

PROTAGON article by Charis Karanikas (appeared 28 August 2018)
English translation

Sara's Story: The girl who saved 18 migrants is charged with trafficking

The Greek authorities accuse her of participating in a criminal network of 30 people—all members of the same NGO—which assisted in the illegal entry of foreigners into our country. The charges include specific dates, on some of which Sara, according to her professors, was attending her classes at Bard College Berlin.

On the morning of August 28, the Greek Police issued a press release concerning the “activity of an organized criminal network that has been systematically assisting in the illegal entry of foreigners onto Greek soil.” As outlined in the document, 30 individuals are involved, all of them members of a Non-Governmental Organization, three of whom were arrested.

According to information obtained by Protagon, one of the three individuals arrested is Sara Mardini, the 23-year-old Syrian who, with her younger sister Yusra, swam for three and a half hours in August, 2015, dragging an inflatable boat full of refugees toward Greek land, saving the lives of 18 people with whom they had set off from the shores of Turkey. The story of the two sisters spread all over the world—Sara and Yusra were given numerous awards and honors for their action.

Six months ago an in flagrante delicto charge was lodged against two members of the NGO “for forgery, violation of State secrets, espionage, and illegal possession of nautical wireless transmitters.” The police press release claims that the two foreigners had been located in Mytilini, getting into a Jeep, which had affixed plates forged to resemble army plates, bearing the state coat of arms, beneath its legal license plates. The Prosecutor's Office at the Court of the First Instance in Mytilini subsequently ordered a preliminary investigation, “during which it was determined to be the activity of a criminal organization,” the report claims, going on to add: “The ultimate goal was to profit from the operations of the NGO, despite its character as a non-profit organization, either through the receipt of gifts of a material nature, or from grants, or from the depositing of funds from individuals or collective bodies to a particular bank account and on a donation page.”

The charges the individuals involved face include facilitating the illegal entry of foreigners onto Greek soil, the formation of and involvement in a criminal organization, money laundering, violation of State secrets, espionage, and the use of a wireless transmitter without a license.

Sara was arrested by the Greek authorities on August 21, 2018, at the airport in Mytilini shortly before boarding a plane to Athens, to continue on from there to Berlin, where she has been issued a residence permit. On September 3, 2018, she is due to appear at Bard College, in order to begin classes for the new year.

The charges brought against her include specific dates on which the Greek authorities claim she committed illegal acts. As Sara herself writes in her statement, “on most of the dates referred to in the charges, I wasn’t even on Lesbos.” As Protagon research into the case has demonstrated, on some of these dates Sara was attending classes and sitting for exams, as verified by her professors and members of the administration of Bard College Berlin, based on documents, attendance sheets, and e-mail correspondence.

The Journey to Europe

In Syria Sara and her sister were both swimmers, who participated in international competitions as part of the Syrian national team. Their father, a coach, taught them to swim practically before they even learned to walk. As the war worsened in Syria, the family moved from house to house, trying to keep safe. Their family home had been destroyed. In summer 2015 the family decided to send Sara and Yusra to Turkey, and afterwards to Europe, accompanied by two male relatives.

During their passage to Lesbos in August, the shoddy boat carrying approximately 20 refugees presented a problem. The motor stopped working and as no one was steering, the refugees were threatened with drowning. Sara and Yusra dove into the water, grabbed the boat by its ropes, and swam all the way to the shores of Greece. After that, by foot, bus, and train, the two sisters made their way to Germany, where they were given political asylum and reunited with their family.

The story of Sara and Yusra spread all over the world. Sara was invited by Barak Obama and the United Nations to speak during the general assembly meeting regarding the refugee crisis, and she was given international recognitions and awards for her action. Yusra became the youngest UNCHR Goodwill Ambassador and participated in the Olympic Games in Rio in 2016.

Precisely a year after the rescue of the refugees, Sara returned to Greece. As she declares in her statement, she worked as a volunteer for the NGO ERCI from August 23 to September 5 2016, from the end of October to the end of December of that same year, and from February to the end of June, 2017. She joined the volunteers once more in November 2017 for one week, and again from December 25, 2017 until her arrest at the airport in Mytilini on August 21, 2018.

In the meantime, in September 2017 Sara was accepted to Bard College Berlin, where she entered the department of Social Sciences. She was given a semester of leave in January

2018 in order to pursue her volunteer work. Prior to that leave, she was in regular attendance at her classes and took her exams at the end of the fall term in 2017.

The Charges

The press report from the police states that “from their entire mode of operation it was determined that [the individuals] offered immediate assistance with organized networks for the illegal movement of migrants, as they acted with intent to aid the professional and habitual movement of a large number of citizens of third countries to the islands of the Northeastern Aegean (Lesvos and Samos) on at least eleven instances, between August 2016 and January 2018. From their illegal action this criminal organization earned (by the means referred to above) significant monetary sums, the amount of which is a subject for determination by the relevant Authorities.”

Among the charges that have been leveled against Sara is one that has her participating together with the other members of the “criminal organization” in a network of encrypted WhatsApp communications, and that she received at particular times confidential information that should have remained restricted and had to do with refugee flows. In the charges that have been attributed it is noted that Sara along with those other members did not inform those Authorities responsible for search and rescue about that information they received, “and acting with intent, they aided on specific dates (30-8-2016, 8-9-2016, 29-7-2017, 15-9-2017, 6-10-2017, 20-10-2017, 27-10-2017, 8-11-2017, 20-12-2017, 22-12-2017, 2-1-2018) but also on others that were not specified, by profession and by custom aided in the movement of a large number of citizens of third countries toward the islands of the Northeastern Aegean with illegal methods and procedures.”

On some of the days on which Sara is accused of not properly informing the Greek authorities responsible for the search and rescue of refugees, she was writing papers in Berlin, giving lectures in other countries, or sitting for exams at Bard College. “I can confirm that she was present in my class for the final exams in German on December 20, 2017,” Narges Roshan, Sara’s German professor, said of Sara. This is one of the dates on which Sara was supposedly using illegal methods to aid the movement of migrants into Greece. Likewise, from October 2-6, 2017, Sara had gotten permission from Bard College to give a lecture on the refugee crisis at the US consulate in Budapest. Regarding October 20, 2017, the professor Ariane Simard confirms that Sara was present in her class, while on October 27, another professor, Michael Weinman, also confirms that she was present in his class. That same day Sara had a meeting with the dean of the college. A representative from Bard also notes that on November 9-11, she was invited to the Arab Conference organized by Harvard University.

The charges also state that Sara along with others proceeded with the use of contemporary means such as binoculars “in the survey and reconnaissance of the stretch of sea between the shores of Turkey across the way and the island of Lesvos,” and

collected “information that concerned migrant flows from Turkey, at specific times (13-10-2016, 26-5-2017, 13-12-2017) and places on Lesvos, as well as at other times and places that were not determined.” As emerges from the attendance log of her German class, Sara was in class in Berlin on December 12 and 14, 2017, which is to say the day before and the day after she was supposedly scanning the sea off the coast of Lesvos.

Another detail mentioned in the charges is that Sara along with others listened to the wireless communications of Greek and foreign authorities (the Greek Coast Guard, NATO, Frontex) “collecting at specific times (...) information about their operations,” which they afterward shared on WhatsApp. Among the times is the date 22-12-2017. As appears on a document that Protagon has in its possession, on that particular day Sara was at Bard College and signed a document showing that she had received her transit card.

The Jeep and waiting for refugees

In the police communication regarding the “activity of an organized criminal network that has been systematically assisting in the illegal entry of foreigners” it is also mentioned that in the time period between 9-12-2017 and 9-2-2018, the members of the organization, in dozens of instances, waited systematically and in an organized fashion for the arrival of boats carrying irregular migrants, using vehicles with forged license plates.

In Sara’s arrest warrant it is noted that while waiting for the refugees she used the NGO’s Jeep which bore double license plates and that beneath the legal plates were affixed forged plates of a “military type.” The dates that are referred to with regard to this waiting in the warrant are: December 11, 12, 20, and 24, 2017, and January 31, 2018. The attendance record for Sara’s German class at Bard College shows that Sara was present in class on December 11 and 12, and that she was sitting for exams on December 20, 2017. She herself in her statement notes that she returned to ERCI as a volunteer on December 25, 2017.

In her statement Sara appeared to refute all the charges against her and to declare herself “unequivocally innocent.”

In its press release, the Greek Police refers that the felony charges formed against the involved parties have been filed with the Prosecutor’s Office at the Court of the First Instance in Mytilini and the case was referred for inquiry. “The investigation is ongoing, to determine the breadth of the illegal activity of the criminal organization and its connections,” the press release concludes.