

THE EU VALUES AND THE TRAPPED REFUGEES BETWEEN DEATH AND HOPE

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 Analysis

After the martyrdom of 34 Turkish soldiers in Idlib, Syria, Turkey started to follow a more proactive policy both in the field and on the table. During this process, Turkey, on one hand, initiated the "Operation Spring Shield" against the Syrian regime forces in Idlib; and on the other hand, decided not to prevent refugees from crossing the border to Europe anymore, whom it used to restrain from doing so in pursuant to the agreement it signed with the European Union (EU).

After more than 145,000 refugees leaned against the Greek border following Turkey's decision, Europe came face to face with a new refugee crisis. Greece's inhumane treatment to the Syrians that came to its border was praised rather than condemned. Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Commission who paid a visit to the area on March 3, complimented Greece on the efforts it made. Moreover, ignoring the ferocity it committed on the refugees, she

introduced Greece, which killed three refugees and injuring five others with live ammunition, as the shield of Europe.

Soon after, tens of refugees were injured because of the violence resorted by the Greek Security Forces. Besides Von der Leyen, Charles Michael president of the European Council, David Sassoli president of the European Parliament, and Andrej Plenkovic president of Croatia paid their visits to Greece's Evros region which is in the vicinity of the Turkish-Greek border. The council members decided to take some steps after seeing the gravity of the situation there. However, at this point, it is necessary to express that the council describes the situation as a peril for their own economies, welfare and security rather than a peril for humanity.

Thus, Leyen announced that the EU was going to give 700 million euros to Greece, 350 million of which immediately, plus 100 border guards,

seven ships, two helicopters, one plane and three private vehicles to make sure that the refugees whose ultimate goal is to reach developed European countries stay in Turkey.

Greece, having the EU's support, announced that it would not accept any asylum applications for one month. Thereon, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) remarked that Greece could not suspend asylum applications, according to both 1951 Geneva Convention about the status of refugees, and the EU refugee law.¹

Besides its decision to support Greece in its one step back from opening its borders to Turkey, the EU called Turkey to abide to the 2016 refugee agreement. However, the EU failed to make any comment about its very obligations, such as granting visa-free entry to Turkish citizens, 6 billion euros worth of financial support which is a small portion compared to the money (40 billion dollars) spent by Turkey for refugees, as well as following up with new negotiations about Turkey's accession to the EU. Whereas, Europe not fulfilling the obligations of the agreement of 2016 is one of the most fundamental factors that led Turkey to open its borders. The fact that the EU didn't support Turkey in creating a safe zone to allow refugees, most of whom are Syrian, could return to their country also played a role in the making of this decision.

There hasn't been any clear information about the aftermath of the tens of thousands of refugees that made it into Greece. Even though Greek officials announced the number of refugees who are trying to cross the border to be around 40,000, understandably the real number is much greater. However, there is still an uncertainty about the refugees that were able to enter Greece. Furthermore, it is understood that those who made it to Greece would have to face Greek nationalists that are on a manhunt and who are sharing their actions on social media, aside from the Greek security forces themselves.

What do the Syrians think?

Many Syrian families have returned to their cities disappointed, after spending their money

and hoping of arriving in Europe; a place where they thought would bring them a chance for a new life.

Many returnees speak about the barbaric actions of the Greek border guard forces against them, who used tear gas, rubber bullets, and large fans. They violently beat anyone who managed to get in, stole their belongings, and burnt their papers.

Hisham. Y, a Syrian refugee who returned to Istanbul recently said, "The whole world left us alone on the Greek border. There were no foreign refugee organizations and even the foreign media coverage was so poor. Only Turkish organizations helped us; they provided medical support and food aid.

The Greek border forces threw tear gas canisters many times even though they saw the children and women with us. Many of these gas bombs were expired, which caused suffocation and shortness of breath. They also used huge fans to ensure that the gas reached the Turkish side and affected a large number of refugees. They treated us like animals," Hisham added.

As the border crisis escalated, The Greek Minister of Immigration stopped all assistances previously given to the refugees whose asylum applications were approved earlier. This decision included assistance programs supported by the United Nations, meaning that these refugees would have to depend on themselves.

Greece also states that all refugees who arrived in the Greek islands after March 1 would be transferred to a new closed camp established in Northern Greece while they wait for their fate.

The world treats refugees as numbers, objects, or a danger that must be faced, without noticing that each of them has a painful story in which they lost all their hopes and dreams, and that they need someone to help them.

Each of them comes from a country that suffers from too many predicaments, which the international community contributed through mismanagement of the crisis, hence escalating the already difficult situation.

It would be understandable if they flee to another place, even if it might cost them their lives.

Another issue that is not less desolating is the fact that hundreds of families have been separated, unable to come together as a result of the European asylum policies.

A 32-year-old woman who refused to reveal her name told us that she had been stuck in Turkey with her children for more than two years. She could not reunite with her husband who had arrived in Europe. Her husband is still unable to obtain the asylum that would enable him to bring his family and children.

She said that she is living a very difficult life in Turkey without her husband as the family's breadwinner, forced to work with her son who was prevented from completing his education due to financial needs. Her children are growing without their father.

The international community deals with the recent refugee crisis on the Turkish-Greek border as a Turkish problem and Turkey's responsibility, ignoring their actions that have created this very conflict to surface.

But the current refugee crisis shows a clear reflection of the international system's weak ability to manage global issues. Instead of

addressing the refugee crisis by adhering to the International Law and Convention on the Rights of a Child, solutions proposed on the table are instead magnifying the crisis.

The Syrian refugee crisis can't be understood partially or separated from what's going on in Idlib, since the situation is actually interrelated. Shunning the humanitarian crisis in Idlib is evident of the international community's failure in taking actions over the deteriorating situation there. And this is the real root of the problem.

The UNSC has adopted 15 resolutions about Syria and the steps to be taken in order to solve the Syrian crisis. None of them were applied. At the same time the "Friends of Syria" group has carried out many meetings on Syria in Geneva and Vienna to name a few. They announced many statements that had zero value on the ground. And yet today all parties appear to prefer Syrians to die silently on their land.

The recent refugee crisis has carried clear messages to the international community that if they truly care about their national interest and security, they should bear their global responsibility. Looking the other way of the problems of your neighboring countries is not the way to your country's salvation. Instead, the problem might spread and engulf a whole region into a lingering crisis.

Sonnotlar

¹ UNHCR, "UNHCR statement on the situation at the Turkey-EU border" (04.03.2020), <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e5d08ad4/unhcr-statement-situation-turkey-eu-border.html#>.