

## **SPIEGEL ONLINE**

Refugee helper Sarah Mardini

### **From heroine to suspect**

Syrian swimmer Sarah Mardini became famous for saving lives on her escape. Now she is indicted in Greece for helping refugees. She and her friends are shocked.

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REUTERS Sarah Mardini

Sarah Mardini could not have imagined that one day she would end up in a Greek prison cell. Sarah Mardini is 23 years old, comes from Syria, and she became a heroine three years ago, together with her sister Yusra. On their own flight from Turkey to the Greek island of Lesbos, they saved the lives of 18 people when their inflatable boat sank off the Greek coast.

She has lived in Berlin since 2015, where she wanted to continue her studies this week. But

she is being detained in Korydallos near Athens, the largest prison in Greece. On Tuesday last week, the Greek police arrested her on the island of Lesbos, shortly after she had finished her recent volunteer service for the Greek non-governmental organisation Emergency Response Center International (ERCI), which helps refugees.

The Greek authorities accuse her of some of the most serious crimes a volunteer in Greece has ever faced: she is supposed to be a member of a criminal network that facilitates the entry of illegal migrants. She is accused of human trafficking, money laundering and even espionage. According to her Greek lawyer, she is accused of five crimes and three offences.

How could that be? What did Sarah Mardini do wrong? Did she even do something wrong?

When SPIEGEL called Sarah Mardini in prison on Thursday, her youthful, lively voice sounds calm despite her difficult situation. She shows no signs of frustration, and her message is clear: "We have done nothing wrong. We were just helping other people."

### **She wanted to help others out of gratitude**

Sarah Mardini's friends in Germany support her story. They say she was travelling back and forth between Berlin and Lesbos, the place where she almost died in 2015. She was lucky then, as she fled to Europe. That is why she wanted to help others now, out of gratitude, but also to process her own escape and her own fate. Sarah Mardini has been volunteering with ERCI for almost two years. On the coast of Lesbos, she helped hundreds of refugees who came across the sea on overcrowded inflatable boats. She gave the exhausted people water to drink, distributed blankets and dry socks until she was suddenly arrested last week.

It is not the first time that Sarah attracted international attention. The last time, however, the circumstances were much more pleasant. She and her younger sister Yusra won hearts and headlines in August 2015. At that time the young women from Damascus had fled to Europe.



AFP Sarah and Yusra Mardini at the Bambi Awards Ceremony

Sarah Mardini grew up in Saruja, a district of Damascus. She and her younger sister Yusra learned to swim early; her father worked as a coach. The sisters had talent. They competed for the Syrian national team. Then the civil war destroyed their youth. The family moved every few months, depending on which part of Damascus was the least life-threatening. Eventually they could no longer stand it when the bombs hit. Their father organized 10,000 dollars for Sarah and Yusra. The daughters were to flee to Europe to have a better life there.

Shortly after, they sat in a boat with other refugees sailing from the Turkish coast towards Lesbos. After a few minutes the outboard engine went off. Sarah and Yusra let themselves slide into the water and swam off. They pulled the boat behind them on a rope. They swam for their lives and helped to save the lives of the remaining passengers. After hours the group arrived on the other shore, on Lesbos, in Europe.

### **To the Olympic Games in Rio as a swimmer**

Sarah and Yusra finally made it to an emergency shelter in Berlin. They asked a translator

whether there was a swimming club nearby. A little later they trained with “Wasserfreunde Spandau”.

The story of the sisters who had towed a boat full of refugees ashore was spreading around the world. Yusra started at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. She became the face of the Olympic refugee team created by the International Olympic Committee. Yusra is now an ambassador for UNHCR. She gives lectures all over the world, met the Pope and Barack Obama and is training for the 2020 Olympic Games in Tokyo.

Sarah had to end her swimming career because of an injury. A year ago she started her studies at Bard College Berlin, where she received a full scholarship. The university supported Sarah's missions on Lesbos. She was able to take a leave of absence to help refugees in Greece.

### **The accusations leave her stunned**

When she waited at Mytilini airport in Lesbos for her flight to Athens on August 21 she was on her way back to university, Sarah Mardini tells us on the phone. "I was looking forward to my new semester at Bard College. The night before I had been out with friends and had hardly slept." Police approached her at the departure gate and told her she was not allowed to board, she had to come with them. "I asked them: Why? I have a passport. But I stayed calm, followed them and they took me to a detention facility at the airport."

Shortly afterwards another volunteer from the non-governmental organisation ERCI was taken to her cell: the German citizen Sean Binder, who is charged with the same accusations, together with a Greek employee of the same NGO. Binder's mother told SPIEGEL that her son had been helping refugees because his father came from Vietnam and fled by sea to Thailand during the war.

Yet they are all accused by the Greek authorities of serious crimes. This includes intercepting the radio traffic of the Greek coastguard and the EU border agency Frontex and using

"encrypted social network apps" to obtain confidential information about arriving migrants from Turkey.

### **Greek police call the accused "a criminal organization"**

Sarah Mardini says the accusations bewildered her. "They asked me why I was back on Lesbos whereas I am living in Germany. I told them that Arabic translators are needed here, that I am trained as a lifeguard and can help people. They asked us about the radio we use - but everyone has one and we only listen to open channels. They wanted to know why we were using WhatsApp as if that was a crime."

The Greek police claim that their investigation of the Greek aid organisation ERCI was "comprehensive". They speak of 30 accomplices, including 24 foreigners. Local sources describe the relief organisation as one of the first NGOs to take action in Lesbos because of the refugee crisis. The NGO supported rescue operations by Frontex and the coast guard and offered medical aid in Moria, the largest and most notorious Greek refugee camp.

The Greek police call the accused "a criminal association" that is said to have been active "at least since the end of 2015" and "provided direct assistance to organised smuggling networks". Their aim was to make profits through financial and in-kind donations.

Like most volunteers, Sarah Mardini publicly called for donations for the NGO. On August 8th she posted on Facebook: "If each of you donates only one or five euros, I am sure we can achieve our common goal of donating 15,000 euros for the people who need help in the refugee camp Moria".

### **An allowance of 100 euros per week**

If the Greek police cannot prove that such appeals for donations were in fact self-interest, they will probably have a hard time with their accusations against the NGO. Independent

Greek legal experts share this view.

Sarah Mardini says she never had the impression that something is wrong with the NGO. "I would trust ERCI with my life. We have very strict rules. We have worked closely with the authorities. Everyone in Lesbos knows us. Instead of checking our phones, the police should have looked at us as human beings to see who we are and what we stand for."

Sven Spannekrebs is a coach with "Wasserfreunde Spandau". He knows Sarah Mardini since she joined his club in 2015 and they are now good friends. A few weeks ago Spannekrebs travelled to Lesbos to visit Mardini on her mission. He says that she helped to organize the refugee camps. She translated, treated wounds and collected donations via Facebook. Spannekrebs says that the money was used to buy about a dozen washing machines for the camp. At night, Mardini and her fellow volunteers observed the coast of Lesbos. They would immediately sound alarm when a refugee boat appeared on the horizon. Mardini did the job on a voluntary basis, says Spannekrebs. She only received an allowance of 100 euros per week.

The Greek authorities' crackdown on volunteers is new. It suggests that an example is being set to curb the activities of volunteers in Lesbos.

### **It can take months before a trial date is set**

It is hard to tell how long Mardini has to stay in prison. If the allegations were to be confirmed in court, she would probably have to go to prison for years. Because of the seriousness of the charges, there will be a trial in any case. Her lawyer has now filed an application to release her for the duration of her proceedings. However a decision is not expected before the end of next week and it could take months before a trial date is set.

In Germany, politicians have already become aware of the Sarah Mardini case. Upon request, the Office of the Federal President announced that the case was known to Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. It was now "up to the German government to resolve the

case together with the Greek authorities".

Her trainer and friend Spannekrebs says: "The accusations are completely fabricated." He considers the accusation that Mardini helped smugglers or did business with them absurd. "Sarah once said to me, 'Smugglers are the worst. They take money to send people to their deaths. I almost died because of these people.' And now she of all people is supposed to have worked with them? That's just crazy!"

Yusra Mardini, the Olympic swimmer, will not comment on her sister's arrest. Through her management she released the following statement: "She knows her sister very well, and everything Sarah does, she does with the good intention of saving human lives".