

# Briefing: A manufactured refugee crisis at the Greek-Turkish border



‘The EU-Turkey deal turned people in need of safety and dignity into political bargaining chips.’

Eric Reidy

Freelance journalist and regular TNH contributor

Greek riot police patrol along the barbed-wire fence at the Kastanies border checkpoint as asylum seekers gather on the Turkish side on 2 March 2020. (Dimitris Tosidis/Reuters)

## MUMBAI

Dramatic scenes have been playing out in recent days at the land and sea borders between Greece and Turkey: Greek police tear-gassing and pushing back crowds of asylum seekers at a northern border crossing; the Hellenic Coast Guard firing warning shots at a dinghy full of asylum seekers in the Aegean Sea; angry protesters preventing another group in a dinghy from disembarking in the port on the island of Lesbos.

The images have been exploited by a savvy Turkish media campaign aimed at maximising pressure on the EU to support Turkish action in northwest Syria and to share more of the burden for hosting refugees. According to refugee advocates and human rights groups, Turkey’s politicisation of the refugee issue and the suffering at the EU’s borders are a predictable outcome of the EU-Turkey deal – a cornerstone of EU efforts to curb irregular migration across its borders.

“This is a broader consequence of the EU-Turkey statement,” Sophie McCann, an advocacy manager for the medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), told The New Humanitarian. “We’ve been saying it for four years: it’s never going to work. It’s clearly failed.” The EU and Turkey signed the agreement in March 2016 after more than one million people – mostly refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war – crossed from the Turkish coast to Greece in the

course of a year. At its centre, the agreement called on Turkey to prevent asylum seekers and migrants from reaching the EU in exchange for six billion euros (\$6.7 billion) in financial assistance for refugees in Turkey and the eventual creation of a legal resettlement pathway to Europe, among other incentives.

Since it was signed, the agreement has created a years-long humanitarian crisis on the Greek islands and turned refugees into a bargaining chip wielded by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to extract support and policy concessions from the EU, according to refugee advocates and human rights groups.

On 28 February, the Turkish government announced that it would no longer prevent asylum seekers and migrants from leaving Turkey, unleashing scenes of chaos and sending the Greek government scrambling to prevent people from crossing its borders. "What did we do yesterday? We opened the doors," Erdoğan told the Turkish parliament on 29 February.

## Why open the borders now?

Turkey hosts more refugees – 4.1 million, including 3.7 million Syrians – than any country in the world, and Erdoğan has repeatedly threatened to "open the gates" of migration to the EU. But the actual decision to open the borders followed the death of at least 33 Turkish soldiers in air and artillery strikes on 28 February in Idlib, a province in northwestern Syria bordering Turkey.

The attack has pulled Turkey deeper into the fighting in Syria, where it backs some anti-government rebels and recently increased the number of troops it has on the ground. Other than backing unsuccessful draft ceasefire resolutions at the UN Security Council and issuing statements of condemnation, European nations and the United States have been unwilling to respond further to recent developments in Syria, leaving Turkey feeling isolated.

In December, the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad – backed by Russia and Iran – escalated an ongoing military offensive in and around rebel-held Idlib province, creating a massive humanitarian crisis and pushing nearly a million people, out of the roughly 2.5 million in the area, to go on the run.

Many have gone north towards the Turkish border, but Turkey has fortified the frontier and is not letting most people cross. But the country fears that hundreds of thousands – and potentially more than a million – new refugees could spill into the country if the Syrian government takes control of Idlib.

"The EU in many ways, and maybe in the background the United States, has given [Erdoğan] an opportunity to put his threat into effect... [because they] haven't done anything about Syria," Kemal Kirişçi, a non-resident senior fellow focusing on migration and foreign policy in Turkey at the Brookings Institution, a Washington DC-based think tank, told TNH. "What he is trying to do by sending these people towards the European Union is to get the European Union involved in what is going to happen in Idlib."

The move also plays to Erdoğan's domestic political audience. The war in Syria will soon enter its tenth year, and as it has dragged on and the Turkish economy has faltered, anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey has increased. "[Opening the borders] is enabling him to turn around and to say to the domestic public that... I know you're uncomfortable with these Syrian refugees. Here it is. I'm doing something concrete about it," Kirişçi said.

The EU's reaction to refugees trying to cross its borders is also allowing Erdoğan – who has been criticised by EU leaders for his human rights record and the erosion of Turkey's democratic institutions during his time in power – to portray the bloc as hypocritical for betraying its fundamental values.

## What has the reaction been?

Since Turkey announced it would open its borders, thousands of refugees hoping to reach Europe have travelled – sometimes with apparent help from the Turkish government and in the full glare of frontline media coverage of a once-clandestine activity – to Edirne, a Turkish city close to the border with Greece and Bulgaria, and to the Turkish coast.

In response, the Greek government deployed additional military forces to prevent people from crossing its borders, and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the country would stop accepting new asylum applications for a period of one month. “Do not attempt to enter Greece illegally – you will be turned back,” Mitsotakis wrote on Twitter.

Turning people away from the Greek border and denying them access to asylum procedures is unlawful, according to Gerry Simpson, associate director of Human Rights Watch’s crisis and conflict division. “International and European refugee law requires Greece to fairly process their asylum claims and not to push [asylum seekers] back at the border or summarily deport them to Turkey,” Simpson told TNH.

The UN’s refugee agency, UNHCR, also said there is no legal basis for Greece suspending its acceptance of asylum applications.

Numerous NGOs denounced both Turkey for manipulating the refugee issue and the Greek government for its heavy-handed response and abandonment of international and EU law. “The EU-Turkey deal turned people in need of safety and dignity into political bargaining chips. Treating human lives as pawns in political negotiations is unacceptable, and puts fundamental human rights second to political gain, violating both international and EU law,” Evelien van Roemburg, Oxfam’s Europe migration campaign manager, said in a statement. Turkey’s opening of its borders also drew condemnation from European leaders and calls for Turkey to uphold its obligations under the EU-Turkey deal. The EU called an emergency foreign ministers meeting on the fallout from the conflict in Syria – drawing criticism that it had failed to respond to the situation in Idlib until asylum seekers and migrants were knocking on its doors.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen travelled to the Greek-Turkish border on 3 March with the Greek prime minister and other European leaders. At the border, Von der Leyen praised Greece for acting as a “shield” and announced 700 million euros (\$782 million) in funding for Greece, including an immediate injection of 350 million euros (\$391 million) to upgrade its border infrastructure.

## How many people are trying to cross and what happens to them?

In the first few days following Turkey’s announcement, the UN’s migration agency, IOM, said it observed at least 13,000 asylum seekers – mostly Syrians and Afghans – gathered at formal and informal crossings along the 212-kilometre-long Turkish-Greek land border, and UNHCR estimates that around 1,400 people had entered Greece, almost all of them landing on the Greek islands, according to a spokesperson. The number is an increase from previous weeks, but not unprecedented.

Getting across the land border is proving more difficult than many people had initially hoped. Many refugees who set out saw this as potentially their one opportunity to escape increasing anti-refugee sentiment in Turkey and a lack of economic opportunity, or to reunite with family already in Europe. But in the no man’s land between Turkish and Greek border checkpoints they were greeted by volleys of tear gas fired by Greek police and soldiers, and some asylum seekers lobbed rocks back at the security forces. At least one Syrian man was allegedly shot and killed by Greek border police, according to videos circulating on Twitter and the Turkish government. Greece denies the report.

People who have managed to cross the land border have either been pushed back to Turkey by Greek police and military patrols – a violation of international law that has a long history at the Greek-Turkish border – or have been arrested and charged for illegally entering Greece. In the Aegean Sea, a young Syrian boy drowned on 2 March after the boat he was travelling in capsized, and reports and videos have circulated of the Hellenic Coast guard trying to sabotage and push boats carrying asylum seekers back to Turkish waters and of at least one vigilante attack on a refugee boat.

## How is this affecting the situation on the Greek islands?

The Greek islands were in crisis even before Turkey opened its borders. Arrivals of asylum seekers increased last year – driven by worsening conflict in Afghanistan and Syria and deteriorating protections in Turkey – to their highest level since the signing of the EU-Turkey deal, and the islands are severely overcrowded, hosting more than 40,000 people in facilities built to hold 6,000.

The EU-Turkey deal requires people who arrive from Turkey to be held on the islands until their asylum claims are evaluated. Rejected asylum seekers are supposed to be sent back to Turkey while people who are granted protection are free to move to mainland Greece. But even in years with fewer arrivals, the asylum process couldn't keep pace, and most people crossing from Turkey have legitimate cases for asylum. Since 2016, just over 2,000 people have been returned to Turkey, and every year people have piled up on the islands, suffering in dire conditions while waiting for their asylum claims to be heard.

“On Lesbos, the situation has just become explosive.”

This year, tensions have simmered as the right-wing Greek government – which adopted hardline migration policies even before the recent crisis – has failed to address the overcrowding and announced controversial plans to build new, closed detention centres on the islands. In the past month, there have been protests on Lesbos, the Greek island hosting the most people, both by asylum seekers and residents who are fed up with the situation. In some cases the protests turned violent as demonstrators clashed with police, and asylum seekers and aid workers have been attacked by far-right vigilantes – and this was before Turkey announced it would open its borders.

“The government has enabled and emboldened a very small group of people, relative to the size of the population of Lesbos, to not be fearful of basically turning into kind of vigilante groups,” said MSF's McCann. “On Lesbos, the situation has just become explosive.”

Since Turkey opened its borders, vigilantes have attacked aid workers, journalists, and asylum seekers on Lesbos, and set up roadblocks to prevent volunteers and NGO workers from reaching Moria, the main camp for asylum seekers on the island. “We've been informing authorities on the island about the attacks and harassment and nothing seems to be done, which is very, very alarming,” McCann said.

## What next?

The EU has taken a defiant tone in response to Turkey opening its borders. German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the move was “unacceptable”, and EU migration commissioner Margaritis Schinas said “no one could blackmail” the EU. But Kirişçi, the migration and foreign policy expert, said the pressure could prove effective. “This crisis is also going to create, I suspect, a willingness, a readiness on the EU-side to chip in,” he said.

That could mean the EU offering Turkey: more financial support for refugees in the country – something Erdoğan said already happened and he has turned down; the extension of trade concessions for products involving refugee labour; the opening of a more robust refugee resettlement pathway from Turkey to the EU; and even the EU taking a more active role in addressing the humanitarian crisis in Idlib.

But aid agencies and human rights advocates say simply returning to the status quo of the EU-Turkey deal, with the EU giving Turkey more money to support refugees in exchange for Turkey controlling migration from its borders, won't fix the situation in Greece.

“The EU member states have to immediately evacuate people from the islands... and there needs to be an alternative to the EU-Turkey statement because it's now not working,”

McCann said. “The EU has to come up with a more sustainable humane and humanitarian solution to this issue because this problem is not going to stop coming. People will continue to come to seek protection in Europe and we have to find a better way to deal with it.”

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