

# NATO sends a flotilla to repulse refugees in the Aegean Sea

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At their meeting on Thursday morning, NATO defence ministers agreed to the immediate deployment of a flotilla to the Aegean Sea to support the European Union in deterring refugees by military force. Since NATO reconnaissance aircraft will also be deployed to monitor the Turkish-Syrian border, a direct NATO intervention in the civil war in Syria looks increasingly likely, with unforeseeable consequences.

The naval force is being deployed to the eastern Mediterranean with extraordinary speed. On Monday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke about a NATO intervention in the refugee crisis during a meeting with Turkish government leaders. Less than three days later, the supreme NATO commander, US General Philip Breedlove, had already ordered the flotilla to the Aegean, where it was intended to be in position within 24 hours.

Currently, the naval force consists of three ships: the German combat support vessel Bonn, the Canadian frigate HMCS Fredericton and the Turkish frigate TCG Barbaros. However, more warships are to follow. The Danish government has already signaled its participation in the mission with its own ships.

At the beginning of the NATO meeting, German Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen said the purpose of the mission was “to make the treacherous business of smugglers and illegal migration more difficult”. She then claimed that behind the smugglers who organize crossings for refugees was “an extensive logistics infrastructure and organization of a highly criminal nature” that “we can no longer tolerate”.

The European Union is criminalising the hundreds of thousands of refugees who want to escape the war-torn areas of the Middle East and Afghanistan and seek protection in Europe as “illegal immigrants” in order to systematically cast doubt on their refugee status. That

the smugglers can pursue their unscrupulous trade in the misery and despair of refugees, however, has much less to do with their alleged connections to organized crime than to the walling off of the EU, which makes it impossible for refugees to seek shelter in Europe through legal channels.

It is as mendacious as it is cynical to claim, as did British Defence Minister Michael Fallon, that the NATO mission could “definitely help save lives in the Aegean and it could help break the criminal gangs who are trafficking migrants from Turkey into Europe.”

The primary purpose of the NATO flotilla is to ensure that the escape routes to Europe via Turkey are completely blocked. This was expressed by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg when he declared that the mission will “help to stem the flow of refugees, to manage the human tragedy in better ways than we’ve able to do so far”.

The “human tragedy” is a product first of all of the imperialist intervention in the Middle East and North Africa. The European powers have responded to the flow of refugees by pulling up the drawbridge even higher and to hermetically sealing off the EU. Already this year, at least 320 refugees have drowned in the Aegean, because they saw no other way to save their lives than to put to sea in totally unseaworthy inflatables.

However, Stoltenberg refused to state whether the NATO warships would rescue refugees who are in distress at sea. Instead, he only said that it is “not about stopping or pushing back refugee boats ... [We’ll] provide high-quality information to the coastguard of Turkey and the coast guard of Greece and the efforts of the European Union.”

In fact, it is just such “pushbacks” that are planned to deter refugees. NATO officials stressed that unlike the

EU-led mission in the Mediterranean between Libya and Italy, where apprehended refugees are generally taken to Italy, both the NATO ships and the Coast Guard vessels would take the refugees directly back to Turkey, even if they were apprehended in Greek territorial waters.

British Defence Minister Fallon stated explicitly that there is a significant change in refugee policy. “They will not be taken to Greece and that’s a crucial difference. This is the first time we have seen a group tasked with returning migrants. That hasn’t happened before. So that is quite an important development.”

Greek Defence Minister Panos Kammenos was even more explicit, saying after the NATO meeting that the agreement “totally changes the conditions on the migration-refugees issue”. The intervention of NATO “solved the problem with the migrants”. It remains unclear what will happen if refugees resist being deported back to Turkey. The appearance of warships, however, has the most ominous implications.

To preserve a semblance of legality in the sending back of refugees, which is illegal under international refugee law, the Greek government (led by the pseudo-left Syriza party) is seeking to recognize Turkey as a “safe third country”. But Turkey is anything but “safe”. The government there is conducting a brutal war against the Kurdish minority, with hundreds of thousands displaced internally. Journalists and opposition activists are arbitrarily arrested. The same fate threatens to befall refugees from Syria, Iraq or Afghanistan, who are also regularly mistreated by security forces and border guards.

The classification of Turkey as “safe” is more than doubtful legally. Turkey has not yet fully ratified the Geneva Conventions, although this is a mandatory requirement in order to be classified as a “safe third country”. The government insists that only those from Europe seeking protection can be granted refugee status. Officially, all other refugees are only tolerated as “guests”, but they are unable to work or access the education or health systems.

Nevertheless, Turkey is now to act as the EU’s “bouncer”, undertaking its dirty work and detaining refugees from the war zones in the Middle East, even though they have no prospects there.

The unlimited cynicism of the European Union was expressed by the EU foreign policy chief Federica

Mogherini. Faced with tens of thousands of refugees from the Syrian city of Aleppo, who are holding out on the Turkish-Syrian border in the most adverse conditions, she reminded the Turkish government of its “moral and legal duty to protect those seeking help”, while at the same time the EU has called for NATO to help to block the stranded refugees in Turkey, stopping them from escaping and sealing up Europe’s borders.

The ruthlessness with which the ruling elite is acting against refugees is staggering. Led by the US, the NATO powers have completely destroyed Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, and deprived millions of people of any prospects of a normal life. Then they instigated a devastating civil war in Syria, which has now driven more than 10 million people to flee.

Now the European Union is using the same forces to prevent the refugees from seeking protection in Europe. They are even used as an excuse to further promote military escalation in the region.

In addition to the deployment of the flotilla to the Aegean, the NATO defence ministers also decided to send reconnaissance aircraft to the Syrian-Turkish border. This is supposedly to uncover refugee smuggling there. In fact, under the guise of a humanitarian intervention in the Syrian civil war, NATO is positioning itself for a direct confrontation with the Russian armed forces.



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