

Europe can't wish away Syrian refugees

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By Ishaan Tharoor

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We are watching the same nightmare all over again. In no man's land along a frontier of the European Union, security forces tear-gas and violently disperse stranded migrants. On a sunny day, the Greek coast guard confronts a rubber dinghy bearing asylum seekers crossing the Aegean. Rather than offer assistance, the maritime patrol seeks to intimidate the refugees, firing warning shots.

We later learn that at least one child drowned after a refugee boat collapsed.

These are not tragic memories of the 2015 exodus of Syrian refugees to Europe, but scenes from the past few days. After largely battering down the hatches, Turkey has once again lifted its gates, allowing thousands of migrants from war-torn lands — the majority Syrian or Afghan — to make either the sea or land crossings to Greece in a bid to claim asylum in the European Union. But they are coming face to face with a Europe that has no room for their hopes and dreams, and waning sympathy for their plight.

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Footage released by Turkish government shows Greek coast guard this morning tried to sink a refugee boat off the Bodrum coast pic.twitter.com/W3h5mfqwCC

— Ragıp Soylu (@ragipsoylu) March 2, 2020

Geopolitics is spurring the new influx. “Turkey shuttered its doors to Greece following a deal with the European Union in 2016, in exchange for E.U. funds to help bear the financial brunt of the migrant crisis: Turkey today hosts over 3 million Syrians — more than any other country in the world,” explained my colleague Sarah Dadouch, who reported from a border flash point along a skinny Thracian river that separates Turkey and Greece.

But Ankara has grown frustrated with what it perceives as a lack of Western help in both coping with its own refugee burdens and resolving the Syrian crisis next door. The past couple of months saw the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad advance deep into Idlib province, a lone rebel bastion in the northwest of the country. The prospect of more than a million newly displaced Syrians seeking to flee Assad was unacceptable to the Turks, who are engaged in a de facto war with the Syrian regime.

Dozens of Turkish soldiers were killed last week in airstrikes. Turkish warplanes and drones pummeled Syrian positions over the weekend. At the same time, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan loosened his country's border controls in a bid to pressure NATO allies and European partners to the West.

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"The West's fancy words, which stem from a fear of migrants, do not have a concrete result in reality," Erdogan said during a televised address Monday. "They say, 'Do not open the gates.' I told them months ago that 'if you do not share this burden with us, we will open the gates.' But they thought we were joking."

Thousands of migrants desperate to get to Europe have been caught in the crossfire. Turkish public sentiment has soured over the costs of hosting millions of Syrian refugees as years of conflict dragged on. Some migrants in Turkey speak of rising xenophobia. Greece, meanwhile, still hosts close to 40,000 migrants in ramshackle camps in its Aegean Islands and remains focused on keeping them away from the European mainland. Conditions there are miserable, as my colleague Chico Harlan reported last month, with food in short supply, poor sanitation and tensions with locals mounting.

"You can get a beer at the port and then with 10 minutes' drive you see an open-air prison," Marco Sandrone, field coordinator for Doctors Without Borders on the island of Lesbos, told Harlan. "There is no transition here between paradise and hell."

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Decrying an "invasion," the Greek government has temporarily suspended the registration of asylum claims from those illegally crossing the border and may attempt to forcibly "return" new arrivals without registering their claims. "The reckless measures being taken by the Greek authorities are a blatant breach of E.U. and international law that will put lives at risk," warned Eve Geddie of Amnesty International. "People seeking asylum are once again being used as bargaining chips in a callous political game."

In a sign of the times, the office of Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said he had recently discussed the situation with President Trump, who "recognized the right of Greece to enforce the law on its borders," according to Reuters. U.S. and European officials are due to travel to the region this week. In Zagreb, Croatia, the European Union will host an emergency session of the bloc's foreign ministers on Friday.

"I understand that Turkey is facing a very big challenge regarding Idlib," German Chancellor Angela Merkel told reporters Monday. "Still, for me it's unacceptable that he — President Erdogan and his government — are not expressing this dissatisfaction in a dialogue with us as the European Union, but rather on the back of the refugees. For me, that's not the way to go forward."

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But the blame for the current instability also lies partially at Merkel's feet.

European governments are divided about what to do with the asylum seekers in their midst and at their borders, and Merkel's open-arms approach to Syrian refugees in 2015 inflamed nationalist governments in central and Eastern Europe, while stoking a far-right populist backlash in the continent's west.

It "made the political discourse in Europe more difficult and gave a very good weapon to nationalists and illiberal elements that already existed," said Danilo Türk, a former president of Slovenia and who heads Club de Madrid, a nonprofit organization whose members are all former democratically-elected leaders.

The crisis over asylum seekers is part of a broader problem bedeviling Brussels — an absence of consensus among national governments undercuts the bloc's ability to act on the world stage. The deal cut with Turkey to choke off the flow of migrants was a pact forged out of political expediency, which neither addressed the plight of the refugees nor the bloody conflict that forced them to flee their homes.

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"The lack of an organized approach by the European Union in 2015 and the subsequent improvisation of the agreement with Turkey has not created a viable platform for dealing with migration crises," Türk told Today's WorldView during a visit to Washington this week. "It was all based on hope that somehow the problem would go away. It has not gone away."

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