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Refugee, volunteer, prisoner: Sarah Mardini and Europe's hardening line on migration

They are 'literally just taking a humanitarian activity and labelling it as a crime'

Eric Reidy/TNH

Eric Reidy
Freelance journalist and regular TNH contributor

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MYTELINE, Greece

Early last August, Sarah Mardini sat on a balcony on the Greek island of Lesvos. As the sun started to fade, a summer breeze rose off the Aegean Sea. She leaned back in her chair and relaxed, while the Turkish coastline, only 16 kilometres away, formed a silhouette behind her.

Three years before, Mardini had arrived on this island from Syria – a dramatic

journey that made international headlines. Now she was volunteering her time helping other refugees. She didn't know it yet, but in a few weeks that work would land her in prison.

Mardini had crossed the narrow stretch of water from Turkey in August 2015, landing on Lesvos after fleeing her home in Damascus to escape the Syrian civil war. On the way, she almost drowned when the engine of the inflatable dinghy she was travelling in broke down.

More than 800,000 people followed a similar route from the Turkish coast to the Greek Islands that year. Almost 800 of them are now dead or missing.

As the boat Mardini was in pitched and spun, she slipped overboard and struggled to hold it steady in the violent waves. Her sister, Yusra, three years younger, soon joined. Both girls were swimmers, and their act of heroism likely saved the 18 other people on board. They eventually made it to Germany and received asylum. Yusra went on to compete in the 2016 Olympics for the first ever Refugee Olympic Team. Sarah, held back from swimming by an injury, returned to Lesvos to help other refugees.

On the balcony, Mardini, 23, was enjoying a rare moment of respite from long days spent working in the squalid Moria refugee camp. For the first time in a long time, she was looking forward to the future. After years spent between Lesvos and Berlin, she had decided to return to her university studies in Germany.

But when she went to the airport to leave, shortly after The New Humanitarian visited her, Mardini was arrested. Along with several other volunteers from Emergency Response Centre International, or ERCI, the Greek non-profit where she volunteered, Mardini was charged with belonging to a criminal organisation, people smuggling, money laundering, and espionage.

According to watchdog groups, the case against Mardini is not an isolated incident. Amnesty International says it is part of a broader trend of European governments taking a harder line on immigration and using anti-smuggling laws to de-legitimise humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants.

Far-right Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini recently pushed through legislation that ends humanitarian protection for migrants and asylum seekers, while Italy and Greece have ramped up pressure on maritime search and rescue NGOs, forcing them to shutter operations. At the end of March, the EU ended naval patrols in the Mediterranean that had saved the lives of thousands of migrants.