

Aylan's story: How desperation left a 3-year-old boy washed up on a Turkish beach

By **Justin Wm. Moyer** September 3, 2015

The first disturbing photo shows **a small boy**. He is wearing a red T-shirt and long shorts that stop below the knee. His shirt is hiked above his waist, exposing his midriff. He is wearing black sneakers with no socks. And **he is dead**, face down in the rocky surf.

In the second photo, the boy is being carried away by a policeman. **The policeman** is wearing latex gloves. The boy's tiny feet dangle below the policeman's waist; we see that one of the Velcro straps on his sneakers has come undone. And though we can't know what the policeman is thinking as **he carries a dead child** from the ocean, one thing is clear: He is looking away.

The Kurdish boy who washed up on the beach was identified by Turkish officials as **3-year-old Aylan Kurdi** [in news reports](#). **He was in one of two boats**, [Reuters reported](#), carrying a total of 23 people that set off separately from the Akyarlar area of Turkey's Bodrum peninsula, apparently **headed to the Greek island of Kos**, where they could have **attempted to enter the European Union**. Reports suggested that their ultimate **destination was Canada**.

Instead, officials said, **the boat capsized**, and Aylan washed up a few miles to the northeast in Turkey, not far from a beach resort. The dead included five children — among them Aylan's 5-year-old brother — and one woman. According to [the Independent](#), the woman was the boys' mother, Riham, 35. Seven were rescued, and two reached the shore in life jackets. According to the [Ottawa Citizen](#), the boy's father, Abdullah, survived.

The family may have been trying to reach Canada. In June, the paper said, Aylan's family "desperately" tried to get permission to emigrate to Canada — where Abdullah's sister, Teema Kurdi, lives in Vancouver — but their refugee application was rejected by Canadian authorities.

"I heard the news at five o'clock this morning," Teema Kurdi, who had gotten a call from Abdullah, told [the Citizen](#) on Wednesday. "All he said was, 'My wife and two boys are dead.'"

"The family had two strikes against them," reported [the Citizen](#), "Like thousands of other Syrian Kurdish refugees in Turkey, the U.N. would not register them as refugees, and the Turkish government would not grant them exit visas."

"I was trying to sponsor them," Teema Kurdi told the paper, "and I have my friends and my neighbors who helped

me with the bank deposits, but we couldn't get them out, and that is why they went in the boat. I was even paying rent for them in Turkey, but it is horrible the way they treat Syrians there.”

A Canadian MP, Fin Donnelly, told the [CBC News](#), that he was trying to assist Kurdi. “She was very concerned obviously with what was going on in Syria and wanted to get her family out,” he said. He and Kurdi wrote a letter appealing to the country's immigration ministry but there was no further movement on the request.

The family was among the millions dead or on the run from the Islamic State's continuing campaign of **destruction in Syria and Iraq**. But, at least until the next horrific image comes along, Aylan is the most powerful symbol of the conflict that has engulfed the region.

[\[A dead baby becomes the most tragic symbol yet of the Mediterranean refugee crisis\]](#)

Aylan's family was from Kobane, Syria, a city often at the center of clashes between Western forces and the Islamic State. Though Kobane was taken by the extremist group last year, the Islamic State was [forced to retreat in February](#). Since then, clashes have continued — including an attack in June in which [145 civilians were killed](#).

“The Daesh attack was a suicide mission,” Redur Xelil, a spokesman for the Kurdish YPG militia, said — using another name for the Islamic State — after the June assault. “Its aim wasn't to take the city but to create terror.”

As is clear, Kobane was no place for a child.

Refugees like Aylan make the 800-mile journey from Kobane through Turkey, trying to get to that nation's Aegean coast. Bodrum, near where Aylan was found, is described by [Lonely Planet](#) as “Turkey's most glamorous seaside getaway.” But the young boy's family was not here for the sightseeing or swimming.

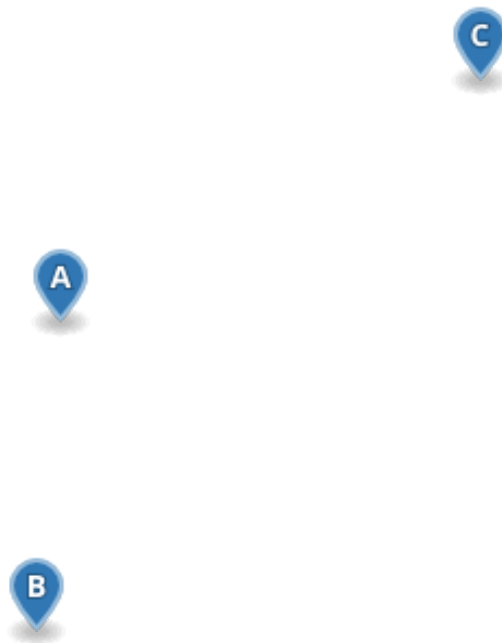
Kos is another jewel of the Aegean — idyllic beaches, mountain villages, ancient ruins. But lately, Kos is less known for its beauty than for its ever-evolving refugee crisis. [Six hundred migrants](#) arrive each night on the island of about 30,000. Since January, a staggering 125,000 refugees have [found their way to Kos](#) and other Greek islands, bringing the humanitarian crisis that's [included violent protest](#) to seaside communities.

“We couldn't sleep at night,” one Iraqi who made it to Kos [told Der Spiegel last month](#). “We were constantly afraid of the militias. They kill people and throw them onto the garbage piles. We want a better life.” [Another familiar refrain](#): “We want papers! We want to eat!”

What refugees sometimes find hard to convey is that, as unhappy as the inhabitants of Kos are about their surprise visitors, those visitors are looking for the quickest way out.

“We just want to leave this island, and they don’t understand that,” Laith Saleh, a 30-year-old plasterer from Aleppo who spent three years fighting Syrian government forces and the Islamic State, told [the Associated Press last month](#). “We can’t get on the boat to Athens if we don’t have the papers.”

Aylan’s family likely wanted to be part of the 600 people coming to Kos daily to fight for food and registration. As bleak as that sounds, it was better than what they left behind in Syria. And it certainly was better than what they got.



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At its closest point, Kos is about 2.5 miles across the Aegean from Turkey. Aylan’s journey across this treacherous stretch of water would have been in a rubber dinghy or similar small boat. Many of these vessels are operated by smugglers — [charging more than \\$800 per person](#) to cross under cover of night.

The result: A 3-year-old ends up dead on a beach in Turkey. He fled his home, where he wasn’t wanted, sought shelter on an island that didn’t want him, and died on the shores of a land that perhaps wanted him least of all. And as refugees from the Islamic State and other turbulent parts of the world besiege Eurostar trains, crowd the French port of Calais, and die on the shores of Libya or in trucks in Austria, it’s clear that Aylan is just one of countless

many.

[*\[Hungary's leader to migrants: "Please don't come."\]*](#)

“This tragic image of a little boy who’s lost his life fleeing Syria is shocking and is a reminder of the dangers children and families are taking in search of a better life,” Justin Forsyth, the chief executive of the child advocacy group [Save the Children](#), told [the Guardian](#). “This child’s plight should concentrate minds and force the EU to come together and agree to a plan to tackle the refugee crisis.”

Sarah Kaplan contributed to this report.

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