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Syria, the EU–Turkey Deal, and Migration Policies in the Age of COVID19

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In February 2020, 33 Turkish military personnel were killed in an attack in Northern Syria. With European NATO allies unwilling to assist Turkey in the aftermath of the attack, the Turkish government began to allow migrants and asylum seekers to cross into Europe, violating the terms of the 2016 EU–Turkey migration deal. How effective is this type of coercive migration diplomacy, and what will the consequences of these actions be for Turkey, Europe, and the broader state of migrant and refugee rights? This brief examines these developments and questions and also places recent migration policies, including the EU's border externalization measures, in the context of the rapid spread of Covid-19.

FIGHTING IN IDLIB

Syrian regime forces, with Russian assistance, relaunched an attack on Idlib province at the end of 2019, leading to the internal displacement of approximately 900,000 Syrians. For many individuals this was a secondary displacement; Idlib is the last remaining opposition-controlled area where civilians and opposition fighters have been able to cluster over the course of the nine-year civil war. At the start of the offensive, Idlib's 3 million residents included about 1.5 million opponents of the Bashar al-Assad regime as well as fewer than 100,000 rebel fighters.¹

As the internal displacement of Syrians continued in early 2020, Turkey became increasingly worried about its southeast

border with Syria. Currently host to approximately 3.6 million Syrians, and with rising anti-refugee sentiments among opposition parties and Turkish voters since mid-2019, the AKP government was adamant in its unwillingness to admit any further Syrian refugees. At the end of February, Ankara took decisive action by sending thousands of Turkish troops and convoys of equipment to Idlib.² While in previous years Turkey has sheltered Syrian rebels and displaced civilians in parts of Northern Syria, this was the first time that Turkey directly engaged in fighting with Syrian regime forces.³

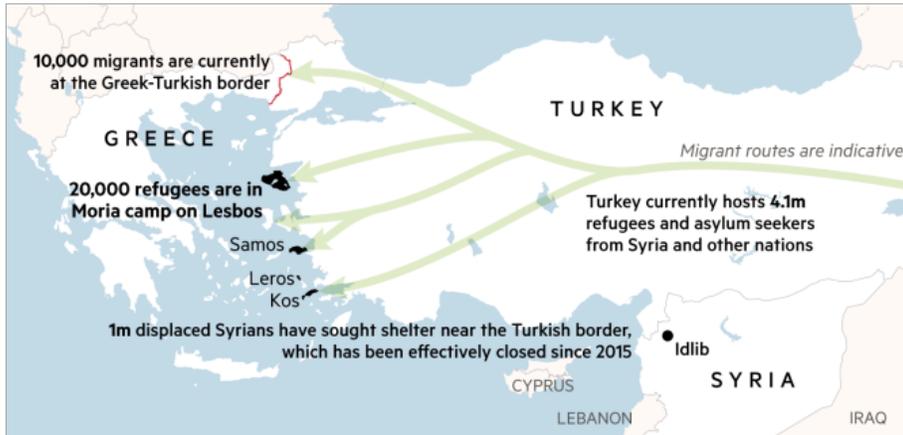
On February 27, 33 Turkish military personnel were killed in an attack and more than 30 others were injured. Turkish officials blamed the Syrian regime, but footage of the attack also pointed to Russia's involvement.⁴ Turkey, a NATO member, turned to European and North American allies for support, but was met with lip service statements and relative indifference rather than concrete assistance in Northeast Syria. Tensions between Turkey and Russia continued to escalate as both Turkish and Syrian forces engaged in drone attacks.⁵

TURKEY AND THE EU

Meanwhile, the Turkish government turned to its northwestern border with the European Union. On February 28, the Turkish government began to allow migrant and asylum seekers to cross into Europe, in violation of the 2016 EU–Turkey deal that



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FIGURE 1 — MIGRANT SITUATION IN TURKEY AND GREECE

SOURCES UNHCR; media reports

was struck in the wake of Europe's refugee "crisis." As part of this deal, Turkey negotiated an up to €6 billion aid package coupled with the reinvigoration of EU accession negotiations and visa liberalization for Turkish nationals. The main premise of the deal (officially, the EU–Turkey Joint Action Plan) was that for every Syrian national returned to Turkey from Europe, one Syrian would be resettled from a Turkish refugee camp to one of the EU member states. The European funds attached to the deal were to be partially used to fund services and access to employment for Syrian refugees in Turkey, but also to help fortify borders and further prevent irregular migration from Turkey to Greece.

While the Turkish government did not officially cite Europe's lack of support in response to the attacks against Turkey in Idlib as the reason for allowing migrants to leave Turkey toward Europe, Turkish officials did remark on the country's inability to manage further refugees arriving in Turkey from Northern Syria amid rising violence.⁶ Following Ankara's decision to open its borders, thousands of migrants and refugees residing in Turkey attempted to reach Europe by both the land crossing with Greece and via the four-mile boat journey to Greece's islands. AKP officials in Istanbul also forcibly bused some individuals from migrant detention centers to the border.

The response on the Greek side was harrowing. Some individuals were captured, tear-gassed, beaten, detained at a secret

detention facility, and eventually expelled back to Turkey without due process.⁷ According to Turkish officials, Greek authorities also fired live ammunition at migrants and asylum seekers trapped in the no-man's land separating the Greek and Turkish land borders,⁸ and the Union of Turkish Bar Associations (TBB) plans to file a lawsuit with the European Court of Human Rights over the maltreatment by Greek authorities.⁹

On March 1, Greece decided to suspend all access to asylum for individuals entering the country—in violation of EU and international law—and to deport them as quickly as possible to countries of origin or third countries.¹⁰ Greek authorities are particularly concerned that as the weather improves in coming months, the arrival of asylum seekers and migrants will increase, leaving Greece to further manage the frontline of asylum arrivals with little EU support. Greece's containment policy since 2016, whereby asylum seekers are forced to remain in camps on Greece's islands rather than travel to the mainland and potentially onto other EU countries, has left asylum seekers residing in dismal, unsanitary conditions. Afraid of further arrivals and in a desperate move, the EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson—in conjunction with the Greek government—began offering €2,000 to asylum seekers already in Greek camps willing to return to their home countries.¹¹

DOES MIGRATION COERCION WORK?

This recent standoff on the Turkish–Greek border has made it abundantly evident that the quick fix approach the EU sought to its 2015 refugee "crisis" via the EU–Turkey deal is highly volatile. Rather than resolving its own internal political disagreements over responsibility sharing of refugees among EU states, the EU outsourced the solution to Turkey. Yet of the €6 billion promised to Turkey in 2016, nearly €4.7 billion has been contractually awarded but only approximately €3.2 billion—roughly half—paid out.¹² In addition to the slow pace of payments, Turkey has also been displeased with the method by which aid has been

dispersed. While the EU favors funding its humanitarian partner organizations operating in Turkey, the Turkish government would prefer to be funded directly. Progress on the other elements of the agreements—including reinstating EU access negotiations and discussions over a customs union—stalled after 2016 as Turkey declined further into autocratic governance.

European leaders from Germany, France, and Great Britain agreed to a summit—which became a teleconference call due to the spread of Covid–19—with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan on March 17 to discuss the border standoff and the possible updating of the 2016 agreement. Following the video meeting, the parameters of EU–Turkey deal remained intact, with German Chancellor Angela Merkel informing Erdoğan that the EU was willing to increase its funding for refugees in Turkey so long as Ankara agreed to put an end to the thousands of refugees attempting to cross the Turkish–Greek border.¹³ In other words, Turkey’s coarse, dehumanizing tactic of threatening the EU with onward refugee movement mostly worked, though whether Turkey will receive further EU support on maintaining a ceasefire in Idlib remains to be seen.¹⁴

However, there may be long–term drawbacks to this type of tactic for Turkey. Turkey has proved itself—previously and with this most recent incident—to be a dangerous and unreliable partner that is willing to force the EU’s hand through threat and blackmail. While the EU may follow through on its offer for further aid and funding if Turkey is willing to continue hosting refugees and preventing them from reaching Greece, the EU is even less likely now than it was in 2016 to seriously consider further embedding itself with Turkey on the issue of a customs union or accession negotiations.

ANTI-REFUGEE POLICY IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

The process of externalizing borders and offshoring responsibility for refugees and asylum seekers has gained pace in recent years, but we should be especially wary of these types of tactics being deployed during

global health crises, such as the one currently underway with the rapid spread of Covid–19. As researchers at the Migration Policy Institute have aptly stated, “Bold measures taken in the name of containing the spread of disease are often fig leaves for broader aims: reducing ‘undesirable’ migration and curtailing the openness that has been blamed for uncontrolled movements of asylum seekers and migrants.”¹⁵ For example, allegedly as part of the Greek government’s response to Covid–19, a Greek naval vessel transferred 436 asylum seekers to a closed detention camp north of Athens on March 17, pending their return to Turkey.¹⁶ While this move is in line with other actions recently taken by the Greek government to remove asylum seekers as discussed above, the spread of the virus provides an additional cover. Similarly, in the United States, the Trump administration announced its plans to immediately turn back all asylum seekers and non–resident foreigners attempting to cross the Southwestern border, citing the risk of Covid–19 spreading through detention facilities and among Border Patrol agents, though such a move has long been on the administration’s agenda.¹⁷ As borders close around the world in response to the virus, and as increased nativism and fear provide fodder for anti–migrant and refugee agendas, there is a heightened imperative to ensure the rights of those who are unable to return to their home countries.

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