

Syriza jails Syrian swimmer Sara Mardini for helping refugees in Greece

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Greece's Syriza-led government has jailed 23-year-old Syrian competitive swimmer Sara Mardini and three other members of the ERCI (Emergency Response Centre International) association on blatantly trumped-up charges. They are accused of people smuggling, espionage and membership in a criminal organisation. The purpose of this chilling arrest is to stop assistance to refugees fleeing the NATO war in Syria by criminalising humanitarian aid.

This latest attack exposes yet again the reactionary character of the petty-bourgeois populist Syriza (the "Coalition of the Radical Left") party, which rules Greece in a coalition with the xenophobic Independent Greeks (Anel). While overseeing draconian EU-led austerity, they set up EU-backed concentration camps to house refugees fleeing NATO wars in the Middle East and Africa in horrific conditions.

In August 2015, Sara and her Olympian younger sister Yusra became internationally famous when they risked their lives to save 18 fellow refugees as they crossed the Aegean from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos. When the boat's engine failed, leaving the craft drifting and taking on water, Sara and Yusra swam the boat to safety. After a 25-day march to Germany on foot and by train and bus, Sara and Yusra were granted asylum there.

A year later, Mardini agreed to join ERCI as a volunteer to help refugees and returned to Lesbos last December. Last month, while waiting at Mytilini airport to return to Germany, she was arrested. The *Guardian* reported that "soon after that, police also arrested ERCI's field director, Nassos Karakitsos, a former Greek naval force officer, and Sean Binder, a German volunteer who lives in Ireland. All three have protested their innocence."

Mardini is being held in Greece's high-security

Korydallos prison. Under Greek law, she can be held pending trial for 18 months. The four ERCI volunteers face charges of establishing and joining a criminal organisation, money laundering, espionage, violating state secrets, counterfeiting and offences against the immigration code and electronic communications legislation.

Police provided no evidence to back up such charges. Mardini's lawyer, Harris Petsikos, told the WSWs she "has denied all the charges. ... These very serious accusations are in no way substantiated by the evidence in the police file. The accused are totally innocent. Police cannot prove anything concrete, but it will take time for the courts to hear our arguments."

He added, "My clients and the other defendants are accused of having committed crimes in Greece on specific dates when they were not even in Greece. We provided specific evidence from Germany and England, showing that on those dates, they were in Germany or England."

Petsikos noted, "These accusations are almost incredible. ... They had radios to speak to each other, and on this public radio frequency they could also hear what police were saying. Now they are accused of hearing police radio transmissions that are supposedly state secrets. But this is obviously not the case."

Refuting accusations that assembling water and blankets for refugees in Lesbos is people smuggling, Petsikos added: "The police are going too far. They claim that practices common in all humanitarian aid groups, that are legal and normal, to help people who have already arrived in Lesbos, are crimes. The police combined facts in a very speculative manner. Then they assembled a file that they gave the courts to try to make it seem as if these were very serious crimes: espionage, participating in criminal organisations, illegal entry into

Greece, etc.”

This is a blatant attempt by police, Syriza Interior Minister Alexis Haritsis, and the Syriza government to silence anyone offering humane assistance to refugees. Human rights lawyer Jonathan Cooper told the *Guardian*, “this is another example of civil society being closed down by the state. ... What we are really seeing is Greek authorities using Sara to send a very worrying message that if you volunteer for refugee work, you do so at your peril.”

Syriza’s cruel and anti-working class character has been exposed since it was elected in 2015, after pledging to end austerity and overhaul right-wing, anti-refugee policies. It has since betrayed all its election promises and capitulated to the European Union (EU), slashing pensions, health care and other key social services, and trampling the overwhelming “no” vote in its own July 2015 referendum on EU austerity. It also reneged on its promises on refugees, accepting the 2016 EU-Turkey deal to keep refugees from reaching Europe.

That deal stipulates that all refugees reaching Greece from Turkey will be interned in Greece until their cases are processed and they are ultimately deported backed to Turkey. More than 60,000 refugees and migrants are reportedly stranded in Greece due to that deal and to border closures across the Balkans. So far, over 19,000 refugees arrived in Greece by sea this year, compared to around 14,000 in 2017. Over 100 people died during the journey in 2018.

Refugees on the Greek islands face horrific conditions, as thousands are packed into overcrowded, make-shift EU concentration camps. On Lesbos island, more than 8,000 people are crammed into the Moria camp, which was supposed to house 2,000. Some of its inmates have been stranded there for years.

BBC journalists who were given rare access to the camp reported that children are attempting suicide there amid appalling sanitary conditions, overcrowding, and deadly violence. “Some people live in mobile cabins, but rammed in-between them all are tents and tarpaulin sheets—homes for those who cannot obtain any official living space. The camp is also now sprawling into surrounding countryside. One tent houses 17 people—four families under one canvas.”

The camp smells of raw sewage. There are around 70 people per toilet, according to medical charity

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). “A mum describes faeces on the floor of the shelter that she lives in with her tiny 12-day-old baby,” the BBC noted.

Sara Khan, an Afghan refugee, said: “We are always ready to escape, 24 hours a day we have our children ready. The violence means our little ones don’t get to sleep.” She said her family spends all day queuing for food and all night ready to run, in fear of fights at the camp.

MSF members said, “The children they are treating have skin conditions caused by the poor hygiene inside, and respiratory diseases from tear gas fired into the camp by police to quell fights. Mental health problems are rife. ... Despite the fact that we push to move these children to Athens, as soon as possible, it’s not happening. Those children are still here.”

Luca Fontana, who has worked in conflict zones, including during deadly Ebola outbreaks in Africa, told the BBC the EU’s Greek camps “the worst place” he had ever seen. “I’ve never seen the level of suffering we are witnessing here every day. ... Even those affected by Ebola still have the hope to survive or they have the support of their family, their society, their village, their relatives. Here, hope is taken away by the system.”



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