

European Union funds Greece's fascistic anti-refugee offensive—Part 1

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This is the first part of a two part series.

Greece has been charged with guarding the European Union's "Fortress Europe" militarised border, aimed at keeping out migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It is doing so with a ferocious zeal, setting up detention camps using hi-tech surveillance techniques that have the stench of fascism hanging over them, courtesy of EU funding.

In 2020, the president of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen dubbed Greece "Europe's shield". Since 2015, the EU has handed Athens over €3.3 billion in direct financial backing in order to keep migrants out of Europe.

In exchange for €6 billion in EU funds handed to Turkey, a deal between Greece and the Turkish government agreed that "All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey." Funding for the deal expired in 2019 and in March 2020 Turkey said that it would no longer prevent migrants from trying to enter Europe via its borders.

In response, the EU and Greece accelerated the persecution of migrants and asylum seekers, establishing detention camps on the mainland and across its islands, in which every facet of the miserable lives of detainees is under constant surveillance.

In September 2020, a massive fire destroyed the infamous Moria refugee slum camp on the island of Lesbos. In its place the Greek government, in alliance with the EU, set up the temporary Kara Tepe refugee camp on a former military training area directly adjacent to the sea. Conditions were not only worse than in Moria, but the authorities took the opportunity to beef up the "security" of the camps, utilising barbed wire fences, exit restrictions and drones to monitor every movement.

In March this year, European Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson announced an initial €198 million euros for an operation allowing Greece to build new and even more oppressive permanent camps. The Multi-Purpose Reception and Identification Centres (MPRICs) would be built on five east Aegean islands and one near the country's land border with Turkey. They were to bolster the more than 30 immigrant detainee camps already dotted across Greece. The MPRICs are funded by the European Commission's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund.

Announcing the camps, Johansson, a former member in the 1980s of Sweden's ex-Stalinist Left Party who then carved a niche for herself in the highest echelons of the ruling Social Democrats, claimed that there would be "no more Morias." Of the MPRICs

she pledged, "These are facilities that will not be closed. They will be humane and allow for areas for families and vulnerable people."

This was a lie. The camps being built in Greece, with the fulsome praise of bourgeois politicians across the continent, are prisons, enforcing total surveillance and control over detainees.

At the end of March 2021, before any MPRICs were even opened, Greek Minister of Migration and Asylum Notis Mitarachi said they would be "closed and controlled." Central to their functioning is the detection of supposed "threats" posed by detainees by means of advanced technologies developed by militaries and regimes specialising in the suppression of entire populations.

In September, the first of the "Closed Controlled Access Centers" opened on Samos, an island in the eastern Aegean 1.6 kilometres off the coast of western Turkey, at a cost of €38 million. The camp is capable of detaining 3,000 asylum seekers.

Two more camps, on the islands of Leros and Kos, opened in November. An additional two, the largest yet, are being built on the islands of Lesbos and Chios and will open in 2022. Journalists researching the camps noted that "The planned construction site [on Lesbos] is right next to a garbage dump."

By the time the Samos camp opened, the EU had switched its position from opposing closed camps to supporting the anti-immigration policies of Greece's right-wing New Democracy government. Opening the camp, German EU bureaucrat Beate Gminder, who heads the European Commission's "Task Force on Migration Management, declared, "Migration can be managed, in a controlled, orderly and correct manner."

Gminder explained, "The new multi-purpose reception center is divided into two, separate sections. One controlled area, with an entry-exit system where residents and staff can enter by using a personal access card, as is the case in many other Member States, and a clearly separated closed pre-removal area."

She added, "The Commission, together with the European Asylum Support Office and Frontex, are working closely with the Greek authorities to continue making necessary improvements to streamline processes and enhance capacities, including for the return of persons who do not have the right to stay in the EU."

Gminder hailed the "new center in Samos that we inaugurate today" as "a prime example of such a new, European approach, as it holds the promise of a better, controlled management of migration."

Al Jazeera journalists Lydia Emmanouilidou and Katy Fallon described in December the total surveillance of the camps, in an operation overseen remotely at the Ministry of Migration and Asylum hundreds miles away in the Nikaia district of Piraeus, Athens.

Allowed to see the operation in action from Athens, they described, “entering an airtight room sealed behind two interlocking doors, accessible only with an ID card and fingerprint scan.”

In front of them was a wall, “covered by a vast screen. More than a dozen rectangles and squares display footage from three [now four] refugee camps already connected to the system.”

The monitoring system, Centaur, is already operational at the camps on Samos, Leros, Kos, and Malakasa on the mainland, and will be rolled out at all of the nearly 40 refugee camps in the country.

“Some of the screens “show a basketball court in a refugee camp on the island of Samos. Another screen shows the playground and another the inside of one of the containers where people socialise.”

Alongside the main cameras, “There will also be thermal cameras, drones, and other technology—including augmented reality glasses, which will be distributed to police and private security personnel.”

On September 20, Notis Mitarakis, Migration and Asylum Minister for the Greek government gave ambassadors from EU countries a tour around the migration control centre to mark its opening.

According to a report by the OmniaTV news website, ‘In the photo we can see 26 ambassadors and one minister observing through a CCTV the lives of people that are in the closed detention centre in Samos. *How they're sleeping, how they eat even how the children play in the playground.*’ (emphasis added)

Mitarakis described the meeting in a tweet: ‘I explained to the 26 EU member-states ambassadors the operation of the [Migration Ministry's] new Incident Management Centre at the ‘Keranis’ Building. It's connected to the new facility in Samos and in the coming period will also be connected to the 36 facilities operating across the whole of Greece.’

The *Al Jazeera* article included the comment of Mohammed, “a 25-year-old refugee from Palestine living in the new Samos camp”. He said bluntly, “There’s not a lot of difference between this camp and a prison.”

The camps, in remote areas and surrounded by barbed wire, are largely inaccessible. Dedicated journalists have done their best to expose them as closed facilities, prisons for those detained there.

Rory O’Keeffe wrote to Nacira Boulehouat, Head of Unit at the European Commission’s Directorate for Migration, Protection and Visa, noting the Commission’s report that “the Greek authorities have confirmed that the residents of the new MPRICs will be allowed to enter and exit at will, while the MPRICs will be constructed fully in line with the relevant EU acquis and standards.”

This wasn’t true, responded O’Keeffe. “In fact, the Greek government has repeatedly stated, in media interviews, in parliament and in public speeches that the camps will be ‘closed’: that is all movement in and out of the camps will be restricted,

including that of the men, women and children who arrive in the EU looking for a safe place to live.

“Its ‘National Migration Strategy 2020-21’ is an 18-page document describing the five camps planned for the Aegean Islands. Seven pages are ‘background’ and do not specifically mention the camps at all, but in the other 11, the document uses the term ‘closed’ to describe the camps 18 times.”

O’Keeffe continued, “The proposals included for the camps in the ‘Strategy’ include:

- “double military-grade walls
- restricted entrance and exit times (8am-8pm: itself a questionable suggestion: why should people be banned from going outside at any time of day or night? Under what possible justification? This is a mark of a closed camp)
- a CCTV system and video monitors
- drone flights over the ‘camps’
- camera-monitored perimeter alarms
- control gates with metal detectors and x-ray devices
- a system to broadcast announcements from loudspeakers
- a control centre for the camps at the ministry’s HQ

“This will cost €33m, which the Commission has also agreed to pay.”

Further evidence was presented in the article, “The new Moria”. The research by Katy Fallon and Elisa Perrigueur, Franziska Grillmeier and Vera Deleja-Hotko featured in a German TV broadcast at the end of October, presented by the German comedian Jan Böhmermann on ZDF. The show, with English subtitles, can be viewed at the web site Das neue Moria here .

The investigation points out, “The EU is not only funding camps that resemble prisons, it is also making them a pilot project for the reception of asylum seekers.”

The Samos camp has “Three-meter-high chain-link fences topped with barbed NATO wire, guard towers and uniformed security personnel patrolling inside and outside the camp 24 hours a day.”

To be continued



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