

EU countries and Turkey move to seal refugee routes

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The 28 European Union member states worked out a deal at a special summit with Turkey on Monday that would make it even more difficult for the millions of people fleeing the wars in the Middle East to enter Europe.

The so-called West Balkan route, along which hundreds of thousands of refugees have reached central Europe via Greece in the past year, is to be closed with the official blessing of the European Union.

Greece will receive several hundred million euros, as well as personnel and logistical support to confine stranded refugees in camps where they can be registered and sent back.

Between the Turkish coast and the Greek islands, the Aegean will be patrolled by NATO, which will seal off the escape routes over the sea, in close cooperation with EU border agency Frontex and the Turkish coast guard.

Turkey will prevent refugees from departing towards Europe and will take back those who have successfully made the crossing to Greece. In exchange, Ankara will receive several billion euros and visa facilitation for Turkish citizens, and accelerated negotiations in its bid for membership in the European Union.

The media received an early draft of the summit's final declaration before the meeting had begun. During the day, however, unforeseen difficulties arose, particularly in the negotiations with Turkey, so that the summit had to continue into the night. But this concerned details, and not the fundamentals, of the policy, which had been carefully prepared beforehand.

For refugees trying to escape the wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, the summit decisions will have devastating consequences. Refugees will face arbitrary treatment by police and authorities, being detained against their will in camps and ultimately transported back to their home countries. They will be forced to choose even more dangerous and expensive routes, which will drive up the

death toll higher still.

The summit exposed the myth of the so-called welcoming culture associated with German Chancellor Angela Merkel since she had agreed last year to allow refugees who were stranded in Hungary under inhumane conditions to continue their journey to Germany.

In reality, Merkel's opposition to the unilateral closure of borders and calls for a "European solution" were never based on humanitarian considerations. Rather, she feared that a return to border controls within the Schengen area would have negative consequences for the German economy, and could endanger the European Union in the long term, from which Germany has benefited greatly.

The export success of German industry in the last decades is due not least to the fact that it has outsourced parts of production to Eastern Europe, where wages are only a fraction of those in Germany. Production takes place across borders and relies on timely deliveries. The EU Commission has recently calculated that widespread border controls within the Schengen area could cost up to 18 billion euros annually. Much of this cost would be due to longer waiting times for trucks.

What Merkel's "European solution" looks like has now been revealed at the summit in Brussels. The summit's decisions also include reestablishing "a normally functioning Schengen area" by the end of the year, i.e., to dismantle the border controls unilaterally imposed by Austria and some Balkan countries, against the wishes of Brussels and Berlin. This requires hermetically sealing off the EU's external borders.

A document outlining the conclusions of the summit states, "Irregular flows of migrants along the route of the Western Balkans are ended; this route is now closed." According to media reports, Merkel is said to have resisted this formulation. But this was merely a matter of saving face. In reality, the route has already been blocked and Merkel had unambiguously stated days before that

unlike last year in Hungary, she was unwilling to allow refugees who are living in inhumane conditions at the Greek-Macedonian border to move on to Germany.

Greece now has the task of serving as a holding tank and deportation prison at the EU's external border. An article in *Die Welt* asked, "Will Greece now become the Nauru of Europe?" This was a reference to the Pacific island of Nauru, on which Australia imprisons refugees who are prevented from reaching Australian soil. The Syriza government will be remunerated for this role with a few hundred million euros from EU funds, and the hint that perhaps there might be a bit more leniency in meeting the austerity measures dictated by the Troika.

Even more draconian is the decision to deploy the largest military alliance in the world to shut off refugee routes across the Aegean. The NATO mission was in principle agreed to in February, but the final agreement only occurred shortly before the summit due to tensions between Greece and Turkey.

But now the German command ship Bonn, part of the Standing NATO Maritime Group (SNMG 2), is underway to take up position between the Greek island of Lesbos and the Turkish mainland. The ship, under the command of Admiral Jörg Klein, has some 210 soldiers on board.

France and Britain are also sending ships to support the mission. Although not a member of the Schengen area, the protection of which is the apparent goal of the mission, London is sending several vessels, as Prime Minister David Cameron personally announced on Monday night.

In Orwellian language, the NATO mission is officially presented as a fight against "human smuggling." In fact, the mission has nothing to do with fighting criminals, but stopping refugees so that they are prevented from crossing the sea and are brought back to Turkey. NATO is working closely with the European border agency Frontex and the Turkish coast guard. In this way, a precedent is being set for the militarization of the external borders of Fortress Europe.

Turkey is to play a key role in Sealing Europe's borders. Although there are already 2.7 million refugees in Turkey, the country is expected to take back all the refugees who manage the perilous crossing to Greece. Many of those affected will be declared "economic refugees" to be deported from Turkey to their country of origin, for example, Afghanistan.

In return, the EU wants to take in some of the refugees directly from Turkey. This is only true for a number of countries that have volunteered, because many EU

members are refusing to allow refugees into their country.

Germany in particular has sought to win Turkey for this role. For this reason, European Council President Donald Tusk travelled to Ankara after the summit. Chancellor Merkel met her counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu on Sunday evening for several hours of talks. The fact that the day before, the Turkish government had violently seized the daily newspaper *Zaman*, forcibly broke up a women's rights demonstration and is conducting a brutal war against the Kurdish population in the east of the country was completely overlooked.

But at a lunch with EU leaders on Monday, Davutoglu raised a series of new demands, bringing confusion to the carefully prepared summit proceedings.

Instead of the long-agreed but not yet disbursed 3 billion euros, he demanded 6 billion euros to finance the refugee and deportation policies. He agreed to take back all "irregular migrants" who have travelled from Turkey to the Greek islands, if the EU bears the costs. He also demanded that for every Syrian who is returned from Greece to Turkey, a Syrian from Turkey be resettled in the EU.

Finally, he called for the establishment of "safe zones" for refugees on Syrian soil. Previously, President Erdogan had proposed building a refugee town in Syria covering an area of 4,500 square kilometres. This would only be possible through a direct military intervention in Syria. In this way, NATO would be directly brought into position against Syrian President Assad and his Russian allies, while Ankara would achieve its goal of preventing the consolidation of a coherent Kurdish region in Syria.



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