

# Alone, on a flaming ship

**The story of a Syrian family fleeing war who lost a 6-year-old son in the Norman Atlantic ferry disaster in 2014.**

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They would try to blend in among the other passengers – at least that is what they’ d planned – but on the night of December 27, 2104, the Norman Atlantic ferry to the Italian port of Ancona was late arriving at Greece’ s western Igoumenitsa harbor. As the clock ticked, the father and his two sons, refugees from northeastern Syria, started feeling more and more exposed. Their presence at the port became increasingly visible.

As a policeman approached them for questioning, the younger of the two boys managed to board by following a family of Arabs. “My son is inside, let me through,” Ahmad Mohammad remembers shouting.

Despite being separated from 6-year-old Raed, Ahmad tried to think calmly. He called his siblings who live in Germany and asked that someone meet the boy in Ancona. He couldn’ t imagine the tragic events that were to follow.

When he returned to Athens the following day, the television news programs were showing footage of a flaming ship – the Norman Atlantic, which had caught fire in the middle of the night while sailing in the Strait of Otranto. After a joint Greek and Italian rescue mission that lasted 36 hours, the toll was 11 dead and at least 18 missing. Some bodies were identified by DNA. Raed was never found.

“I now believe he is dead. A death certificate has been issued, but I still have a right to know what happened to him, what happened on the boat,” says the grieving father.

Ahmad is one of 105 plaintiffs (survivors and victims’ relatives) who have filed suit at a court in Bari, Italy, against the owner, manager and builder of the Norman Atlantic, as well as the Italian ship register.

For the first time Kathimerini tells the story of the family which fled civil war in Syria only to become embroiled in one of the biggest maritime tragedies in the Mediterranean in recent years.

### Fleeing Syria

Some of his brothers had gone to university, and one was already working as a doctor in Europe, but Ahmad chose a different path and opened a bakery in the Syrian town of Hasakah to support his wife and their four children.

It took almost two years before the Syrian civil war landed on their doorstep. Their neighborhood came under attack in 2013.

“I remember the sky being bright red. I heard screams. I grabbed the children and ran. Our nearest neighbors were 100 meters away but when we got there, they were all dead. The table was set; they had been about to sit down to dinner,” remembers Ahmad. “That’s when I decided that we should leave Syria for my children’s sake.”

The family initially moved to Ceylanpinar, a small town on the Turkish-Syrian border. Jobs were hard to come by and wages were half of what Turks were being paid. The Syrian refugees did not feel welcome, and the money Ahmad’s brother sent from Europe was not enough to feed his family of six. That’s when he thought of Greece as a gateway to Europe. The family traveled to Izmir in Turkey and sought a smuggler, like **thousands of Syrians before them**, to help them make the crossing.

They got a deal for 1,200 euros per adult and 600 euros per child but only had enough money to send Ahmad and the two elder sons, Abdulkader and Raed. Once they reached Germany, they would figure out a way to bring over the rest of the family through a reunification program.

Ahmad had also thought that his two oldest sons could start school as soon as they arrived in Germany.

## Reaching Europe

On December 3, 2014, the father and his two sons landed on the shores of the Greek island of Lesbos on a plastic dinghy, along with another 27 refugees. They walked for a couple of hours, until they were spotted by a taxi driver who called the police.

They spent six days at the processing center in Moria, where they were given a six-month permit to stay, and then traveled to Athens, where they looked for another trafficker for the rest of the journey. At the time, some refugees would rent a hotel room for 450 euros a month, while others would seek help from acquaintances or rent a bed for 4 euros per night at large apartments fitted for the purpose by smuggling rings. Ahmad belonged to the latter category.

The Balkan Route via Idomeni in northern Greece had not opened yet, so the passage to Europe was either very expensive or very dangerous. The family's options were to buy fake papers and board an airplane or to risk sneaking onto the back of truck to Italy, mainly via Albania, or through the Greek ports of Patra and Igoumenitsa.

“I didn't have enough money for the 'traditional' routes. My only solution was either to return to Turkey or find an alternative,” Ahmad tells Kathimerini. He eventually found himself in Igoumenitsa with one new adult passport and his two sons, hoping they would sneak onto a ferry to Italy.

No one knows how many refugees and migrants were hiding on the Norman Atlantic that night. As Kathimerini reported in December, one Greek truck driver told Italian authorities that when the fire broke out he saw at least two stowaways in the car deck and another four on a lifeboat.

Two rescued Afghans and a Syrian who had snuck on, hidden in trucks, said that there were at least another 10 on board. On one of the bodies located in the garage, Italian authorities found objects in the pockets that suggested it belonged to an Afghan man.

## Eyewitnesses

Very little is known about what happened to 6-year-old Raed on the ferryboat. One survivor, who lost his wife and daughter in the fire, remembers seeing the boy crying because he was alone, shortly after the ship set sail from Igoumenitsa. The witness has testified that he saw Raed again at an exit to the deck when the smell of burning plastic filled the cabins and corridors.

Back in Athens, a Palestinian man sharing a flat with Ahmad and Abdulkader, close to Acharnon Street, remembers finding the father and son staring at footage of the Norman Atlantic on the television in a state of shock. The 8-year-old boy sat in stony silence, unable to respond to any questions and refusing food. He didn't cry either.

After the wreck of the Norman Atlantic was towed to Brindisi, one of Ahmad's brothers tried in vain to learn of his nephew's fate, while Ahmad and Abdulkader spent the next two months in Athens posting photographs of Raed on Facebook and asking for information on his movements. They eventually returned to Turkey to join the rest of the family. Meanwhile, Greek authorities issued a death certificate for Raed on December 30, 2015.

### **Dealing with the pain**

Ahmad made it to Germany in May 2016 and received a one-year residence permit with the right of renewal. His wife and their three remaining children joined him last August. Now they are learning German and trying to adapt to their new life, but the pain of their loss still weighs heavily.

"I still look for news about the case," Ahmad tells Kathimerini via Skype from the family's new home in Wurzburg, Germany. His wife still has some hope that Raed may be still be found, but the couple has agreed never to discuss the issue in front of the other children.

Abdulkader, the eldest son, suffered from nightmares and shut himself off for months after the tragedy, besieged by guilt for not having followed his younger brother onto the ship. None of the family had the opportunity to receive grief counseling, until now.

"Abdulkader's teacher says he has a very bright future ahead of him, that he's very smart," says the boy's father. "I'm very proud of him. But there are moments when he's lost in his thoughts. His memories of his brother have not been extinguished. Whenever

someone asks him what he needs, he says he wants his brother to be found.”

Just 43, Ahmad appears older on the computer screen; his hair is completely white and his eyes sad and tired. He’ s learning German and hopes to work as a baker again or as an assistant for the elderly. “I blame myself every day, but I have three children and need to stay strong,” he says.

“My mind says that my son is dead. But, my heart still hopes he might be alive. Maybe someone managed to save him.”

Links to the published story

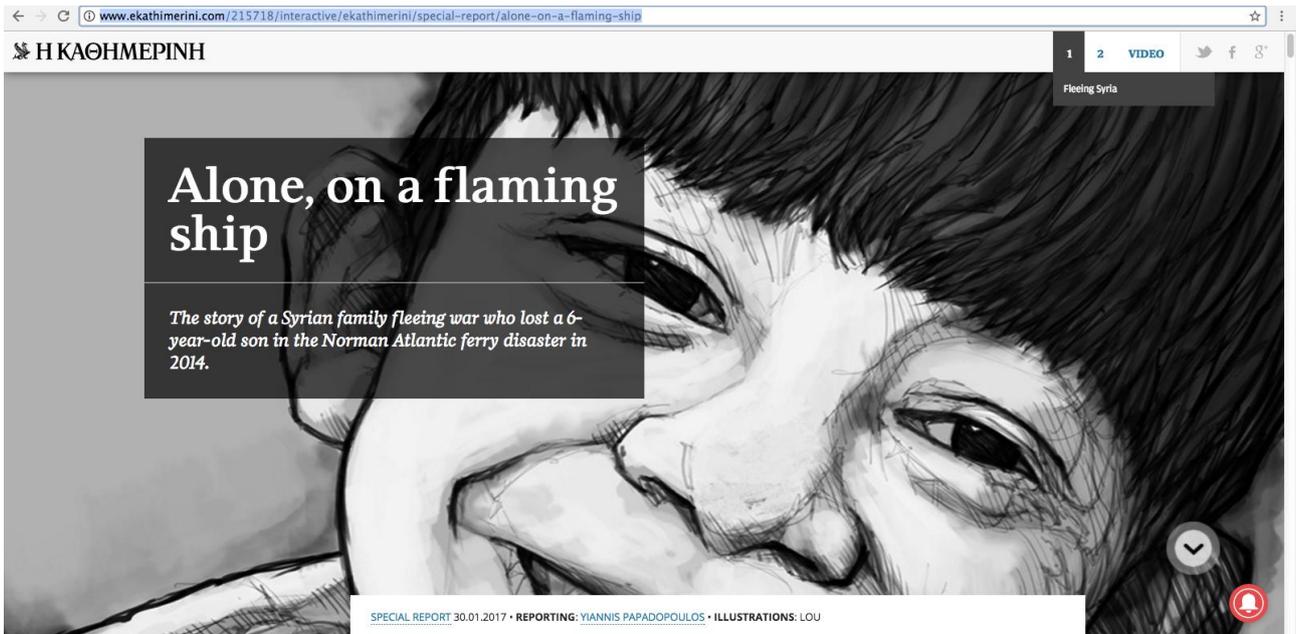
Greek edition:

<http://www.kathimerini.gr/892869/interactive/epikairothta/ereynes/e3i-etwn-monos-se-ena-flegomeno-ploio>

English edition:

<http://www.ekathimerini.com/215718/interactive/ekathimerini/special-report/alone-on-a-flaming-ship>

Screenshot 1:



Screenshot 2:

