



INFO PACK

Humanitarian Tragedy in Idlib and the EU's Failed Responsibilities

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Introduction

Since 2011, millions of Syrians have been forced to leave their homes due to operations instigated by the Assad regime, as well as terror organisations such as Daesh and the PKK/YPG. By 2015, more than a million refugees and asylum seekers had crossed into the European Union (EU). This caused significant political rifts within the EU, with

some states calling for the re-imposition of frontiers in the Schengen region. Nine years later, with the Syrian civil war unabated, innocent civilians continue to bear the worst brunt of violence and displacement. The ongoing crisis in Idlib has been deemed a 'crisis on a monumental scale' by the United Nations (Al Jazeera, 2020) due to the Syrian regime's blatant disregard for human life.



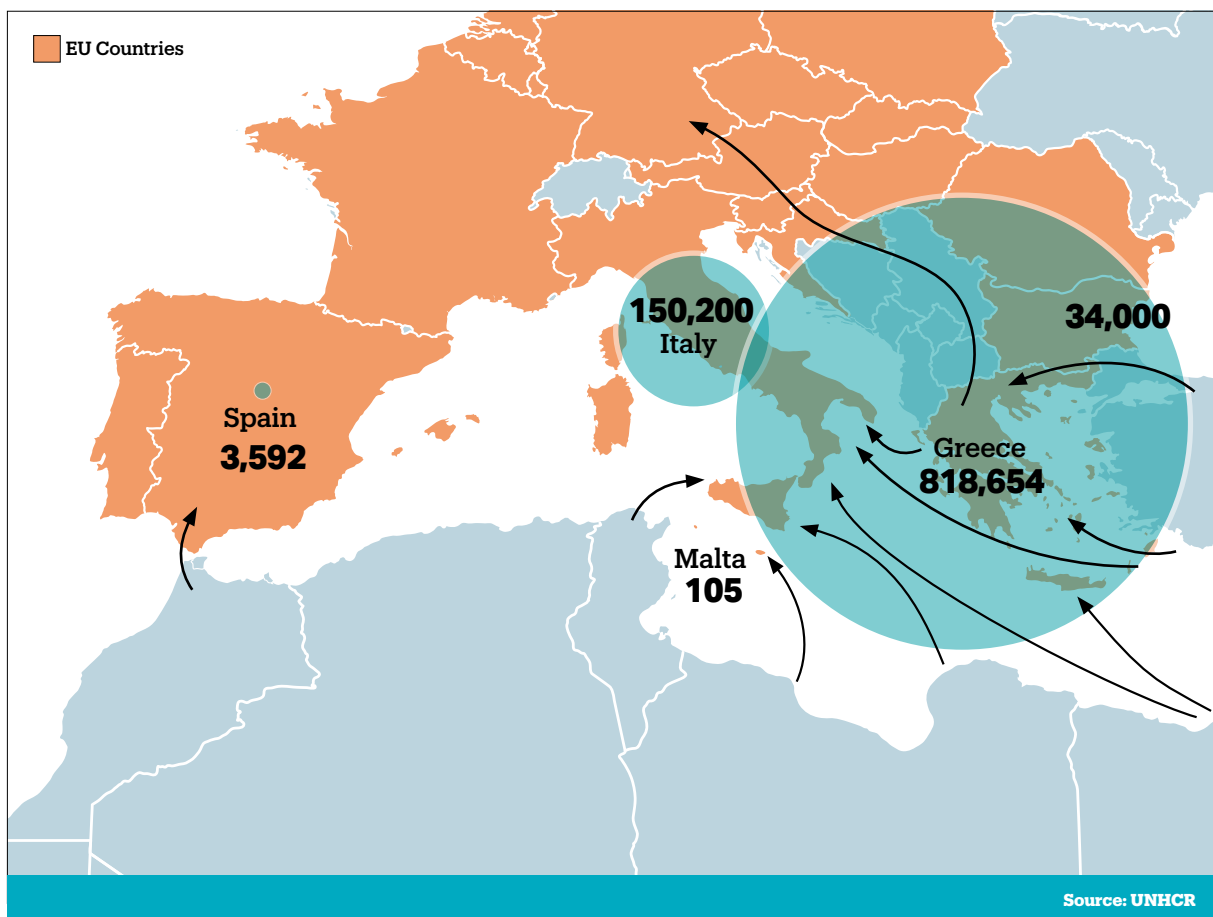
Dozens of refugees protest at the tracks of Athens's Larissis station, demanding to go to other European countries, in Athens, Greece on April 5, 2019. Train paths are closed after around 200 refugees blocked the rails. (Ayhan Mehmet - Anadolu Agency)

The EU-Turkey Migration Agreement

In 2016, a migration agreement was struck between the EU and Turkey to curb the number of refugees arriving in Europe. Under the agreement, Syrian refugees were to be exchanged between Turkey and EU countries under the following arrangement: the EU sends all Syrians who were able to reach the Greek islands illegally after March 20, 2016, back to Turkey. In return, Syrian refugees arriving legally would be accepted into the EU.

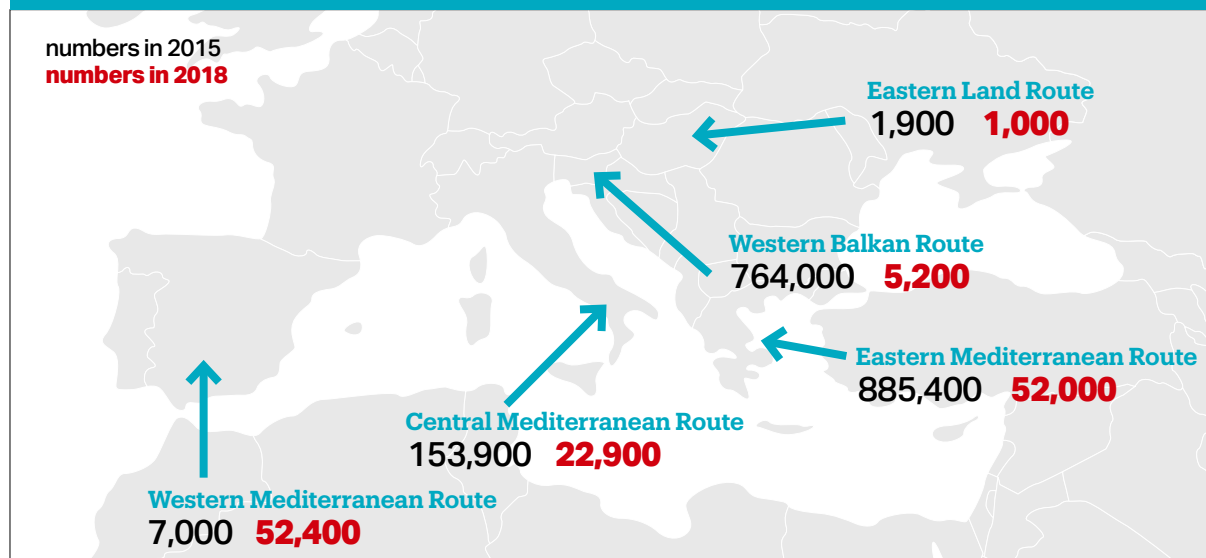
By all accounts, the deal was effective in reducing the number of migrants seeking to enter the EU. According to the EU Commission, the number of refugees who came to Greece via Turkey, which was at its highest prior to the migration agreement, fell by 97 percent compared to the previous period (Deutsche Wells, 2018).

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MIGRANT NUMBERS

numbers in 2015
numbers in 2018



Source: INFOMIGRANTS

As EU countries closed their borders, Turkey's open-door policy for Syrian refugees earned the country the title of the world's largest refugee-hosting country (Esen & Binatli, 2017). Almost 4 million Syrians have been settled in Turkey- constituting almost 3.5 percent of the host country's total population. Though some critics have said that Turkey is not a safe country for refugees (Roman, 2016), the Turkish government has provided healthcare and educa-

tion to all refugee children as well as adults, earning international praise. By enabling refugees to live outside of camps in Turkey, the Turkish government's efforts were aimed at integration and mutual benefits that it brings for both refugees and host communities. Turkish language lessons were provided as well as the opportunity to work, set up businesses and ultimately contribute to the economy.



A Syrian teacher instructs refugee students, at a class located in a refugee facility in Malatya, Turkey on March 08, 2016. (Volkan Kaşık - Anadolu Agency)

Failed Responsibilities

Under the agreement, Turkey was promised €6 billion in financial aid in order to support its management and rehabilitation of Syrian refugees. While the EU Commission states that half of the promised amount has already been distributed, the Turkish government counters that only €1.85 billion has been made available from the EU, which is a paltry sum compared to the \$40 billion that have been spent by Turkey on refugee relief. Opposition political parties in Turkey have often argued that this money represents resources taken away from Turkish citizens themselves (Daily Sabah, 2019).

While Turkey has hosted almost 4 million Syrian refugees as a result of the EU-Turkey agreement, only 12,489 Syrians from Turkey have been resettled in EU member-states. Germany took in 4,313, the Netherlands 2,608, France 1,401 and Finland 1,002 Syrian refugees (Deutsche Wells, 2018).

Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria and Denmark did not accept any refugees at all (Deutsche Wells, 2018).

Additionally, due to slow refugee processing in Greece, only 1,564 Syrians were sent back to Turkey between 2016-2018 (Deutsche Wells, 2018). This has led to major capacity issues in refugee camps on the Greek islands, leaving refugees facing abuse and neglect. Greece has been criticized both for leaving refugee camps in deplorable conditions and its increasingly anti-refugee policies. According to the United Nations Human High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are now more than 96,500 refugees and asylum seekers in Greece, mainly because most of them remain in Greece after being denied entry to northern European countries due to border closures along established migration routes (Mohyidin & Baskici, 2019).



Greek police use tear gas on migrants on the border with North Macedonia outside a refugee camp in Diavata, a suburb of Thessaloniki, Greece on April 06, 2019. Hundreds of migrants and refugees gathered following calls on social media to march to the border. (Ayhan Mehmet - Anadolu Agency)

According to the Greek government's most recent figures, 26,753 women, men and children live in camps designed for about 6300 in Moria on the northeastern Aegean island of Lesbos. Journalist Lianna Spiropulu says that the refugees in Moria have to wait approximately 9 hours in line in order to obtain three meals a day if food is available at

all (Congo, 2019). The UNHCR has called sanitary facilities 'woefully inadequate' (Aposotolou, 2019). According to Apostolos Veizis, the Director of Medical Operational Support in Greece for Doctors Without Borders (MSF), there is only one toilet for every 300 people on Samos and one shower for every 506 people at Moria (Aposotolou, 2019).



Greek police officers intervene against Syrian refugees protesting restrictions on the border with North Macedonia as they wait at a makeshift camp along the Greek border on April 11, 2016. (Rober Astorgano - Anadolu Agency)

Idlib and the Unfolding Humanitarian Disaster

The brutality of the Assad regime has continued unabated for nearly a decade and appears to be reaching an apogee as it advances, with Russian support, on Idlib, Syria's last opposition-held province. Syrians who had fled the violence elsewhere in Syria had found relative safety in Idlib, however they are no longer safe there.

On February 27th, 2020 thirty-three Turkish soldiers were killed in airstrikes by Russian-backed Syrian government forces in Idlib. According to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkish forces are in Idlib to help Syrians 'suffering at the hands of the Syrian regime and to secure a safe border zone' (TRT World, 2020). Given the escalation in violence by Russia and Iranian-backed Syrian regime forces in Idlib, Turkey is now facing the prospect of millions of Syrian refugees crossing over into its territory again to seek safety. The Assad regime has been accused of conducting 'ethnic cleansing' (Hamad, 2020) as an 'estimated 6,500 children have fled Syria every day since the offensive began on 1 December last year, with 300,000 children becoming refugees in that time span' (Hamad, 2020). More than 700,000 people have been forced to flee, women and children comprising 80 percent of them (Hamad, 2020).

Turkey's Communications Director, Mr. Fahrettin Altun, stated that Turkey had "no choice" but to let refugees into Europe as it was beyond Turkey's capacity to allow entry to the nearly one million Syrians fleeing Idlib because Turkey had not received previously agreed upon support in host-

ing Syrian refugees (BBC News, 2020). Mr. Altun also called for the international community to protect civilians in Idlib from "genocide" by imposing a no-fly zone (BBC News, 2020). Groups of Syrian refugees began heading to Turkey's borders with Greece as well as Bulgaria soon after the announcement was made (BBC News, 2020). In response, the Greek Prime Minister said that "no illegal entries into Greece will be tolerated" (BBC News, 2020) and that security along all land and sea routes would be tightened.

As of early March, as a consequence of the refugee influx due to the humanitarian crisis in Idlib, Greece has suspended new asylum applications for at least a month. In a statement, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) highlighted that this is against the 1951 Geneva Convention as well as EU refugee laws.

As it stands, the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement appears not to be able to protect Syrian refugees as they continue to face violence and death in their own country, considering Europe has not been able to meet its financial responsibility of supporting Turkey in supporting Syrian refugees. Turkey has repeatedly stated that it cannot shoulder the responsibility alone, given that it already hosted more than 3.5 million refugees. As Assad regime forces close in on the last opposition redoubt in Idlib, home to millions of already-displaced Syrian civilians, the world continues to look on with bated breath, seemingly paralyzed by inaction.



Refugees waiting for the borders to be opened at the Sarayıcı Er Square in Edirne in an attempt to cross further into Europe perform prayer during the Eid al-Adha celebrations on September 24, 2015. (Berk Özkan - Anadolu Agency)

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