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The refugee drama in Syria, Turkey, and Greece: Why a comprehensive approach is needed

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SWP Comment

NO. 16 APRIL 2020

The Refugee Drama in Syria, Turkey, and Greece

Why a Comprehensive Approach Is Needed

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The plight of refugees in the Syrian province of Idlib, on the Greek islands, and on the EU's external borders has worsened dramatically over the last few months. Once more, the European Union (EU) is split on questions of asylum and migration, and it portrays limited capacity to act in issues of foreign and security policy. What options does the EU have to address the deteriorating situation? This question has become even more pressing due to the spread of Covid-19. The EU-Turkey statement of 2016 has strengthened cooperation with Ankara on humanitarian aid and border controls, but it also has major weaknesses. A comprehensive approach is needed. The EU should prioritise providing new financial resources for Turkey that should be complemented by scaling-up assistance to Greece as well as to Syria's neighbours. In addition, the Europeans should support the creation of a safe zone in northern Idlib.

As in 2015, the worsening of the refugee situation in Greece and Turkey today stems from an escalation in the (civil) war in Syria. Since April 2019, the regime in Damascus has launched a number of military offensives aimed at reconquering the province of Idlib in the country's north-west, with the overall goal of reclaiming the whole of Syria's territory. An agreement between Russia and Turkey (the September 2018 Sochi Agreement) had previously averted the offensive, but it was ultimately unable to prevent it. Even the Turkish observation posts along the agreed ceasefire line did not change this. In December 2019 the Syrian regime launched its latest military cam-

paign with the support of its allies — Russia, Iran, and Iranian-led militias.

In order to counter the advances of the Syrian army, Ankara increasingly supported Syrian rebels and brought its own troops and heavy equipment to the frontlines starting in February 2020. Turkey wants to prevent a renewed rush of refugees to its borders, to underpin its demand for a safe zone or buffer zone in the border region, and to shore up its negotiating position with regard to three areas on Syrian territory that it currently occupies. After a dramatic escalation between Turkey and Syrian rebels on the one hand, and the Syrian army, Russia, Iran, and Iranian-led militias



on the other, Moscow and Ankara agreed upon another ceasefire on 5 March 2020. The ceasefire applies to a narrow six-kilometre strip on both sides of the M4 motorway connecting the Syrian provincial capitals Latakia and Aleppo. Even if the ceasefire has since resulted in a cessation of air strikes, the arrangement is not intended to be permanent and does not settle the conflicting interests of the actors involved. Its implementation has also proven to be difficult.

Dramatic Situation of Internally Displaced Persons in Northern Syria

Against this background, the predicament of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria has further worsened. According to the United Nations (UN), from the beginning of December 2019 to mid-March 2020, almost one million Syrians — approximately 60 per cent of which are children and 20 per cent women — fled from the fighting and the advancing Syrian Arab Army. Today, around a quarter of the people in the affected areas of the provinces of Idlib and Aleppo are on the run. The way to Turkey, however, is blocked — all border crossings into Turkey have, in principle, been kept closed since March 2015. Turkey also completed a border wall in 2018 and has used force to repel new refugees from Syria, as reported by human rights organisations. Some 550,000 Syrians have thus sought refuge in the border region in north-western Idlib, and more than 400,000 have moved to Turkish-controlled areas further east, mainly in the enclaves of al-Bab and Afrin.

For many, it is not their first displacement. Since 2017, some 1.5 million Syrians have been evacuated to Idlib from other parts of the country in the course of so-called reconciliation agreements, which served the regime in Damascus to reconquer breakaway territories, or have fled there. This has doubled the population in the province of Idlib. Even before the

current crisis, 2.8 million people in north-west Syria were dependent on humanitarian aid. Harsh weather conditions have added to the worsening situation of refugees: There is a lack of (heated) shelters, water, sanitary facilities, food, and protection against attacks.

Further forced displacement from Syria towards Turkey is foreseeable once the fighting in the province of Idlib intensifies again or if Damascus takes control of the north-west of the country. Yet, Turkey is not ready to accept more refugees and is therefore likely to keep the border closed. Even in the mid to long term, Syrian refugees are unlikely to return to Syria in significant numbers. Rather, more Syrians are likely to leave, or want to leave, the country in order to escape repression and persecution or — in view of the economic and currency crisis — to make a living elsewhere.

Situation of Refugees in Turkey

Turkey hosts the largest refugee population worldwide. Syrians, with around 3.6 million people, constitute the largest group. In addition, there are 400,000 to 500,000 non-Syrian refugees, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Syrian refugees enjoy temporary protection in Turkey, and only about 2 per cent of them live in refugee camps. They can obtain work permits, but this ultimately depends on the goodwill of their employers. Compared with neighbouring countries, refugees in Turkey have a high rate of school enrolment and a large proportion work in the (mainly) informal sector. Nevertheless, it remains a major challenge for Turkey to integrate Syrian refugees into its society and economy (see SWP Comments 1/2020 and 5/2020). Moreover, popular attitudes towards refugees have become increasingly hostile as the economic crisis in the country deepens. As a result, the government has ramped up restrictive measures. Syrian refugees are no longer allowed to stay in Istanbul, but only in the districts where they were originally regis-

tered. It also appears that some refugees have been pressured to sign up for “voluntary” return. In practice they are threatened with deportation in inhumane conditions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 87,000 refugees returned to Syria from Turkey between 2016 and January 2020. It is fair to assume that a sizeable portion of them did not do so voluntarily.

The repatriation of refugees also plays a growing role in Ankara’s military offensives against its southern neighbour. When “Operation Olive Branch” began in January 2018, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emphasised in a speech that the goal was “to return Afrin to its true owners ... and to return three and a half million Syrians to their homeland”. In September 2019 – one month before the latest military invasion – Erdoğan presented a plan to the UN General Assembly that foresaw reconstruction projects to settle about one million refugees in a safe zone in north-eastern Syria.

Escalation at the Turkish-Greek Border

At the end of February 2020, the Turkish government announced that it would open its border to Europe. In doing so, it drew refugees and migrants to the crossings with Greece, provoking a local humanitarian emergency. Four objectives informed Ankara’s decision: 1) to obtain more EU financial support for hosting refugees; 2) to commit Europe to providing stronger financial and diplomatic support in the face of the humanitarian emergency in Idlib, which would help to overcome the crisis on the ground and prevent new refugee movements into Turkey; 3) to shore up political/military backing for Turkey’s agenda in northern Syria; and 4) to receive financial support for its reconstruction efforts there, including the creation of residential development projects for repatriated refugees.

The Greek government used tear gas and rubber bullets to prevent refugees and migrants from entering Greece, and it

suspended the right to apply for asylum for one month. According to press reports, a secret camp on the Greek mainland has been used to detain newly arrived migrants and refugees in order to return them directly to Turkey, bypassing the rule of law. Numerous EU representatives, including Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and the Council of Interior Ministers, expressed clear support for Greece in these endeavours. Frontex, the EU’s border and coast guard, was tasked with launching two rapid interventions to reinforce Greek land and sea borders with Turkey and to intensify repatriation operations. For these and other measures – such as offering financial incentive programmes for voluntary returns, increasing reception capacities in the Evros region of Greece, and strengthening locally-needed infrastructure for health and safety screening – the EU Commission provided €350 million in emergency aid. It announced that this amount would be doubled through a reallocation of budgetary resources. Only after some delay did the EU Commissioner for Home Affairs, Ylva Johansson, voice cautious criticisms of Greece’s clear violations of international and European refugee law. Therefore, with the growing operational involvement of EU agencies in northern Greece, there is a risk of sharing responsibility for the violations of human rights and refugee law.

By mid-March the immediate crisis at the EU’s external border in Greece had eased. Since then, Turkey has transported several thousand irregular migrants and refugees that remained in the Evros border region back to Turkish cities. What has often been described from a European perspective as attempted blackmail by Ankara appears to have come to an end for the time being. The Turkish coast guard has also resumed its regular border surveillance. However, this is unlikely to stop crossings to the Greek Aegean islands completely, especially when milder weather conditions return in the spring.

Perpetual Crisis on the Greek Islands

Living conditions for migrants and refugees on the Greek islands remain catastrophic. The facilities (so-called hotspots), which were set up with EU support starting at the end of 2015, were meant to accommodate just over 6,000 people, but they currently house more than 41,000 people. The overcrowding is an — unplanned — consequence of the EU-Turkey statement of 2016, which stipulates, among other things, that asylum seekers may not, as a rule, be transferred to mainland Greece. At the same time, asylum procedures on the islands have been extremely slow, and repatriations to Turkey that were originally intended have hardly been implemented. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs), UNHCR, and various EU institutions have long criticised the living conditions in the hotspots. In addition to overcrowding, a lack of security, dismal sanitary conditions, and insufficient access to medical care and psycho-social support add to the humanitarian crisis. Accidents and fires occur repeatedly, as do violent riots, which have already claimed several lives. The first Covid-19 infections among migrants and refugees in a reception centre on the Greek mainland illustrate the even more serious threat to the health and lives of those detained in camps on the islands.

For months already, the Greek government has been considering the evacuation of refugees to the mainland. In the medium to long term, Athens wants to house new asylum seekers arriving on the islands in closed facilities. However, local protests have so far largely prevented their construction. With the asylum law that came into force in January 2020, Greece has further restricted the rights that allow asylum seekers to stay in the country; the use of the police and the military is intended to speed up the asylum procedures. Whether the Greek government will succeed in returning rejected asylum seekers to Turkey in larger numbers than in the past depends on two questionable assumptions. On the one

hand, Greek courts would have to consider Turkey as a safe third country. Related legal challenges have already been raised against summary deportations of irregular migrants during the current crisis. On the other hand, Ankara would need to offer constructive cooperation, which has been fundamentally called into question by the recent crisis at the common land border.

Background of the EU-Turkey Statement

Cooperation between the EU and Turkey is urgently needed, both for refugee protection and for border security. Over the past weeks, both sides have emphasised that the existing EU-Turkey statement of March 2016 — often referred to as the refugee or migration “pact” or “deal” — continues to serve as a common point of reference. Following a meeting with Erdoğan in Brussels on 9 March 2020, EU Council President Charles Michel announced that EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu should jointly review how the 2016 statement could be better put into practice.

By 2014 the escalation of the civil war in Syria had led to a massive regional crisis of forced displacement, all while the UNHCR was facing severe shortages of humanitarian aid. Brussels’ first response was to launch the “EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis” (“Madad Fund”). The trust fund provided initial financial support for several of Syria’s neighbouring countries in 2014, but it was far from sufficient. In view of rapidly rising refugee numbers, Brussels pursued more comprehensive stabilisation measures in autumn 2015 with the “EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan”. The first part of the plan aimed at improving the humanitarian situation of refugees in Turkey. This was to be achieved both through European financial aid and through legal and institutional reforms in Turkey. The latter were particularly decisive for providing Syrians with medium-term prospects. For example,

the Turkish labour market was opened up and Syrian children were able to go to school. The second part of the Action Plan focussed on border management and information campaigns against irregular migration. This was in the interest of Europe as well as Turkey. After all, Turkey wanted to avoid serving as a corridor for irregular migration from various parts of the Middle East and Asia to Europe over the long term.

However, a broader political agreement became necessary in order to get the co-operation between Europe and Turkey off the ground and operational. This was done in March 2016 with the EU-Turkey statement, in which the Europeans committed to mobilise up to €6 billion until the end of 2018. In return, no more asylum applications were to be accepted from Syrians who landed irregularly on the Greek islands. Instead, they were to be returned to Turkey as swiftly as possible – which would be defined as a safe third country for this purpose. Conversely, the EU would accept vulnerable persons from Turkey through resettlement, ideally in corresponding numbers to the Syrians returned from the Greek islands (“one-to-one mechanism”). In the case that irregular crossings over the Aegean were by-and-large stopped, Europe offered the prospect of further resettlements from Turkey. The EU also committed to revitalising accession talks with Ankara to continue work on deepening the customs union and accelerating negotiations on visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens.

Implementation of the Statement

To date, most of the pledged €6 billion in European financial support has been spent on education, health, and humanitarian aid. According to the EU Commission, contracts for services worth €4.7 billion have been signed, of which €3.2 billion has already been paid out. Financial resources have been approved, mainly for projects implemented by UN agencies, international financial organisations, and some NGOs. A

good €1.5 billion has also been earmarked directly for state agencies in Turkey, above all the Ministry of Education. In an audit at the end of 2018, the EU Court of Auditors emphasised the need to shift from short-term, limited humanitarian aid to the creation of sustainable support structures for refugees.

From a European perspective, the greatest achievement of the EU-Turkey statement is that the number of irregular border crossings into the EU has been greatly reduced. For many proponents of the pact, the most important argument for its continuation is the deterrent effect on sea crossings and the subsequently lower number of drownings. The one-to-one mechanism has often been described as the reason for this development, as Syrians received the political signal that they would be deported from Greek islands back to Turkey. However, in practice, the implementation of this aspect of the EU-Turkey statement has been very limited. By the end of January 2020, only about 2,000 people had been transferred from Greece to Turkey since 2016 – a fraction of the overall number of asylum seekers on the Greek islands over the same period. The largest group of returnees was comprised of Pakistanis, who have no prospect of protection, either in the EU or in Turkey. At the same time, the EU received more than 25,000 Syrians from Turkey who were particularly in need of protection. Despite the larger number of people, this was less than half of the quota originally planned. In light of this, one can question whether the one-to-one mechanism of the EU-Turkey statement made a significant and lasting impact on the number of irregular landings on the Greek islands. Weather conditions, the improved humanitarian situation in Turkey, and increased border controls on the so-called Western Balkan route could also be responsible for the rapid and steep reduction in sea crossings, which was already apparent in the winter of 2015/2016. More recently, the inhumane reception and living conditions on the Greek islands acted as a standalone deterrent factor.

Other elements of the EU-Turkey statement, such as accelerated visa liberalisation, could not — and cannot — be implemented due to the domestic political situation in Turkey since the attempted coup of July 2016. Only the deepening of the customs union still seems feasible from a technical point of view. However, economic conditions have changed considerably in the meantime, adding to general problems with regard to the rule of law in Turkey.

Of the nine points contained in the statement, only the European pledge of financial aid was ultimately kept — though with considerable delays. The EU can point out that the vast majority of the financial resources have been allocated, and funds that have not yet been disbursed will eventually all be paid out in the context of longer-term projects. Nevertheless, Turkey can legitimately call for more resources and speedy disbursements to avoid shortfalls, as the first projects providing direct support for Syrian families will come to an end in autumn 2020. The EU has not yet been able to agree internally on new funds for Turkey, not least because the negotiations on the next EU multiannual financial framework (2021 — 2027) have proven to be very difficult so far. The Corona crisis is likely to exacerbate the situation and push international humanitarian aid to the backburner, as EU member states are now urgently adopting comprehensive emergency and supplementary budgets to contain the economic damage at home.

Reform Proposals for the EU-Turkey Statement

The starting point for any reform is to evaluate the deficits of the existing framework for cooperation under the EU-Turkey statement. The criticisms range from the lack of monitoring mechanisms, the miserable reception conditions on the Greek islands, the insufficient quality and excessively long duration of asylum procedures in Greece, to insufficient numbers of repat-

riations to Turkey as well as of refugees who are directly resettled from Turkey by EU member states. In conclusion, the pact as a whole is not working.

Based on this assessment, one may recommend smaller or fundamental reforms to the cooperation format with Turkey over migration control and border security. Very far-reaching proposals are coming from the European Stability Initiative (ESI), which sees itself as the initiator of the EU-Turkey statement. The ESI advocates a structural overhaul and renewal, an “EU-Turkey statement 2.0” with short- and medium-term measures. The most urgent task would be to end the humanitarian emergency on the Greek islands by immediately emptying the camps while also preventing a new humanitarian catastrophe on the Greek mainland.

To achieve such a transformation of the current status quo, Greek authorities would have to prioritise two measures. First, new and sufficient reception centres and shelters would have to replace the existing camps, which need to be closed. Second, the Greek asylum system should undergo deep reform to enable asylum procedures to be completed within two months, including the appealing of any decisions. Greece would need the support of other EU countries in planning and implementing such a system. According to the proposals of the ESI, newly arrived Syrians to Greece would be sent back to Turkey without an individual asylum procedure. This would have to be accompanied by a review mechanism with Ankara to ensure that they are treated in Turkey in accordance with international standards. It is argued that a “statement 2.0” could stabilise the situation in the Aegean and reduce the number of irregular entries into Greece. In return, the EU states should keep their promise to resettle more refugees directly from Turkey. This would have to be on a larger scale than in the past, for example 50,000 people within the first year. Moreover, an additional €6 billion should be provided to Turkey for its continuing efforts to host and integrate Syrian refugees, whose numbers are likely to rise further over the coming years.

Some of these reform proposals are indeed essential. Especially in light of the Covid-19 crisis, it has become truly urgent to empty the camps on the islands. It would also be beneficial to support Greece in processing asylum applications, to undertake more resettlements from mainland Greece to other EU states, and to make further financial contributions to Turkey. Yet, it makes little sense to continue the one-to-one mechanism of repatriation and resettlement. Even if the ESI acknowledges problems with this provision of the EU-Turkey statement, its reform proposal still assumes that any irregular migrant who arrives in Greece after the entry into force of a new edition of the statement could be returned to Turkey. However, experience to date shows that the preconditions for considerably increasing the number of returns to Turkey are too high. This component should therefore be dispensed within any future cooperation framework between the EU and Turkey.

A Comprehensive Approach

It is clearly not sufficient to only reform the EU-Turkey statement. Rather, Europe needs to pursue a more comprehensive approach to deal with the challenges. First and foremost, the EU must support Greece more decisively. The perpetual state of emergency on the islands should be ended as soon as possible by means of evacuations to the mainland. Greece has currently more than 90,000 open asylum procedures. These cases cannot be processed adequately without more substantial EU assistance. Earlier this year, the European Asylum Support Office announced that it intends to double the number of officials seconded to Greece to more than 1,000 this year. This promise needs to be fulfilled, despite the unexpected constraints of the Corona crisis. In parallel, programmes for resettlement to other member states are urgently needed for recognised refugees. This should build on the first voluntary initiative by seven EU member states to accept 1,600 unaccompanied

minors, which still has to be put into practice. Public health risks will be even less manageable if the situation in the camps remains unaddressed. For rejected asylum seekers, EU-funded programmes for voluntary return are conceivable, as far as the situation in the country of origin permits it. Effective support for Greece will also be a precondition for the fundamental reform of the Common European Asylum System, which will be proposed by the EU Commission in the “Pact on Migration and Asylum” later this spring. This structural endeavour is more important than ever. The increasingly widespread suspension of the right to asylum and the full closure of international borders during the Corona crisis must not be accepted as the new normal.

Second, it is in Europe’s interest to become more involved in Syria’s neighbouring states. The material and social costs that the main host countries for Syrian refugees (Turkey: 3.6 million; Lebanon: 900,000; Jordan: 650,000; Iraq: 250,000) have accrued need to be compensated more systematically. Europe thus should prevent premature returns from these countries to Syria, which remains highly insecure. Early returns would also completely overload the aid organisations working in Syria. Instead, Europeans should invest much more decisively than they have so far in the human capital of the Syrian population within the diaspora. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund, about half of all Syrian children in the country itself as well as in neighbouring countries currently do not attend school. Regardless of whether refugees return to Syria or remain permanently in the respective host countries, adequate education, training, and services are essential to ensure that they do not remain dependent on aid in the long term. With this priority in mind, the EU should also deepen its dialogue with host countries.

Third, it is in Europe’s interest to make a rapid and substantial contribution towards alleviating the plight of refugees in the embattled Idlib province and preventing Covid-19 from spreading among the IDP population. That is why the Europeans –

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in cooperation with UNHCR, the World Health Organisation, the World Food Programme, international NGOs, and Turkey — should immediately provide aid and emergency shelter for those who are forced to camp in inhuman conditions near the Turkish border. At the same time, Russia must be pressured to ensure that cross-border access for humanitarian aid is maintained after 10 July 2020, when the respective Security Council resolution expires. Europeans should also exert efforts vis-à-vis Moscow and Ankara to extend and consolidate the ceasefire in Idlib so that a political compromise can be negotiated for various points of contention (territorial control, protection for the civilian population, dealing with armed fighters, etc.).

Fourth, in this context, it would make sense if Russia and Turkey committed to creating and securing a safe zone for IDPs in the north of Idlib province. Europeans should offer support for the establishment of such a zone, provided that certain minimum conditions are guaranteed, for example: the zone should be reserved for unarmed civilians only; it should not become a base for military operations; nor should it be used for the repatriation of refugees from Turkey. Military engagement by Europeans or even NATO, as demanded by Ankara, would be rejected by Moscow (as well as Damascus) and would not receive a UN Security Council mandate. It would therefore run the risk of further escalating the situation instead of helping to stabilise it. Nor should the Europeans provide diplomatic, financial, or military support for Turkey's military operations and political ambitions in northern Syria. Although Turkey has a legitimate interest in securing its border with Syria and fending off potential attacks on its territory, its military invasions and occupation of Syrian territory are in clear breach of international law.

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