

Serres, Thursday 31 March 2022



Mohammad Shuhada, 32

Idlib, Syria

I grew up in Idlib, and lived there for 29 years.

It's a small city, like Serres. Around it, there were so many small villages. The weather was good. It was the same as Serres.

We were good people, but maybe we got confused I think.

In the war, people got used to it and came to like blood and fighting. For a lot of people, it was to get rights. The government was very bad. But fighting doesn't help people to have normal lives. It makes them think fighting is normal. And this is what is happening now.

People are fighting now for many reasons. Some people think they have to, some still hope to get rid of the government, the government fights to stay in power, others fight because of religion. There are lots of reasons. But I think the main problem is politics.

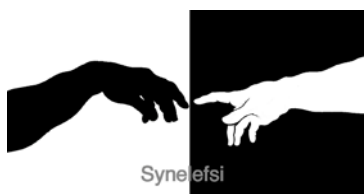
And as a result there are many problems. The country has been without education for 11 years, and we are now believing lies. But we still – I still – have hope to become better.

My dad and mum, I got into Turkey, and my younger brother and sister. It was too dangerous and I was the only one old enough to know what to do and young enough to do it. I got them to Konya. It was worthwhile. They like it there and because they are old they did not need to get jobs. We used a lot of money, but we had some left and they could get a pension as well.

But I stayed in Idlib for a while longer and then eventually when I had to I moved to Europe.

I have been here for two and a half years, with my son who is four. His name is Mustapha. His mother – my wife – is in Belgium now. We both miss her very much and we are working hard to be reunited with her.

For Mustapha it's very hard because he is so young. I think he is not OK. He needs his mother. He sees a social worker for one hour each week and it's really the only time he smiles. He wants his mother, of course. Whatever I can do for him-and I love him and care for him and do what is best for him- I can never be his mother





For me it's also hard. My wife is nine months pregnant. Any day now she will give birth to a baby girl and all I really want is to be there with them. So we can be a family together again.

We were together for one year and seven months in Samos.

The good thing for my family in Konya is that Konya is safe and people have rights there. It's very different from Syria.

In Turkey, it seems like the government decided to use the situation in a good way, everyone can work and make things and make things better in Turkey. But they have not done that here. Erdogan did it. He had his own reasons but it worked well for everyone.

In Idlib, I worked with an organisation, **GOAL**. I worked with them for four and a half years, doing food distribution. It was because people really needed help in Idlib. They couldn't grow enough food and none was coming in by the roads.

But I also created my own company, an internet network. It was named after my brother, *Ashrafnet*. It provided public internet for people's phones and laptops. But it was still very very dangerous in Idlib and when it began to get worse, I left with Mustapha and my wife. We couldn't stay any longer.

It was a real shame for us. At the beginning of the war, I had felt I had to stay in my country, to help it and to help rebuild it when the war ended. I felt that if everyone left, who would be able to build? But then life became much harder, and it was clear things would not end quickly and that only those with power would even be allowed to help to rebuild. And those people were the ones with guns, often without education. Including Al Qaeda, for example.

So, as the missiles were falling on the city, and as the gunfights were getting louder, closer and more frequent, we left.

I decided to go to Europe, because I wanted and still want to continue my education. I want to get certificates so that when it's safe to go home I can be good for my country, for my family. Even for the world, because the world will be better if Syria is a good, safe place again.

We stayed as long as we could stay, and as it became impossible, we left. We went into Turkey and met with my family in Konya. We stayed for six months to save money to pay a smuggler to reach Greece.

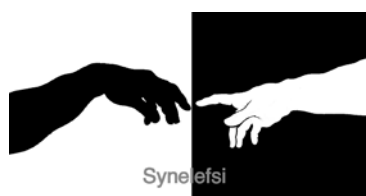
We found the smuggler on Facebook. He charged us €1,100 each. That's why we had to save money and why we were in Turkey for six months.

We tried twice. The first time, the Turkish police caught us. They were crazy. We went from Izmir, but when they caught us they said they would take us to Kilis. I said we had papers and they did it anyway. They drove us there and just left us, so we had to travel back across the country to Izmir once again.

They took us there because they wanted to take our fingerprints, so if we had done anything wrong we could be pushed over the border to Syria.

We lived in a tent in Samos, and then we were transferred here.

Samos was very bad. I worked as a volunteer with **MSF**, for six months or more.





But the camp made everyone feel bad and behave badly. It was very crowded and there were queues for everything, including food,

The company that distributed the food got Syrian, Afghan and other volunteers to work for them. But because they were working but not being paid, and they had no money, they started to steal the food and then sell it to the other refugees. So I could get three pieces of bread, for me, Mustapha and my wife, but they made me pay for two of the pieces. They were thieves, stealing from my family.

I went to the police station, and told them what was happening.

But the police officer just asked me 'you know what happened in Mytilene?' I said yes, there was a fire. He said 'We put the people in prison.'

I said I hadn't made a fire, I'm just asking for food for my child. He said 'we are the leader here'. I said yes but I am telling you there are thieves here stealing our food and you tell me about people setting a fire on another island.

He said: 'Have you studied?' I said yes I graduated from an engineering institute. He said 'then you are smart. You take care of your wife and child. Don't say these things again to me or to anyone else. I understood. I apologised.

A soldier came in carrying a stick and said: 'Give him to me.' The police officer said no, now it is OK. Leave him with me.'

I thought this was Europe. But it's like Syria under Assad.

Then he checked my phones to see if I had photos or videos of the camp, of the situation there. That is terrible. That they banned us from having those, so we could not let people know how it was there. Let me tell you: it was awful. People should know. It isn't just that it was so cold in the tents, and that people would die from cold and from fumes. And the wind cut you like knives.

But it was also that the camp was so crowded. No-one could move. There was no space and it was like torture. The camp was always filthy, with litter and even sewage, and it was never properly cleaned. It was not fair. It was not a way to treat human beings.

If I hadn't been able to speak English, I think the police officer would have arrested me. I think I would still be in prison now.

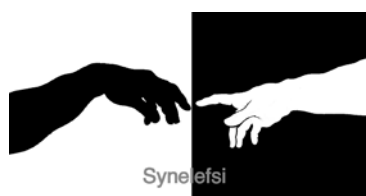
I continued to work as a volunteer in the camp. I tried to help people.

But the conditions were so bad, and it was bad for everyone. I had to cut trees to keep my family warm. But I said to the camp staff and the police: 'We have to do this but it means that the whole hill will be black, with nothing growing on it.'

If they had helped us, we wouldn't have had to do that. But it was necessary, or we would freeze.

So we had a bad impact for everyone, but we didn't want to. We wanted just to live. It was so cold and they provided nothing, and their policies changed good people into bad people, because people felt they must be selfish just to survive. No-one wanted to be that.

And people say 'Middle East refugees are bad, Ukraine are good.'





But we are not bad, and Ukrainians are not either. It is just that our experience was harder than theirs, and people do what they need to to get through, to stay alive.

Seven months ago, we arrived here. It's better here than in Samos, or than Idlib during the war. But to be honest it is very very bad compared to Idlib before the war.

If you have a pet and you want it to have a good house, that's what this camp is like. For pets, not humans.

It's clean and quite new, but for animals, not humans. We are still refugees

We are in the asylum system. In Samos, they changed the law while we were applying, and they told us that because we had been in Turkey and Turkey was 'safe' we would be sent back.

But we were only in Turkey because we had to be to get here, and we had to stay because we had to pay a smuggler and we had to raise money for that.

But we had interviews about sending us to Turkey, so I was rejected for asylum. But then Turkey said it would not accept us. Or anyone. So I was told to reregister to apply again for asylum. And then we were transferred to the mainland.

They didn't do another interview this time, they just looked at our Samos interviews and then sent an e-mail to say we had been accepted. We were so happy, and our lawyer congratulated us.

But then two weeks later I got another e-mail to say I would have to have another interview. So I don't even know what is happening now. Honestly, the only people who have helped us at all so far are the smugglers. That's how I feel because only they have done what they said they would, and what they should. They are the only ones who helped us for our rights.

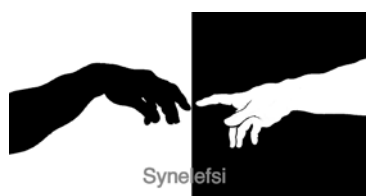
It's hard here because I have a young child, so I cannot work. **Mobile Info Team (MIT)** accepted me as an interpreter, five hours per week, and that would have been good because it is enough time so I can still look after my son, and I could do it on the internet. But then they found someone in Thessaloniki where they are based and that's better for them. I don't blame them, and I understand, but for me it was a real shame.

I volunteer here with **Lifting Hands International (LHI)** – they run a community centre next to Serres camp, where some food and other items are distributed, and lessons are taught as well as social activities taking place) and I am trying to learn skills as well. I have access to a laptop and it's important so I can stay in contact with my wife, but it also means I can learn things as well. I am learning Premiere and other programmes, so I can do a better job when I finally can study and work.

I also made an interview with **Europe Must Act**, with the EU politician Tineke Striek. I did it because I think it is important to talk about what is happening here, and who we are.

But it's nothing real. If they would give us the chance, we could do something. We could help. We could contribute and help make life better for everyone. It's the same in Syria.

It just feels like they will not give us any chance, to live a life and show what we can do. So, many people feel every day like they have to take things into their own hands, force it to happen ourselves.





The refugees in Europe one day will make political change. I take no hope from Europe now. It is gone, my hope.

One day I will take a good course in a good university in Europe. And I hope one day we will be able to go home to Syria, when it is safe. I hope it can be a good country, at peace, with a good government.

I want to study Politics, because that will help rebuild Syria.

I will study anywhere. In Belgium, they speak French. That's a good language.

When my wife arrived in Belgium, there is a law that families can reunify. There are two ways. If she gets residence there, she can invite me. But she doesn't have it yet. The second way is to ask the asylum service here to send me to Belgium. But I would have had to have come here when my wife was in Belgium, so we cannot do that.

I have tried about 14 different lawyers to see if there is a way. Because of course Mustapha and I are desperate to be with her. The last one I approached took on my case. And he has done good work. After a month, the Dublin Unit accepted the case and an appointment has been booked.

That is good news, but my lawyer says that after acceptance by Belgium I would still have to wait at least for and a half months to get a ticket to travel. And I haven't yet been accepted by Belgium. But my wife will give birth very soon. I want to be with her very soon.

She was told she would have residence in Belgium after six months. But she doesn't have it.

With **Lifting Hands**... I try to keep my mind working. I don't want to just be trapped in a box, getting stressed about things I can't control.

I want to help people. I have good experience with organisations. I learnt English through volunteering and I am taking an English certificate so I can study more.

After two and a half years, I have lost everything. I lost my patience, and my hope. I am now just trying to keep my mind strong.

There is a war still in my country. I have to pay attention and keep up with the news to see what is happening there.

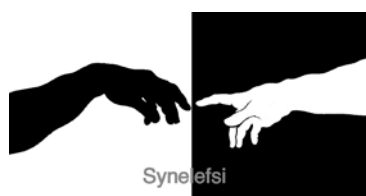
So, I know about Ukraine. We all do.

You don't choose your country, and in many cases we didn't even get to choose our governments. But it is ours. It's where we belong and came from.

So because of the invasion of Ukraine, we understand and we are sad because they will become refugees like us.

It's the same lie 'they are European refugees, we must support them'. This lie becomes the same. They are helping them because their country is destroyed. They know that Russia is very very strong and they know it has weapons and a leader who will kill people, so surely they should have done something.

We hear good news about deals but will they happen? If Donbas wants to be independent I hope it will be. But what about the Ukrainian people there?





And the Ukrainian people have lost their money, their possessions, not because of themselves but politics and politicians.

Some UK news said that the UK spent £1m on changing the government in Ukraine, and in Syria, but where is the money? What happened in Syria? We lost our country. We are refugees without hope, without anything. It was a stupid policy.

I met some Ukrainian people here. I said it's the same with us.

They have given them new staff and security people to look after their cars and things. But security for what? For who? Who are they against? Us?

We don't understand. They don't need that. We won't steal from them. We don't want to take their stuff. Why do they need security? To protect them from us?

That's not their fault. Security guards come even when we talk to the Ukrainian people, to make sure we don't fight them or attack them. Why would we do that? We are not monsters.



I said to them that I hope their country will be free soon. You are 44m people, we are 21 million. We have had to go to and through so many countries, and if your war lasts a long time maybe you might have to do it.

You will have to transfer across in Europe and European opinion will change. That is what happened and is still happening to us. If you feel now that things are good, I hope you don't experience what it feels like when the situation is bad.

I hope the situation in Ukraine improves and the war ends. They are people like us. They have the same rights as all of us. They need help, like anyone would and does. So do we.

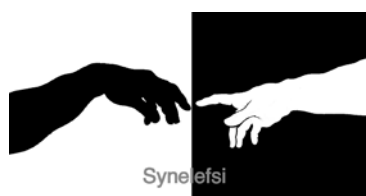
There are about 25 people here so far. *Kosmote* gave them free SIM cards. And bottled water.

The government says 'we thank *Kosmote*' because they gave them these things, and the water company for bottled water.

But they lost their country. And the government is happy because they have been given a bottle of water and a SIM card.

They are refugees. They get better quality food than we ever have, but it's the same experience for them as for us. Even if we give everything to them, they still lost their country.

To be clear in my experience, I have now been here for two years and six months. I have no idea even what will happen tomorrow. The most important things really are for





everyone to be told what will happen and when it will happen. They should give this to us. All of us. Ukrainians and everyone else. Give everyone their rights. For food, work, study. It's no good for anyone to be a refugee.

For me, I still haven't been given residence. I have been here two and a half years.

They are still trying to say they will push me back to Turkey. They should be clear, tell us we can have residency or go somewhere else. Please, we just want and need people to be clear.

And they try to push people back legally, but Turkey and Greece have many problems.

Our main problem is what is the government's plan? After two years we are kept here: what do they want to happen next?

I arrived here with so much hope, to build things and help people, but I lost everything.

I am being punished.

I had good energy but now I just eat, drink, sleep and then I will die.

All has changed in my heart and head. I feel no hope, no dream here. People say that we are bad people. But give us the chance to do good things and we will do them. It's all we want. But now, it's impossible.

I have learnt things without school, my wife, too. She speaks English better than me. She created a school for refugees in the mountain in Samos. She taught 22 girls at this school, and then they became volunteers themselves. So she really changed something. They changed others' lives.

But the government says 'look, the refugees can't do anything.

If the government changes its policies, we can help the whole country. Not just refugees, we can help everyone. We can help Greece if we have the chance. But at the moment we are not allowed to do anything. There are no opportunities. We can help Greece. But we need help to have the chance.

Greek people are good but policies have to change.

