

European Union-Turkey deal to expel refugees comes into force

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The deal struck last Friday between the European Union's 28 heads of government and Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu to facilitate the mass deportation of refugees arriving in Greece came into force on Sunday.

The agreement, negotiated at a special two-day summit with the authoritarian Turkish regime, aims to seal off Europe's borders to the millions of desperate people fleeing war and social misery produced by a series of wars and military interventions led by the imperialist powers. It represents a flagrant violation of international law by effectively abolishing the right to asylum, leaving the refugees at the mercy of the Turkish government.

During the first day of the new regulations, an additional 1,500 refugees arrived on the Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios, bringing the total stranded in the country to more than 50,000. These new arrivals, and all those who subsequently reach Greece across the Aegean Sea, are to be returned to Turkey following a farcical asylum procedure which is intended to be completed within 48 hours. In exchange, the European Union (EU) pledged to accept Syrian refugees already in Turkey on the basis of a "one in, one out" principle, up to a maximum of 72,000.

Greek officials and volunteers assisting the refugees on the islands have described chaotic conditions at camps and warned that the agreement may not be enforceable. Giorgos Kyritsis, coordinator for immigration policy in Athens, told the press that Syriza Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras presented a plan at a cabinet meeting on Saturday afternoon which demanded the immediate implementation of the EU-Turkey deal. "But in practice, structures are needed, personnel must be prepared and that takes a bit longer than 24 hours," the official said.

Military and security forces will play a prominent role in enforcing the deal. EU members are to send up to 1,500 officers with the EU's border protection service Frontex, whose task will be to carry out the repatriation of refugees to Turkey. The Greek army was deployed to Lesbos on Saturday to move refugees to camps on the mainland.

NATO's operation in the Aegean Sea aimed at

intercepting refugee boats and turning them back to Turkey is to be expanded to cover a longer stretch of coastline.

The same European powers which have routinely invoked "human rights" concerns to justify one military intervention after another in the Middle East and North Africa are denying refugees the right to seek protection from the persecution and war which these very policies have produced. This is being justified on the spurious grounds that Turkey, a country engaged in a low-level civil war against the Kurdish population and ruthless repression of political opponents, should be designated a "safe third country."

Even if the new regulations are fully implemented, the minuscule figure of 72,000 refugees will be reached in a matter of weeks, at which point the EU has vowed to suspend the resettlement programme. Moreover, it remains entirely unclear which EU members will accept the initial 72,000 refugees, since no commitments were included in the deal.

Those refugees deported to Turkey will virtually have no hope of ever reaching Europe, since the deal contains a provision to put asylum applications from people who have previously entered Europe "illegally" to the bottom of the pile.

Turkey will receive up to €6 billion in financial assistance from the EU over the coming two years for its role in accepting refugees deported from Greece, even though Davutoglu has made clear his government's intention to repatriate them to their home countries. In addition, Turkey is also being offered the prospect of visa free travel within the EU for its 75 million citizens if it meets a series of conditions, and the opening of a new chapter in Turkish negotiations to join the EU.

The deal with the EU has strengthened Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his brutal crackdown against political opponents and journalists. On the eve of last week's summit in Brussels, Erdogan declared bluntly in a March 16 speech that criticism of Turkey on issues like "democracy, freedom and rule of law" were groundless.

“For us, these phrases have absolutely no value any longer,” Erdogan continued.

Seizing on the March 13 bombing in Ankara claimed by a splinter group of the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) which left 37 dead, Erdogan announced his intention last week to expand the definition of terrorism to include MPs, journalists and activists. “Those who stand on our side in the fight against terrorism are our friend. Those on the opposite side, are our enemy,” he chillingly warned in his March 16 address.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and the other heads of government who hailed the refugee deal know full well that Erdogan’s statements amounted to an open declaration that Ankara intends to deploy the full force of the state against refugees and anyone else who dares to oppose government policy. The EU will be directly complicit in such repression by expelling refugees to a police state regime which has not even fully implemented the UN Refugee Convention.

Erdogan followed up his explicit defence of the authoritarian methods employed by his government with comments yesterday that sought to place the blame for the refugee crisis on the European powers’ failure to intervene militarily in neighbouring Syria. “All those who have not accepted a no-fly zone and a zone cleared of terror in Syria, and everyone who complains about the refugees are two-faced and hypocritical,” he said.

Turkey’s push for a no-fly-zone in northern Syria is aimed above all at countering efforts by the Kurdish fighters combatting Islamic State militants from establishing a contiguous territory on the Turkish border, which Ankara fears would become the basis for a separate Kurdish state.

The adoption of such a policy, under conditions where Russian aircraft have intervened on the side of the Assad regime, would be the deployment of NATO air power and other forces along the lines of the 2011 regime-change operation in Libya. Notwithstanding recent moves by Moscow to draw down its forces deployed in Syria, a direct NATO intervention in the Syrian civil war of this character poses the real threat of a military clash between US-led NATO and Russian forces.

The unanimity among EU heads of government on Friday’s deal could not disguise the fact that deep divisions persist in the bloc. The closure of the Balkan route to refugees without travel documents and the agreement to send all refugees arriving in Greece back to Turkey have resulted in alternative routes being considered, including passage through Albania before crossing the Adriatic Sea to Italy. The Austrian government vowed last month to impose border controls on the Brenner motorway on its border with Italy, one of the busiest routes between southern and northern Europe.

Financial Times columnist Wolfgang Münchau warned that the EU-Turkey agreement amounted to a further step in the disintegration of the free movement of people within the Schengen zone and ultimately of the EU itself. Noting that Italy could once again become the main entry point for refugees, he wrote, “France, Switzerland and Slovenia can be counted on to reintroduce controls at that point. Italy would then be cut off from the Schengen passport-free travel area, of which it is a member, and Schengen would become a small club of north European countries—possibly a model for a future eurozone. This would be the first step in the fragmentation of the EU.”

Münchau condemned the agreement because he claimed that the EU had lost its “moral high ground” and had sold “its soul to strike a deal with Turkey.” “[T]he EU is paying Turkey €6bn and opening up a new chapter in EU accession negotiations—this with a country whose leadership has just abrogated democracy. The EU is further set to allow visa-free travel to 75m inhabitants of Turkey. The EU not only sold its soul that day, it actually negotiated a pretty lousy deal.”

In truth, the EU was not compelled to sell out its principles in order to entrust the authoritarian regime in Ankara with the carrying out of its dirty work. The readiness of all of the member states to sign off on a plan to expel refugees to Turkey starkly exposes the reactionary nature of the EU, an institution through which Europe’s imperialist powers organise attacks on workers and the most vulnerable sections of society, and carry out their aggressive foreign policy objectives.

This is precisely why Münchau, like a number of other commentators in the bourgeois press, is wringing his hands in frustration over the deal with Turkey. For decades, the European powers have exploited their “moral high ground” to justify one imperialist war after another, from the bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 to the ongoing efforts to topple the Assad regime. The further erosion of the European powers’ humanitarian pretensions will only intensify the challenge of selling new wars, such as the well-advanced plans for military operations in Libya, amid growing polar opposition to war and social inequality.



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