

# THE MERKEL PLAN

**Restoring control; retaining compassion**

**A proposal for the Syrian refugee crisis**

**4 October 2015**

## **The Merkel Plan**

*This paper outlines how an agreement between Germany and Turkey could have an immediate and dramatic impact on the Syrian refugee crisis. It would restore control over Europe's south-eastern border without sacrificing compassion for the refugees. But with the far right resurgent across Europe, the window of opportunity for decisive action is closing fast.*

We propose an immediate agreement between Germany and Turkey on the following points:

- Germany should agree to grant asylum to 500,000 Syrian refugees registered in Turkey over the coming 12 months.
- Germany already expects high numbers of refugees to arrive in Germany. But rather than waiting for them to undertake the perilous journey across the Aegean and the Western Balkans, Germany should accept claims from Turkey through a fair and orderly process and provide safe transport to successful applicants. The offer should be limited to Syrian refugees already registered with the Turkish authorities, to avoid creating incentives for new migration flows into Turkey. Other EU member states should join in.
- In return, from a specified date, Turkey should agree to accept back all new migrants reaching Greece from its territory. This would quickly reduce the flood of boats crossing the Aegean to a trickle.
- Germany should agree to help Turkey obtain visa-free travel in 2016.

*The paper explains how the various practical and legal aspects of this agreement could be resolved. It explains why, in the face of escalating anti-migrant and anti-Muslim rhetoric from far right parties across Europe, an early solution is in the vital interests of both Germany and Turkey.*



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## WHY WE NEED A PLAN NOW

The numbers are extraordinary, and growing fast. In the seven months from January to July 2015, a total of 125,000 asylum seekers arrived in Greece. Then in August alone, 108,000 people came. In September, the number was 153,000.<sup>1</sup>

Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Croatia are all waving the refugees through. And, despite its rhetoric, so is Viktor Orban's Hungary. As a result, after 150,000 people entered Greece in September, a similar number reached Austria. As an Austrian official told *The New York Times* on 25 September: "Up to 10,000 migrants have been entering Austria daily, mostly from Hungary."<sup>2</sup> Orban's fence has made the journey a little more arduous, but made no difference to the outcome. Most refugees arriving in Austria then move straight on to Germany. The recent restoration of a few border controls in Germany did not change this either. On 29 September, the Bavarian government noted that 169,400 asylum seekers had arrived that month.<sup>3</sup> At this rate, the coming year will see more than 1.8 million refugees arriving in Germany – and that's without taking into account the impact of Russian military intervention in Syria. As a UNHCR regional coordinator noted about the flow, "I don't see it abating, I don't see it stopping ... perhaps this is the tip of the iceberg."<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, despite global horror at images of drowned children, the Aegean Sea claims yet more lives. In September, 160 people died attempting the crossing. This is more than in the whole year before.<sup>5</sup> Yet 99.9 percent of all those who attempted the crossing made it to Greece. Such odds will not deter people from trying. The wall that surrounds Fortress Europe has collapsed.

Politicians and commentators are proposing to buttress this wall with more fences and watchtowers and border guards. None of their proposals are plausible. The European Commission proposed a package of measures in September – reallocating some asylum seekers already in the EU, creating hotspots to speed up registration of new arrivals, developing a proposal for a European border service and coast guard. None of these measures, even if fully implemented immediately, would restore control over the external border in the Aegean. Meanwhile, German politicians keep repeating that there has to be a "European solution," as if another EU conference might produce a solution like a genie from a magic lamp. This will not happen.

On talk-shows around Europe, experts repeat the non-proposals: address the "root causes" of the crisis, "solve the situation in Syria, Libya and the Middle East", host another international conference. There are dozens of speeches in which leaders agree that the EU *has to secure* its external borders; that the border *must be sealed*; that thorough border controls *have to be implemented*; that *infrastructure needs to be strengthened*. Nobody offers any concrete ideas for this is to be done. A recent interview with the High Representative for EU foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, in *The Washington Post* highlights this helplessness. While the title of the article promises much – "E.U. Foreign policy chief: Here's what to do about the refugee crisis"

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, [Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean](#), accessed 30 September.

<sup>2</sup> *New York Times*, "[No end in sight to tide of migrants entering Europe, U. N. says](#)", 25 September 2015; *Vienna.at*, "[10.500 Flüchtlinge Montagvormittag in Österreich](#)", 28 September 2015.

<sup>3</sup> *Berliner Morgenpost*, "[Bundespolizei meldet wieder steigende Flüchtlingszahlen](#)", 29 September 2015. *FAZ*, "[Täglich kommen bis zu 10.000 Flüchtlinge](#)", 29 September 2015. *Focus*, "[Flüchtlingskrise in News-Ticker](#)", 28 September 2015.

<sup>4</sup> *The Guardian*, "[EU refugee crisis 'tip of the iceberg', says UN agency](#)", 25 September 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Source: [Missing Migrant Project](#). IOM is the leading intergovernmental organisation working on migration.

– the reader looks in vain for a proposal. The helplessness of elites is captured in Mogherini’s plaintive statement that “it was painful to see fences or walls built in Europe.” She asserts that “the issue is manageable for us Europeans.” She hopes that “international partners could take more refugees for resettlement.” She concludes that only a “political solution to the conflict in Syria” will help.<sup>6</sup>

While mainstream leaders signal their helplessness, some politicians see the refugee crisis as an extraordinary opportunity to change the very nature of European politics, stoking public fears of a “Muslim invasion.” In a speech on 5 September, Hungarian prime-minister Viktor Orban argued that this crisis was an extraordinary opportunity to defeat liberal politics in Europe. His proposals amount to ending the EU’s association with universal human rights, abolishing the right to asylum for Muslim refugees and creating an illiberal and islamophobic European Union.<sup>7</sup> The humanitarian crisis is fast becoming a political one, with the potential to shake the European Union to its foundations. If the refugee situation remains out of control, there is a real prospect of a resurgent far right, more energised and more unified than ever, gaining a controlling stake in European politics.

There has been too much vague talk and wishful thinking. There is an urgent need for solutions that can restore control without giving up on compassion, that can work here and now and that are not premised on an eventual resolution of the Syrian quagmire. This paper presents such a proposal. But before that we need to understand why what is currently proposed will not work.

## **WHY CURRENT PROPOSALS WILL NOT WORK**

Recent weeks have seen many meetings and speeches by European leaders demanding action, and many policy proposals to stem the flow of arrivals. Let us look at each of them in turn.

### ***Provide more funding to help refugees in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan***

This is a good idea for humanitarian reasons. UN-managed refugee camps and the international relief effort in Lebanon and Jordan have been seriously underfunded. Four million Syrian refugees represent a huge burden for the region.

At the same time, conditions in refugee camps are certainly not the main factor in the calculations being made by the refugees. According to UNHCR, Turkey has built some of the best-equipped refugee camps in the world. In February 2014, *The New York Times* wrote about Turkey under the title “How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp”:

“It’s the nicest refugee camp in the world!” a Polish diplomat staying at my hotel crowed when I mentioned the place to him the next day. Standing with him was an Italian official; he nodded vehemently in agreement. No one I spoke to — not the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, not academics, not even the refugees — denies that the standard of living here is exceptionally high. When I later listed the amenities to a refugee expert, she replied, “I’ve never heard of such a thing.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Washington Post, [“E.U. foreign policy chief: Here’s what to do about the refugee crisis”](#), 2 October 2015.

<sup>7</sup> ESI, [“Refugees as a means to an end – The EU’s most dangerous man”](#), 24 September 2015.

<sup>8</sup> The New York Times, [“How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp”](#), 12 February 2015.

The author noted that “gratitude for the host country pervades the camp.” There is electricity, schools and low crime rates. It is a far cry from the harsher conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon or Jordan, or to the conditions in refugee camps in Hungary or Greece. And yet, the article concludes, even in Turkey’s camps, what is missing is hope:

“Besides the comforts, and the cleanliness, and the impressive facilities of the Kilis camp, there is one important thing to note: Nobody likes living there. ‘It’s hard for us,’ said Basheer Alito, the section leader who was so effusive in his praise for the camp and the Turks. ‘Inside, we’re unhappy. In my heart, it’s temporary, not permanent.’ ‘What if it was permanent?’ I asked him. Quickly, he answered, ‘It’s impossible to accept this.’”

It is eminently clear today that it will be many years before any refugees can return to Syria, back to communities now destroyed beyond recognition. They need jobs – none of the host countries gives them work permits, although this is at least under consideration in Turkey. Above all, they need a future for their children – half the refugees in Turkey are below the age of 18. And an estimated 90 percent of them are not even living in camps. At present, the only viable option many refugees see is getting to Germany. The prospect of slightly better living conditions in or outside of refugee camps will not change this calculus.

### ***A single EU Asylum Agency to assess claims and grant protection***

This is a good idea, as the current system of different national asylum systems has been revealed as completely dysfunctional. However, even if the obvious political obstacles could be resolved, such an agency would take years to design, establish and become effective. Furthermore, its task would be to deal with the refugees already in the EU; it would have no greater capacity to limit the number of arrivals than the current national asylum agencies.

### ***A common list of safe countries of origin***

Under international and EU law, “a safe country of origin” is a country that has been assessed as free from armed conflict or persecution. People from such countries still have a right to make an asylum claim, but if they can show no strong evidence of individual persecution, their claims can be quickly rejected. The European Commission is now proposing a common EU list of seven safe countries of origin: Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. At present, 17 percent of asylum applications in the EU come from these countries.<sup>9</sup>

This useful proposal would facilitate the processing of those claims, freeing up administrative resources. It would do nothing, however, to reduce the number of arrivals over the Aegean. It would change nothing for Syrian refugees.

### ***Improving EU burden sharing***

There has been a lot of focus on burden sharing – ensuring that all EU countries do their part to host refugees. In the medium term, this will need to be part of any solution, even if the political barriers are formidable. Already a mandatory plan on relocating 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece adopted on 22 September strained intra-EU relations. Agreement on the much larger numbers needed looks remote. And making such a system operational is a huge logistical challenge.

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<sup>9</sup> European Commission, [“An EU ‘Safe Countries of Origin’ List”](#), undated.

Most importantly, though, a system for distributing refugees across the continent will make no difference to the current inflow. The same can be said for better managed and equipped reception centres in Greece.

As for calling on the rest of the world to do more to accept Syrian refugees: this is a distant prospect, at best. The United States has agreed to take in a few thousand over the next year; the UK has agreed to 20,000 over five years. Together, those figures are less than the numbers arriving each week in Greece.

### ***Taking on the people smugglers***

There are many proposals for a stepped-up law enforcement response. There is no question that the movement of refugees is being facilitated by brazen criminality of a particularly heartless kind. Leaving desperate refugees to suffocate in the back of abandoned refrigerated trucks is among the most shocking of crimes imaginable. However, the refugee crisis cannot be solved by arresting people smugglers. The demand for an avenue into Europe is so great that inevitably there will be unscrupulous characters to provide the supply. And Syrian refugees do not need to take advantage of sophisticated smuggling operations to reach Greece on flimsy boats. They are already in Turkey, and the boats needed to take them to Greece are comparatively cheap.

### ***Banking on a “European solution”***

European institutions have been working at full tilt, but nothing that is currently discussed in Brussels will make a difference in the short term. The president of the Commission put the refugee issue at the centre of his State of the Union address on 9 September. On the same day, the Commission published a proposal as “part of a comprehensive and systemic approach”.<sup>10</sup> EU ministers met on 22 September and agreed on a “temporary and exceptional” – that is, not permanent – relocation mechanism limited to 160,000 refugees (the current inflow of one month).<sup>11</sup> The next day, EU leaders adopted a package of measures: increased financial assistance to international organisations and frontline countries; additional resources for relevant EU agencies, including personnel and equipment from member states for common border patrols; establishing hotspots in frontline EU member states, at the latest by November 2015.<sup>12</sup>

There is a serious problem, however, shared by all of the proposals discussed by the EU in recent weeks. Even if fully implemented immediately, these measures would not restore control over the external border in the Aegean. They would not reduce the flow of new arrivals.

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<sup>10</sup> European Commission, [Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council](#), 9 September 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Council of the European Union, [Decision establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece](#), 22 September 2015.

<sup>12</sup> European Council, [Informal meeting of EU heads of state or government on migration, 23 September 2015 – statement](#), 24 September 2015.

*EU package of measures<sup>13</sup>*

<b>Juncker's State of the Union</b>	<b>EU 23 September summit results</b>
Relocate a total of 160,000 asylum seekers from Italy, Greece and Hungary	Agreed
Create hotspots in frontline EU member states to speed up the registration of refugees and increase support to these member states	Agreed
Common EU list of safe countries of origin, including all candidates and potential candidates	Not yet agreed
Proposing a permanent relocation mechanism	Not agreed – only a temporary relocation mechanism was proposed
Commission will soon propose steps towards a European border and coast guard	

***Build higher fences***

There are many variations on this idea – from strengthening Frontex, the EU border agency, to restoring border controls within the EU's Schengen area – but all of them fall short of a practical solution. Leave aside, for a moment, humanitarian sentiment, morality or legal commitments undertaken under the UN Refugee Convention and EU legislation. The most basic objection to the idea that building fences can contain the refugee crisis is that there is no way that this can actually work. It is not that fences never work: the Soviet-era Iron Curtain – with its watch-towers, military border patrols and shoot-to-kill policy – was an effective at controlling the movement of people, a border system that “worked”.

But fences can't be built on water. The suggestion that Greece could somehow stop migrants from reaching the EU if only it tried a bit harder is an empty one. This could not be achieved even if a new European border and coast guard took over. Currently, any migrant who gets into a boat off the coast of Lesbos and Kos has a near certainty of reaching Greece. The Greek government cannot sink ships or push them away from its shores. This would be both illegal and dangerous. Its choices are limited to waiting for them to land on Greek territory or intercepting them at sea and bringing them to Greece. Either way, they reach the EU. Smugglers know this, and as news travel fast, so does a rapidly growing number of potential migrants from countries as far away as Central Asia.

A bigger EU deployment in the Aegean could help rescue flimsy boats overturned in the waters. It could bring better communications, better equipment, better surveillance and better inter-agency cooperation. But this would not bring down the numbers of people reaching Samos, Kos or Lesbos. This is because EU border guards would be required to escort to EU territory any boat with migrants that they stopped. And any boat they missed would continue on to the Greek islands anyway. The flood of asylum claimants would continue.

***Turkey should stop refugees***

Some EU leaders have suggested working with Turkey to address the refugee crisis, through a reinforced dialogue. This is based on the right insight: that effective border control depends above all on the EU's neighbours and their willingness and ability to stop irregular migrants

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Claude Juncker, “[State of the Union speech](#)”, 9 September 2015; European Council, [Informal meeting of EU heads of state or government on migration, 23 September 2015 – statement](#), 24 September 2015.

from reaching the EU's borders. This explains the ebb and flow of people crossing the Adriatic from Albania to Italy in the 1990s; it explains why few boats leave Morocco to cross to Spain; and why the collapse of states in North Africa, primarily Libya, has created an almost impossible situation for the Italian coast guard in the Mediterranean.

It is true that the key to stopping the uncontrolled arrival of hundreds of thousands in the Eastern Mediterranean is held by Turkey. However, current suggestions that Turkey should do more fail to explain either *how* Turkey might stop Syrian refugees crossing the Aegean or *why* it might try to do more than it already does. After all, even other EU member states are rushing to put refugees on trains or buses headed for Germany. Why should Turkey, burdened with by far the largest share of Syrian refugees, do any differently? In fact, Turkey is already taking action. So far in 2015, the Turkish coast guard has arrested 59 people smugglers and rescued over 45,000 refugees on the Aegean, taking them back to Turkey. The fact that few refugees are crossing Turkey's land borders into Greece or Bulgaria is evidence that Turkish border management is by no means ineffective.

*Table: Turkish Coast Guard operations*

<b>Year</b>	<b>Migrants (rescued)</b>	<b>Traffickers captured</b>
2013	6,937	71
2014	12,884	72
2015 (until 6 Sep)	45,253	59

But there are clear limits to these efforts, which resemble Sisyphus rolling a rock up a hill. Those who actually visit the area see this quickly:

“Refugees hide in olive groves around rocky coasts and settle there while waiting their turn to get on the boat. They are not visible from the sea, and it is challenging to reach their isolated area on foot. Locals are afraid to venture into the area, out of fear of the human traffickers’ guards. Because the area has only scattered villages, the police presence is small. Local officers deal with day-to-day incidents, traffic accidents, minor thefts and the like.”<sup>14</sup>

The problem for the Turkish coast guard is less to detect boats than to stop them safely:

“Once migrants are at sea stopping them is difficult and risky. Refugee boats set to sail in columns, simultaneously from many points. At the same time it is possible to see 30-40 boats afloat at once. They move fast, they take risks, they do not stop when they are warned. There were originally three coast guard boats in the area, deployed to stop smuggling, deal with the pollution caused by passing ships and other routine jobs. After the migrants arrived, Turkey sent extra boats, boosting numbers to 10... Once a coast guard boat stops a migrant dinghy, it takes at least an hour to get refugees on board and return them to the port. After that the refugees are registered, delivered to the local authorities and dispatched to a refugee camp. While all this is happening, other boat loads reach Greece.”

Sometimes smugglers shoot at Turkish authorities. There is also the fear of accidents:

<sup>14</sup> Bora Bayraktar, “Gateway to Europe: Why Turkey isn’t stopping the migrants”, [euronews](#), 22 September 2015.

“Turkish officers also are cautious about stopping the overloaded vessels because capsizing them with children and non-swimmers aboard could be deadly. Rescuing a boatload from the water takes around half-an hour, easily enough time for many to drown.”

And for refugees who are intercepted, there is nothing to stop them from trying again.

Offers of European cash do not address these practical challenges – and have not been well received in Turkey. When EU leaders meet Turkish president Erdogan in Brussels on Monday 5 October, they will likely repeat their ‘offer’ of €1 billion of EU money. Senior Turkish officials told ESI that this is “disingenuous.” The money in question had already been pledged to Turkey to support its EU accession process. It is not new funding, and reallocating it in this way is not seen as meaningful support.

Another attractive argument is that the EU might promise to speed up the path towards visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens. The problem with this idea is that it is member states that decide on whether to lift the visa requirement. It is not from Brussels but from Paris or Berlin that such a promise would have to come, in order to be credible.

It is true that the only way this crisis can be resolved in the short term is with Turkish cooperation. But this would have to be cooperation on quite different terms from those that European institutions in Brussels can offer. In fact, on this issue, the EU can offer very little. It is from elsewhere that a credible proposal must come.

### **WHY GERMANY MUST ACT NOW**

With European institutions offering piecemeal measures that do not add up to a coherent plan, it is clear that German Chancellor Angela Merkel is the only leader in a position to take meaningful action.

Merkel won the respect of many Europeans for her compassionate leadership when this crisis erupted in late August. Now, compassion needs to be accompanied by a reassertion of control over Europe’s borders. Merkel and her political allies across Europe need to show that it is they, and not the far-right, who can offer a real solution to the crisis.

At this moment, the European far right fantasises about ever-higher fences, refugee boats pushed back to sea, and camps to incarcerate those who slip through. If it looks as if there is no limit to the number of refugees arriving in the EU, the public’s compassion will eventually be trumped by fear. This is ruthlessly exploited by the far-right, which conjures up visions of millions of impoverished migrants arriving from around the world, to swamp European values and destroy the European way of life.

Merkel’s challenge is not just to end the refugee crisis, but to do so in ways that reassert Europe’s commitment to universal human rights. As the richest continent in the world, Europe has a vital interest in maintaining respect for international norms. The majority of Europeans have responded to the crisis by recognising their shared humanity with those escaping the Syrian war. Any solution must reflect this humanitarian impulse.

Angela Merkel is uniquely placed to propose a credible EU policy, given her popularity in her own country, her visibility in the world and the fact that she has staked her political capital on Germany’s ability to handle this crisis. Despite recent setbacks, she remains in a strong political position, with no rivals in her party and substantial cross-party support within the Bundestag.

But the window of opportunity is closing. In October, 76 percent of Germans thought that there should be “legal ways to immigrate to Europe” – down from 85 percent in September. In October, Merkel’s approval rating stood at 54 percent – down from 63 percent in September. In another October opinion poll, 51 percent of Germans agreed with the statement: “I am concerned that so many people are coming to Germany” – up from 38% in September.<sup>15</sup> Merkel has stated that “Germany can do this.” Yet 59 percent of Germans now disagree with the statement that Germany “can handle this crisis.”<sup>16</sup>

Germany can, indeed, manage this crisis. But Merkel urgently needs to show how she will do so. There is a need for a German initiative that can take the heat out of the refugee crisis. Unilateral German action is not meant to side-line European institutions, but to create the breathing space within which a credible EU policy can emerge.

### ELEMENTS OF THE MERKEL PLAN

There are more than 1.9 million Syrian refugees registered in Turkey.<sup>17</sup> It is from Turkey that most refugees begin their journey to Europe. The central idea of this plan is that it is in both the EU’s and Turkey’s interest to share this burden.

The key elements of this plan are the following:

**A German quota for Syrians in Turkey:** Germany should set a quota of 500,000 Syrian refugees from among those currently registered in Turkey whom it will accept in the next twelve months. Germany should also call on other EU member states to join the scheme, in which case the total might be higher.

**Asylum claims:** Under this plan, Syrian refugees would be able to submit their asylum claims to Germany and other participating states from within Turkey. Those who are accepted will be given safe and orderly transport to their new host communities. The offer should be limited to Syrians currently registered with the Turkish Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM). In this way, it avoids creating incentives for more migrants to travel to Turkey, which would only increase Turkey’s burden. Yet this would still directly address by far the largest section of the refugee caseload. Syrians made up 175,000 (65 percent) of the 271,000 migrants who reached Greece between January and August 2015.<sup>18</sup>

**Logistics of applications in Turkey:** The challenge of processing asylum claims in Turkey is not as difficult as one might imagine. Since November 2014, German authorities no longer conduct individual interviews with Syrian asylum seekers arriving in Germany, unless there are doubts about the identity of the applicants or a particular reason to doubt their claim. The German authorities took this decision to save resources, since the recognition rate of Syrian asylum seekers in 2014 was over 95 percent.

Applicants in Germany are registered, their photos and fingerprints are taken, and they complete a detailed questionnaire. Case workers then make a decision based on the paperwork. This

<sup>15</sup> *Tagesschau.de*, “[ARD-Deutschlandtrend: Deutsche besorgt über Flüchtlinge](#)”, 1 October 2015.

<sup>16</sup> *N24*, “[N24 Umfrage: Deutsche glauben Merkel in Flüchtlingskrise nicht](#)”, 1 October 2015.

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR, “[Syrian Refugees](#)”, 25 August 2015.

<sup>18</sup> The data is from the [Hellenic Police, Ministry of Public Order & Citizen Protection](#), accessed on 25 September 2015.

approach can equally be applied in Turkey. The Turkish government has already registered the Syrian refugees, so the information in the existing database can help in the process.

The fact that the vast majority of Syrian refugees are families also makes the processing of claims easier. According to a 2013 survey, 17 percent of the Syrian refugees in Turkey were heads of family, 15 percent were spouses, 55 percent children, 3.3 percent grandchildren and 9 percent single adults or other relatives.<sup>19</sup> This means that only 26 percent (heads of families and single individuals) would need to file asylum applications. If the head of family is granted asylum, this should be automatically extended to his/her spouse and children.

Registering 500,000 persons is of course nonetheless a substantial undertaking. However, Germany already faces this challenge at home. The new head of the responsible agency (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge – BAMF) has already asked for 3,000 new positions, giving him a total staff of 6,300. If part of the work is done in Turkey, BAMF could hire locally for positions that do not require expert knowledge.

**Helping the most vulnerable:** One effect of such a scheme is that it would allow priority to be given to the most vulnerable groups among Syrian refugees, who are not in a position to undertake the arduous crossing of the Aegean and the journey across the Western Balkans. Vulnerable refugees are already prioritised under the EU’s internal relocation schemes aimed at redistributing asylum seekers from Italy and Greece.<sup>20</sup> This category includes unaccompanied children, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women and single parents. The same approach could be taken to Syrian refugees in Turkey. This would restore fairness to a process that is currently based on the survival of the fittest.

**The Aegean migration route:** As a quid pro quo for Germany’s offer, Turkey would commit to taking back, in a quick and simple procedure, all new migrants that reach Greece from a given date. This means that, within days of their arrival in Greece, they would be sent back by the Greek authorities to Turkey. Within weeks, the number of refugees crossing the Aegean will slow to a trickle, as it would become pointless to undertake the risky journey. Cyprus has demonstrated how this can work: since it became known that it was difficult to get from Cyprus to the rest of the EU, few refugees have attempted to reach the island.

**Legal issues:** To return refugees lawfully to Turkey, Greece has to deem Turkey “a safe third country” under Asylum Procedures Law. This involves a determination that refugees in Turkey are not at risk either of persecution or of being forcibly returned to Syria. This would allow Greece to declare inadmissible any asylum claims by individuals transiting through Turkey. This is both lawful and plausible. Syrians in Turkey already enjoy temporary protection, while non-Syrians can apply for asylum under a new EU-inspired asylum law.

**Support to Turkey:** Germany, other participating EU countries and the European Commission would provide Turkey with financial assistance to manage the readmission of migrants from Greece. They would also increase their assistance to the Syrian refugees whom Turkey already hosts, along the lines of existing proposals.

<sup>19</sup> Prime Ministry Disaster & Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) survey, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> The [Council Decision of 14 September 2015 on relocating 40,000 persons in need of international protection from Italy and Greece](#) prioritises vulnerable persons who, in reference to a [2013 EU Directive on standards for receiving asylum seekers](#), are defined as “minors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence, such as victims of female genital mutilation.”

**Visa-free travel for Turkey:** The European Commission would commit to assessing early next year whether Turkey qualifies for visa-free travel with the EU. If so, it would present a legislative proposal to that effect no later than June 2016. Since implementation of the EU-Turkey and Greece-Turkey readmission agreements and issues of asylum and migration are at the core of the visa liberalisation process, which was launched in December 2013, Turkey is certain to meet the main conditions if this scheme is implemented and the Syrian refugee crisis managed. Germany should indicate its political support for this.

### EFFECTS OF THE MERKEL PLAN

If adopted in the next few weeks, the Merkel Plan would have a dramatic effect on the refugee crisis.

**The effects in the Aegean:** Asylum seekers will stop undertaking the perilous boat journey to Greece, which cost 246 lives between 1 January and 28 September 2015.<sup>21</sup> If everybody is returned to Turkey within days, and there is a viable alternative way of achieving asylum in the EU, the journey would quickly become futile. Smugglers would lose their clients. Scenes of desperate refugees amassing on the island of Lesbos or wandering across the Western Balkans will soon pass into history.

**The effects on the EU:** The EU will have restored control over its Aegean border. This will allow leaders in Central European nations who have argued against burden-sharing arrangements “as long as the borders are not controlled” to revise their position.

**The effects on Germany:** Germany and the other participating EU countries will have time to organise accommodation and support services for the recognised refugees before transporting them to their final destinations. The process will become orderly and organised. Furthermore, the German authorities will regain control over the number of refugees arriving in Germany, restoring the public’s trust in the government. While large, the number of refugees coming to Germany would not exceed those that the German government currently expects to arrive irregularly through the Aegean-Balkan route.

**Possible effects on Greek-Turkish relations:** Cooperation on a practical mission like this in the Aegean should help build confidence and revive talks between Athens and Ankara on other bilateral issues in the Aegean.

**The effects on non-European democracies:** The fact that Germany is exercising leadership on this issue will allow it to call on other rich nations to contribute in turn and alleviate the humanitarian effects of the Syrian war. The US, Canada, Australia and other countries should undertake a similar initiative for the 1.1 million Syrian refugees based in Lebanon. The US should commit to accepting at least 50,000 over the coming year. This is a comparatively cheap investment in the stability of a vital country, and thus in the security of the US and its key allies, including Israel.

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<sup>21</sup> Missing Migrant Project, "[Mediterranean Sea: Data of Missing Migrants](#)".

## WHY THIS PLAN IS IN TURKEY'S INTEREST

Why would it be in Turkey's interest to help Germany in this way? For many years, Turkey has resisted taking back third-country nationals who crossed its borders into Greece, despite a readmission agreement. Why would Turkey act differently now?

In fact, this agreement could make a significant contribution to Turkey's security. In recent times, a resurgent Russia has been revising borders, annexing territories and supporting separatists in the northern Black Sea. It has moved its military into annexed territories in the Southern Caucasus. Now, it has launched a major military intervention on Turkey's southern border, attacking groups that the US and Turkey have long supported. Turkey today finds itself surrounded by hostile states and armed groups, in a more precarious strategic position than at any time since the end of the Cold War.

At such a time, good relations with Europe are a key anchor for Turkish security. The rise of an anti-Muslim, pro-Putin far right in European politics should therefore be a cause for real concern. It brings the prospect of EU politics moving in the direction of aligned its foreign policy more with the Kremlin.

A political storm is gathering strength in a number of EU member states. Populists around Europe are energized by the lack of credible strategies presented by the mainstream parties. By coincidence and due to its electoral cycle, Austria, one of the states directly affected by the refugee movements, might be the first to experience a political earthquake. The far right Freedom Party (FPÖ) is doing better than ever, campaigning on the asylum issue.<sup>22</sup> At regional elections in Upper Austria at the end of September, it doubled its vote from 15 to 30 percent.<sup>23</sup> It might win regional elections in Vienna on 11 October, where the Social Democrats have won every democratic election since 1919. If this happens, the international echo and impact on social democratic parties throughout Europe could be devastating. In fact, the Austrian Freedom Party even has a realistic prospect of winning the next national elections.<sup>24</sup> Traditional parties are in a panic. The leader of the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the junior member in the government, stated recently that "if Europe does not react, national borders will necessarily be closed."<sup>25</sup> The interior minister, belonging to the same party, warned that in the absence of an international solution, "a stricter course of action at the borders, meaning also the use of force" might become inevitable.<sup>26</sup>

All this raises the prospect of a vicious circle: a sense of helplessness among mainstream parties leading to rising confidence among those who oppose the very idea of asylum for Syrian refugees. It will paralyse effective policy making. It also strengthens the hand of those who think like Hungary's Viktor Orbán. Orbán recently compared the current refugee crisis with previous Ottoman invasions. As he put it in a speech on 5 September:

"there is something which fundamentalists might call a crusade, but which moderates like me would rather describe as a challenge posed by the problem of 'the Islamization of Europe'. Someone somewhere must reveal this for what it is, must halt it, and must replace it with another, counteractive policy."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Vienna.at, "[Strache \(FPÖ\) im Interview: '15.000 Flüchtlinge sind genug!'](#)", 11 September 2015.

<sup>23</sup> Land Oberösterreich, "[Landtagswahl 2015 – Ergebnis Oberösterreich](#)", 28 September 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Salzburger Nachrichten, "[FPÖ könnte auch im Bund die Nummer Eins werden](#)", 1 June 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Salzburger Nachrichten, "[Mitterlehner im SN-Interview: Bauen an der 'Festung Europa'](#)", 19 September 2015.

<sup>26</sup> FAZ, "[Österreich halt Gewalteinsatz an Grenzen für möglich](#)", 29 September 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Miniszterelnok.hu, "[Viktor Orbán's speech at the 14th Kötöcse civil picnic](#)", 5 September 2015.

Orban hopes to define Europe as a Christian project in opposition to Islam. For Turkish leaders, a European Union in which a growing number of national governments embrace this political agenda is a significant security threat, at a time of growing uncertainty over Russian intentions. To cooperate successfully on an important issue with the most influential country in the EU, Germany, would create a powerful counter-narrative. Improved relations with Greece through cooperation in the Aegean might also prove important.

An agreement that included German support for visa liberalisation would also offer a major practical benefit for Turkish citizens. And of course, the agreement would relieve Turkey of a significant share of its Syrian refugee burden. It would be a public recognition that, so far, it is Turkey that has carried the lion's share of this challenge. It is time for Europe to step forward and do its share. And it is the right moment for Germany to take a lead.



*Previous ESI newsletters and reports on the refugee issue*

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Newsletter: [Refugees as a means to an end – The EU's most dangerous man](#) (24 September 2015)

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