

The Next Syrian Refugee Crisis Will Break Europe's Back

As the possibility of another exodus increases, Greece's decrepit refugee camps expose how the EU wasted the past three years.



Afghan men gather outside the main gate of the Moria camp as migrants wait to be processed on the Greek island of Lesbos on Oct. 22, 2015. SPENCER PLATT/GETTY IMAGES

A few weeks ago, the entrance to the Katsikas refugee camp in northwestern Greece was blocked to all traffic. Initially, the protest was reported as one by locals against the refugees. It was quickly established, however, that the refugees themselves were the protesters. Their goal was to prevent the arrival of police buses bringing in more people to the camp.

I had visited this camp several times since 2016. It is a former military installation, converted to host around 350 people. When the protest took place,

almost 1,000 lived there, in cramped conditions inside a site prone to flooding. A few days later, massive storms proved the point.

Katsikas is just one small part of a wider, much bleaker picture. The infamous Moria camp on the island of Lesbos has grown around three times in size since 2015. More than 13,000 live inside and around an installation whose capacity is supposed to be a mere 3,000. The conditions inside the camp are hellish. The death toll is rising, violence is rife, and ever more children show symptoms of “resignation syndrome”—they simply lie down and stop interacting with others, a condition that predominantly affects “psychologically traumatized children and adolescents in the midst of a strenuous and lengthy migration process,” according to experts. A similarly overcrowded camp in Samos is facing the same issues. Camps across the rest of Greece are in no better shape.

The residents of these camps are those who, over the past four years, have been stranded on Europe’s outskirts after making the trek from Turkey. The camps are an expression of the continent’s self-inflicted helplessness: the haplessness of the Greek bureaucracy and the obstinacy of other European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, unwilling to show any solidarity.

This brings us to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the threat he issued last week to “open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees” over the Aegean Sea and into Europe if it tries to interfere with Turkey’s invasion of northern Syria—with Greece being the logical first stop. The threat is effective because it raises uncomfortable questions about Europe’s readiness for a new refugee crisis emanating from the Middle East.

“It’s our right to say that,” Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in an interview with *Deutsche Welle*. “It is not a threat, and it is not a bluff. This is just the answer to an attitude of the European Union.” Erdogan clearly thinks Europe has given him the upper hand in any conversation about migration.

If so, Europe has done so unnecessarily. The question of whether the continent has the potential to manage the refugees currently hosted by Turkey permits a simple answer: absolutely. Greece on its own took in and fully integrated a million people from Albania and other Balkan countries in the 1990s. Distributing some 3.6 million people across the entire continent is a small problem in comparison.

The problem is that intra-EU fighting has weakened the bloc’s resolve. The

migration deal struck between the EU and Turkey in 2016, which established Turkey as a barrier for Syrians and others fleeing toward Europe, was always doomed to fail. That's not only because the funds promised to Turkey were a pittance compared with the task asked of it but also because of the country's long history of using migrants for political ends.

The trends have been accelerated by Turkey's rapid transformation from somewhat erratically to unreliable regional actor. In a recent report by the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, Turkey is classified as a "civilization state" that defines its interests in ways opposed to the West. In her contribution to the report, N. Selin Senocak of UNESCO writes: "Especially after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016, Turkey has felt betrayed by the US and EU, marking a turning point in Turkey's political history and its diplomatic relations with the EU and US." This has translated into Turkey's abductions of U.S. citizens, constant harassment of Greek and Cypriot boats and planes around the Aegean, and now threats to disrupt European societies by weaponizing refugees unless Turkey can get its way in Syria and also natural gas fields near Cyprus.

The question was always what Europe would do to prepare for the next inevitable wave of migrants with the time that the deal had bought. Unfortunately, it made barely any progress toward equitable and humane solutions. Europe's deliberate choice to keep refugees in hellish conditions on Greek islands has made it subject to perpetual potential blackmail by Erdogan's government. Despite threats of sanctions by the EU in the face of his brutal invasion of Syria, Erdogan can feel confident that little will be done in response.

Indeed, judging from the conditions at the Greek camps, it seems obvious that Europe is simply too exposed to another refugee crisis to call Erdogan's bluff. Yet this is precisely what it should prepare to do. An immediate EU relief program should be put in place, and refugees should be evacuated in significant numbers from the Greek islands and into other countries. The facilities in Greece should be upgraded to end the suffering of those who remain. And, in the meantime, the Greek government should actively cooperate with nongovernmental organizations and other groups to house refugees outside the camps, rather than continue its current hostile approach.

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