

Greece's new war on refugees: Clearing squatters in Athens

In the early morning of Aug. 26, dozens of asylum seekers and migrants woke up to the frightening sound of a helicopter buzzing above them. Greek riot police were stationed outside, ready to evict them from two buildings that had been abandoned for years before they began living there. The evictions took place in the heart of Exarchia, a neighborhood in Athens renowned for progressive thought and anarchist activity.

Since 2015, a few thousand of the 65,000 asylum seekers in Greece have found refuge in vacated buildings across Athens. These accommodations are commonly referred to as squats, and they offer a dignified alternative to overcrowded reception centers and refugee camps located far from public services and support networks. But police are now rapidly evicting refugee squats to allegedly crackdown on drug dealers.

The raids started in April under the country's previous left-wing Syriza government. But they've witnessed a sharp uptick under the conservative New Democracy Party that came to power in July with a vow to impose "law and order" in Exarchia. Law enforcement agencies have evicted eight refugee squats in four separate raids over the past month. In all, nearly 1,000 asylum seekers have been driven out in these raids. And unlike the previous government, which left refugees to migrate to new squats, New Democracy is hauling evicted refugees back to prison-like camps and detention centers.

"Squats are necessary because the state doesn't have a place to put everyone." ~A.Z. A Lebanese Migrant

To be sure, drug gangs have carved out space in the central square of Exarchia, much to the dismay of the neighborhood's residents. But migrants and activists say that none of the dealers lived in the evicted squats, all of which had a strict

no-drug policy. Instead, they say, the evictions are part of a wider policy to accelerate the asylum process and deport rejected asylum seekers. New Democracy has said it aims to return 10,000 people back to Turkey by 2020, five times the number that Syriza deported in four and a half years.



A police officer on the premises of the old Athens airport, during the evacuation of a refugee camp. -SOURCE PANAYOTIS TZAMAROS/GETTY

“The new government is pushing this myth about how bad the squats were and how great the camps are,” says Ioanna Manousakki-Adamopoulou, a Ph.D. candidate at the University College London, who has lived in and focused her research on the squats in Exarchia.

The truth, she adds, is that the squats evolved into self-sustainable communities that Greek leftists and anarchists embraced. In two abandoned schools that sheltered hundreds of asylum seekers, activists and charities built small playgrounds for children, cooked meals and offered language lessons in classrooms. In other squats, activists repaired amenities and helped enroll refugee children in schools.

By contrast, aid workers in September warned of a looming catastrophe in refugee camps on the Aegean Islands: Attempted suicide rates among children were soaring, while hundreds of people were forced to share a single toilet and shower. The overcapacity, say rights groups, was largely responsible for an inadvertent fire that erupted in Moria camp on the island of Lesbos in September, which left a woman and a child dead.



A view of the Prosfygika complex. Wedged between the Supreme Court of Greece and the Athens police headquarters, this is hardly the place you imagine you’d find Greek and immigrant squatters. -SOURCE LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AFP/GETTY

Soon after the fire was put out, riots erupted in the camp, prompting the government to begin relocating thousands of people to mainland Greece.

Refugee advocates welcomed the move, yet many suspect that the camps around

Athens will soon become unbearably overcrowded. Only a few of the 26 camps on the mainland are legally registered, meaning there's little oversight of how authorities treat refugees. The camps also can't shelter everyone, especially with thousands of asylum seekers arriving in Greece after fleeing Turkey's crackdown on Syrian refugees in recent months. And in March, the Syriza government ended U.N. housing accommodation and cash assistance for recognized refugees, according to a statement by the U.N. Refugee Agency. "Squats are necessary because the state doesn't have a place to put everyone," says a Lebanese migrant who requested he be identified by his initials, A.Z.

An English speaker, A.Z. often helped translate between Arab refugees and Greek volunteers in Exarchia. He too had lived in one of the abandoned schools in the area, but he moved out before it was evicted on Sept. 19. Most inhabitants were women and children, many of whom were enrolled in local Greek schools.



Refugee children chant in front of riot police during a protest of refugees living in squats and solidarity groups over the detention by police of five migrant children. -SOURCE LOUISA GOULIAMAKI/AFP/GETTY

One Syrian refugee named Mohammad, who didn't disclose his last name for fear of reprisal from authorities, notes that the police were less aggressive under the previous government. "I used to tell the police I was Syrian and they wouldn't ask me for legal papers, but now they're after us," he tells me. He's still in Exarchia, but fears he too will be moved to a camp soon. He already has harrowing memories of Chios island when he arrived in Greece in 2017. Unable to bear the stench of garbage, the police harassment and the sight of barbed wire around the camp, he paid a smuggler \$650 to take him to Athens. He eventually came to Exarchia, where he found a community of Arab refugees and anarchists who became his close friends. Most of the squats in Exarchia are run by popular committees, which meet frequently to establish rules, sort out disputes and discuss housing needs. "If Greece didn't have anarchists, it would be terrible," says Mohammad.

Iyad Akram, a 25-year-old from Gaza, had stayed in one of the camps on the mainland when he arrived in Athens last July. He remembers the police shouting racist remarks, while migrants often fought in the camp. Fed up, Akram moved to

Exarchia nine days later.

The squat where he and Mohammad were staying was evicted in the early morning on Oct. 17. Those found without legal papers were hauled to detention centers, while everybody else was taken to camps. Akram and Mohammad left the camp yesterday and are now sleeping in a garden in Athens. The hopes they carried with them to Greece are already in tatters.

"I hate the camps," Akram tells me, as he smokes a cigarette. "I didn't leave Gaza to end up there."

Source:

<https://www.ozy.com/fast-forward/greeces-latest-war-on-refugees-clearing-squats-in-an-athens-anarchist-hub/97219/>

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