

Greece drops charges against Syrian swimmer Sara Mardini for helping refugees

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A week ago, a Greek court dropped charges against 24 immigrant rescue volunteers including 27-year-old Syrian swimmer Sara Mardini. It is a devastating climbdown for Greek authorities, confirming that the charges against her and her colleagues were baseless and outrageous.

In August 2018, Greece's petty bourgeois pseudo-left Syriza ("Coalition of the Radical Left") government arrested Mardini and another aid worker, Seán Binder. Syriza ruled Greece in a coalition with the far-right Independent Greeks (Anel). While overseeing draconian EU-led austerity, Syriza set up EU-backed concentration camps to house refugees fleeing NATO wars in the Middle East and Africa in horrific conditions.

Mardini and other aid workers were charged for helping refugees and migrants, fleeing war-torn areas in the Middle East and Africa, at risk of drowning at sea. They were accused of people smuggling, fraud, membership of a criminal organization and money laundering, facing up to 20 years in prison, for working for the search and rescue NGO, known as ERCI (Emergency Response Centre International), on the island of Lesbos.

After their arrest, Mardini and Binder spent more than 100 days in prison before being released on bail, facing up to eight years in prison if found guilty. According to Human Rights Watch, other aid workers include Nassos Karakitsos, a trained rescuer, and Panos Moraitis, the founder of the search-and-rescue group, who were also held in prolonged pretrial detention in 2018, forcing the group to cease its operations. There is currently no search-and-rescue organization active on Lesbos.

Sara and her Olympian younger sister Yusra have become internationally famous after they risked their

lives in 2015 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, Sara returned to Greece and joined ERCI as a volunteer to help refugees.

Her story was told in a highly popular 2022 Netflix movie, "The Swimmers," that recounts the last ten years of Sarah and her sister Yusra, leaving their parents and younger sister in Syria to seek refuge in Germany, during the US-NATO led war in Syria in 2015. They both swam for the Syrian national team before fleeing home. In Germany, Yusra resumed swimming training until qualifying for the 2016 Rio Olympics, then five years later for the Tokyo Olympics as part of the refugee Olympic team.

The Syriza government brought charges against rescue volunteers based on a Greek police report containing blatant factual errors. The police provided no evidence to back up such charges. In 2018, Mardini's lawyer, Harris Petsikos, told the WSWs that Mardini "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 the police were saying. Now they are accused of hearing police radio transmissions that are supposedly state secrets. But this is obviously not the case.”

By bringing charges against Mardini and her colleagues, the petty bourgeois reactionaries in Syriza were carrying out the bidding of the entire European Union (EU). As it waged war in Libya, Syria and across Africa and the Middle East, it sought to block tens of millions of people forced to flee their homes from coming to Europe. Trampling on refugees’ fundamental right to asylum, it built a vast network of detention camps in Europe and the Mediterranean in which refugees are imprisoned in horrific condition.

This criminal policy goes hand in hand with legitimizing extreme-right politics, sweeping austerity against the working class and remilitarization with massive spending for police-state measures.

The trial against Sara and other rescue volunteers was set to begin on January 10, 2023. Human rights organizations condemned the trial. They and the defendants pointed out that the trumped-up charges effectively amounted to an attempt to criminalize anyone working to help refugees and immigrants.

“If I can be criminalized for mostly doing little more than handing out bottles of water and smiles, then so can anyone. This trial is not about me and Sara, or even the 22 other defendants. This trial is about the Greek authorities trying to crush compassion and prevent people from seeking safety. But I trust that justice will prevail, and we will be able to get on with our lives,” said Seán Binder.

“This case is really an indictment of the Greek authorities, who are going after people for saving lives the authorities didn’t want them to save,” said Bill Van Esveld, associate children’s rights director at Human Rights Watch. “Meanwhile the Greek government continues to restrict humanitarian rescue while also illegally pushing back refugees and migrants, forcing them into the deadly situations that humanitarians tried to alleviate.”

When the trial began, Amnesty International renewed its calls to the Greek authorities to drop all charges against them. Nils Muižnieks, Director of Amnesty International’s European Regional Office, said:

Sarah and Seán did what any of us should do if we were in their position. Helping people at risk of drowning in one of the deadliest sea routes in Europe and assisting them on the shoreline is not a crime. This trial reveals how the Greek authorities will go to extreme lengths to deter humanitarian assistance and discourage migrants and refugees from seeking safety on the country’s shores, something which we see in a number of European countries. It is farcical that this trial is even taking place. All charges against the rescuers must be dropped without delay.

The collapse of the Greek regime’s trumped-up charges against Mardini underscore, above all, that EU’s entire “Fortress Europe” policy targeting refugees is utterly reactionary and steeped in the criminality of European states and governments. The defense of migrant rights requires the international mobilization of the European working class in a struggle against imperialist war, the EU and the EU’s vast police-state apparatus.



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