in Brussels and European capitals and that calculus has not changed. It is fireproof.

When thousands, and then tens of thousands, of asylum seekers began to arrive by sea on Greece's islands in 2015, the European Union's strategic response was the creation of so-called hot spots. Moria was the largest and most notorious of these, and its architecture and evolution most graphically demonstrated its true intention.

Its concrete terraces, nested fences and razor wire amounted to an anti-shelter. It was not meant to receive and give shelter, it was a spectacle intended to deter future asylum seekers.

Moria became the emblem of an EU deterrence policy [2] in which the warehousing of asylum seekers in humiliating circumstances was the point. Any other approach was and is seen as creating a “pull factor” that will attract another 2015-style surge of arrivals.

Migration experts have spent the last five years explaining to policymakers why this is not true but the base assumption has proven to be impervious to evidence. The European deterrence consensus is concealed behind technocratic jargon like “managed migration” but it is really evidence that the Continent prefers to pay the poor to contain the poorest. Europe's leaders no longer care whether human warehouse fees are paid to Turkey or to Greece, or spent on a lower cost per capita basis in

Jordan or Lebanon.

The deal that underpins the consensus was the EU-Turkey statement unveiled in 2016. That agreement foresaw Turkey preventing the departure for Europe of the vast majority of asylum seekers in return for billions of euros in financial assistance. The terms transformed refugees and migrants into a commodity that could be leveraged by the unpredictable and autocratic regime of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

When the deal collapsed six months ago, it quickly became apparent that there were no new ideas on the EU side. All diplomatic efforts have dwelt on renegotiating the old deal with some minor tweaks. Meanwhile, the dreadful logic of its original terms has reached its inevitable, damaging conclusion: People trying to access asylum in Europe are cast not as “people like us” but an invading horde — weapons in an asymmetric war.

Now with Moria in ashes and 12,000 people destitute on the roadside of Lesbos — and the whereabouts of two dozen people suffering from COVID-19 unknown — the human misery splashed across newspapers will feed the same “us and them” dynamic.

The spectacle will be used to justify the notion that we (Europe) are full and they are dangerous. That much is made clear by efforts to blame the camp’s destruction on the people who survived Moria. A better question would be: How did this fire trap not burn down sooner? It is pointless to debate why a matchbox caught fire.

This dire situation is not the result of a lack of money. The 2015 humanitarian crisis in Greece drew in an unprecedented EU financial response that surpassed €1 billion within 18 months and has kept climbing since.

Meanwhile, the Greek government has been seeking to transform the majority of its asylum camps from open reception centers into what are essentially prisons. Migration Minister Notis Mitarakis confirmed that work is already underway on a “closed center” to replace Moria. It’s a plan he has been pushing in the teeth of local opposition on the islands, where there is little or no appetite for the violence, inhumanity and permanence inherent in locking up people who have committed no crime.

Now amid the fear, flames and drama, the Greek government will almost certainly get its way.

European Commissioner for Home Affairs Ylva Johansson, a Swedish social democrat, will be asked not only to acquiesce to the detention of thousands of people in violation of their fundamental rights but to pay the bill to make it happen. She should refuse and call on EU member countries to use the upcoming negotiations on a new asylum and migration pact for a deeper rethink of the bloc’s migration policies.

There are no indications this will happen. Instead, Moria will rise again. This time it will not just look like a prison camp — it will be one.

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P.S.

- Politico. 9/10/20, 10:56 AM CET. Updated 9/11/20, 5:06 AM CET:
<https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-migration-policy-moria-fire-misery/>
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Footnotes

- [1] See, available on ESSF (article 54759), [Greece : Fires destroy Moria refugee camp on Lesvos](#).
- [2] See, available on ESSF (article 54761), [Moria \(Lesvos\): Greek refugee camp blaze highlights EU's migration failure](#).