

On solid ground?

Twelve facts about the EU-Turkey Agreement

25 January 2017

The EU-Turkey refugee agreement reached on 18 March 2016 has had a dramatic impact on refugee movements in the Eastern Mediterranean. It has sharply reduced irregular crossings from Turkey to Greece and, with this, the number of people who drown on this dangerous journey.

It has achieved this without diverting refugees onto other, even more hazardous routes and without breaking EU and international refugee law, which prohibits refusing entry to people who request asylum, and sending them back without due process. There have been no mass expulsions; in fact, more people had been returned from Greece to Turkey in the three months before the agreement than were sent back in the nine months after it was concluded.

The situation in the Aegean stands in a sharp contrast to that in the Central Mediterranean, where numbers of crossings and deaths were higher in 2016 than in 2015. The difference is that the EU has a sound plan for the Aegean despite all implementation problems, and no such plan for the Central Mediterranean.

Some key issues have to be urgently addressed to ensure a genuine success of the EU-Turkey agreement:

- The EU must work with Turkey to ensure that Turkey is a safe third country for refugees, offering shelter to Syrians under Turkey’s Temporary Protection Scheme for Syrians, and a credible asylum process to all other refugees.
- With EU support, Greece needs to urgently increase the capacity of its Asylum Service and its Appeals Committees to swiftly process the claims of currently more than 15,000 refugees and migrants on the islands. It also needs to improve their appalling living conditions.
- The EU must fulfil its commitment under the EU-Turkey agreement “to offer migrants an alternative to putting their lives at risk”¹ through resettlement. The current number of fewer than 3,000 refugees resettled from Turkey to EU countries falls woefully short of this promise. If the EU wants to see Turkey make an extra effort and process refugees returned from Greece expeditiously and in line with international standards, it must also lift the visa requirement for Turkish citizens.

If the EU-Turkey agreement is implemented in full, it will demonstrate that it is possible to control borders and at the same time respect the UN Refugee Convention, combining compassion and empathy with control and security concerns.

¹ [EU-Turkey Statement](#), 18 March 2016.

Twelve basic facts about the EU-Turkey agreement

FACT ONE: The refugee crisis of 2015 was largely about the Aegean where 84 percent of all illegal border crossings into the EU took place.

Detections of illegal crossings of EU borders in 2015²

Route	Border crossings
Eastern Mediterranean (sea and land)	885,386
Central Mediterranean (sea)	153,946
Other routes (sea and land) ³	10,035
TOTAL	1,049,367

FACT TWO: There has been a dramatic fall in the number of crossings in the Aegean since the EU-Turkey agreement in March 2016: more than 150,000 crossings were recorded during the first three months of 2016 vs 22,000 in the remaining nine months of the year.

Arrivals on Greek islands in 2016⁴

Month	Arrivals	Totals
January	67,415	
February	57,066	151,452
March	26,971	
April	3,650	
May	1,721	
June	1,554	
July	1,920	
August	3,447	21,995
September	3,080	
October	2,970	
November	1,991	
December	1,662	

² Frontex, [Risk Analysis for 2016](#), March 2016, p 17.

³ The “other routes” do not include detections on the Western Balkan route since virtually all refugees and migrants detected there had already entered, and then again left, Greece before they reached the Western Balkans, so they would be double-counted. They also do not include the circular route from Albania to Greece, which is used by Albanians who go to Greece for seasonal work and then return again to Albania.

⁴ UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean, [Greece](#).

FACT THREE: Since March 2016, the number of people drowning in the Aegean has also dropped as a result of fewer crossings. During the first three months of 2016, 366 people lost their lives in the Aegean compared with 68 in the remaining nine months.

Deaths in the Aegean in 2016⁵

Month	Deaths	Totals
January	275	
February	46	366
March	45	
April	10	
May	0	
June	0	
July	7	
August	3	68
September	27	
October	2	
November	14	
December	5	
Total	434	434

FACT FOUR: While the EU-Turkey agreement has reduced the number of crossings in the Aegean, EU policies have not managed to influence the numbers of refugees and migrants reaching Italy. Arrivals via the Central Mediterranean route in 2016 (more than 181,000) were even higher than in 2015 (154,000).

Detections of illegal border crossings by sea in 2015 and 2016⁶

	2015	2016
Greece	856,723	173,447
Italy	153,842	181,438

⁵ IOM/Missing Migrants Project, [Mediterranean](#).

⁶ UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean, [Greece](#) and [Italy](#).

FACT FIVE: There has been no redirection of refugee/migrant flows from the Aegean to the Central Mediterranean sea route. These are separate and independent flows as the nationalities of the refugees and migrants show.

Top nationalities of arrivals in Greece and Italy in 2016⁷

Greece		Italy	
Syria	47%	Nigeria	21%
Afghanistan	24%	Eritrea	12%
Iraq	15%	Guinea	7%
Pakistan	5%	Ivory Coast	7%
Iran	3%	Gambia	7%
Other	6%	Senegal	6%
		Mali	5%
		Sudan	5%
		Bangladesh	4%
		Somalia	4%
		Other	22%

FACT SIX: There have been no mass expulsions from Greece under the agreement. In fact, the number of people that were readmitted by Turkey from Greece from January to March 2016 under the bilateral Turkey-Greece readmission agreement (967 irregular migrants and failed asylum seekers⁸) was higher than the number of people returned under the EU-Turkey deal from April until now (838). This is the result of slow processing of asylum claims on the islands and a reluctance of the Greek asylum authorities to send asylum seekers to Turkey as a safe third country.

Transfers from Greece to Turkey as of 17 January 2017⁹

Month	Transfers (by person)
April 2016	386
May 2016	55
June 2016	27
July 2016	0
Aug. 2016	16
Sept. 2016	94
Oct. 2016	139
Nov. 2016	31
Dec. 2016	53
Jan. 2017	37
Total	838

⁷ UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean, [Greece](#) and [Italy](#).

⁸ European Commission, [First report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement](#), 20 April 2016, p. 4.

⁹ European Commission, [Operational implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement](#), as of 17 January 2017.

FACT SEVEN: Although more than 20,000 refugees arrived on Greek islands between April and November 2016, only 9,304 were able to submit asylum claims as of 27 November.¹⁰ Of those, the Greek Asylum Service decided 6,040 claims.¹¹ This makes 755 decisions per month - while an average 2,541 new people arrived each month during this period.¹² At this rate, the refugee population on Greek islands will continue to rise.

Initially the European Commission asked for 400 asylum case workers and 400 interpreters from EU member states to be deployed through EASO on the islands in order to help an envisaged 200 Greek case workers process asylum claims.¹³ The Commission later reduced the requirements to 100 EU case workers and 100 interpreters. However, in late 2016, there were only 39 EU case workers and 64 interpreters on the islands.¹⁴ The Greek Asylum Service (GAS) did not publish deployment figures, but according to anecdotal evidence there were never more than 20 GAS case workers on the islands in 2016.¹⁵

The situation seems to be improving now. The Greek Asylum Service states that it has deployed 100 case workers on the islands since the beginning of January,¹⁶ and the EU has also increased its presence.

EU support to the Greek Asylum Service on the islands as of 20 January 2017¹⁷

Island	Member states experts	Interpreters	EASO staff	Interim staff seconded to the GAS
Lesbos	18	24	5	7
Chios	20	17	3	5
Samos	10	14	3	2
Leros	8	9	2	1
Kos	6	11	2	2
Total	62	75	15	17

¹⁰ European Commission, [Fourth report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement](#), 8 December 2016, p. 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Fact Two, p. 2.

¹³ European Commission, [EU-Turkey Statement: Questions and Answers](#), 19 March 2016, p. 2.

¹⁴ The figure of 39 case workers is as of 5 December, and that of 64 interpreters as of 28 November 2016. European Commission, [Fourth report](#), 8 December 2016, p. 3, and European Commission, [Hotspot State of Play](#), as of 28 November 2016.

¹⁵ ESI field research in Greece in May, July and August 2016 as well as research by phone throughout the year.

¹⁶ Greek Asylum Service, [The Work of the Asylum Service in 2016](#), press release, 17 January 2017.

¹⁷ European Commission, [Hotspot State of Play](#), as of 20 January 2017.

FACT EIGHT: The vast majority of asylum seekers on the Greek islands who are to be sent back to Turkey as a safe third country (in “admissibility” procedures) or whose claims have been decided negatively on merits, appeal these first-instance decisions issued by the Greek Asylum Service. As of 27 November 2016, there were 2,014 appeals. However, the second-instance Appeals Committees had resolved only 838 cases. Among those, they overturned 390 out of 407 first-instance decisions to send asylum seekers back to Turkey. (After a negative second-instance decision, asylum seekers can still turn to courts and also demand that their return to Turkey or their home country is suspended until the court decision.)

Appeals decisions on the islands, 20 March to 27 Nov. 2016¹⁸

Number of appeals	2,014
Number of decided appeals	838
Appeals against first-instance inadmissibility decisions (return to Turkey)	407
- Decided in favour of the appellant, reversing the first-instance decision	390
- Decided against the appellant, upholding the first-instance decision	17
Appeals against first-instance negative decisions on merits (no right to asylum)	431
- Decided in favour of the appellant, reversing the first-instance decision	62
- Decided against the appellant, upholding the first-instance decision	369

FACT NINE: While relatively few refugees and migrants now undertake the dangerous and illegal journey to Greece, there are still new arrivals on an almost daily base, adding to the high number of refugees and migrants on the Greek islands.

Arrivals on the Greek islands – daily average¹⁹

	Daily average
Jan. 2016	2,175
Feb. 2016	1,968
March 2016	870
April 2016	122
May 2016	56
June 2016	52
July 2016	62
Aug. 2016	111
Sept. 2016	103
Oct. 2016	96
Nov. 2016	66
Dec. 2016	54
Jan. 2017 (until 22/01)	45

¹⁸ European Commission, [Fourth report on the progress made in the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement](#), 8 December 2016, p. 6.

¹⁹ UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response - Mediterranean, [Greece](#).

FACT TEN: For months the number of refugees and migrants on the Greek islands has been beyond existing capacities to host people decently.

Occupancy and capacity on Greek islands, 17 January 2017²⁰

Island	People	Capacity
Lesvos	6,073	4,083
Chios	3,567	1,203
Samos	2,096	933
Kos	2,282	1,236
Leros	850	1,066
Rhodes	453	0
Megisti	16	0
Tilos	0	50
Total	15,337	8,571

FACT ELEVEN: The number of Syrian refugees that the EU has resettled from Turkey since the EU-Turkey Statement remains inadequate given that Turkey hosts more than 2.8 million Syrian refugees.²¹

Resettlements of Syrians from Turkey to EU countries as of 17 January 2017²²

EU country	Syrians resettled from Turkey
Germany	1,213
Netherlands	507
France	438
Sweden	278
Finland	152
Belgium	102
Italy	82
Spain	57
Luxemburg	52
Lithuania	25
Portugal	12
Estonia	11
Latvia	6
Total	2,935

²⁰ UNHCR, [Greece sites - Daily map indicating capacity and occupancy \(governmental figures\)](#), as of 17 January 2017.

²¹ UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, [country section Turkey](#).

²² European Commission, [Operational implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement](#), as of 17 January 2017.

FACT TWELVE: Despite repeated calls from the Commission, so far only 7,919 asylum seekers have been relocated from Greece to other EU countries. Two Council Decisions from September 2015 foresee the mandatory relocation of 63,302 claimants from Greece.

Asylum seekers who have reached Greece after the EU-Turkey agreement (after 24 March 2016) do not qualify for relocation; nor do nationalities with recent EU recognition rates lower than 75 percent. So relocation only benefits “old arrivals” with very high recognition rates such as Syrians.²³

Relocations from Greece from Sept. 2015 until 24 Jan. 2017²⁴

Country	Relocated from Greece	Relocated from Italy	Offers (GR and IT)
France	2,414	282	4,170
Germany	894	455	5,250
Netherlands	866	380	1,525
Portugal	631	271	1,618
Spain	601	144	900
Finland	560	359	1,270
Romania	513	45	1,702
Ireland	241	0	514
Lithuania	229	0	550
Latvia	184	9	394
Belgium	177	29	530
Luxembourg	165	61	270
Slovenia	101	23	180
Estonia	78	0	210
Cyprus	55	10	140
Malta	34	46	99
Bulgaria	29	0	400
Czech Republic	12	0	50
Croatia	10	9	46
Slovakia	9	0	30
Sweden	0	39	50
Poland	0	0	100
Austria	0	0	0
Hungary	0	0	0
Denmark	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
UK	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Norway	78	415	875
Switzerland	28	340	1,030
Liechtenstein	10	0	10
Iceland	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Total	7,919 (of 63,302)	2,917 (of 34,953)	21,913 (of 98,255)

²³ European Asylum Support Office (EASO), [Questions and Answers on Relocation](#).

²⁴ European Commission, [Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism](#), as of 24 Jan. 2017.