

# Nato's new migrant mission in the Aegean is a victory for Turkey and proof of Europe's strategic irrelevance

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*A plan to deploy Nato ships in the Aegean sea to tackle people smugglers operating between Turkey and Greece was agreed in early February. Angelos Chryssogelos writes that the new mission will do little to influence the dynamics of the migration crisis, with effective management of the problem still reliant on Turkish cooperation. He also argues that by signing up to the Turkish demand to make Nato the main arena for deliberations over the crisis, Europe's interests are now in danger of being entangled with Turkey's agenda in Syria.*



The recent Nato agreement to create a mission to tackle the migration crisis in the Aegean has been presented as a major new development. But its impact on migrant flows will in reality be limited. Its shape and scope for action is a reflection of Turkey's priorities in the region rather than European needs. The creation of the Nato mission showcases the EU's strategic irrelevance and highlights Turkey's desire to entangle Europeans in its adventurist endeavours in Syria.

## Nato's mission in the Aegean

The Nato mission will conduct monitoring, surveillance and reconnaissance in the Aegean in order to deter and contain the activities of human traffickers. Nato forces will not push back boats, except when rescuing migrants from drowning who will be returned to Turkey. The task of deterring smugglers will be performed by the Greek and Turkish coastguards. But assistance from Nato will not make much of a difference if the key actor in the crisis, Turkey, does not act decisively. The stemming of migration flows still hinges on Turkey's will to patrol its coasts.

In previous months, Turkey had been under pressure to patrol its coasts more effectively. But it refrained from acting because the cost of accepting back or keeping in Turkish territory large numbers of migrants was considered much higher than whatever rewards the EU had promised. Caving in to external pressure would also be infuriating for domestic public opinion. A Nato mission allows Turkey to give in to some EU demands while circumventing these problems. As the mission covers Turkish as well as Greek territory, Turkey can deflect part of the European pressure for control of migrant flows back on its neighbour. Turkey has also ensured that its actions will be scrutinised by an organisation in which it has a strong say.

## Turkey's complex Syria strategy

The migration issue forms only one aspect of a complex geopolitical game that Turkey is involved in now in Syria. Turkey's relationship with Russia has deteriorated rapidly. Moscow's clients in Syria have made significant inroads against Turkey's allies, threatening it with both a collapse of its support and the arrival of new waves of refugees to its borders. Turkey's position is further complicated by the assertiveness of Syria's Kurds, whom Turkey's Western allies consider a valuable ally against Islamic State.



Family of migrants at the First Reception Centre on Lesbos, Greece. Credits:  
IFRC / Flickr

Turkey is now pushing for stronger support from Nato for its activities in Syria. A first step was taken in the same meeting that authorised the migrant mission in the Aegean. There, Nato also decided to step up its participation in the fight against Islamic State, initially by deploying AWACS planes in the region. Involving Nato in the management of the migration crisis is part of a broader strategy by Turkey to align Europeans with its goals in the region. Any signs of Turkey becoming more cooperative on migration in the following weeks must be seen through the prism of its interests in Syria and its expectation that Europe will support it there in return.

### **Europe's strategic irrelevance**

The EU hopes that Turkey will do more on migration if it is subject to international monitoring. But because it was negotiated with Turkey, the mission's mandate does not do enough to push Turkey into action. In addition, the mission's scope reflects strategic considerations on the part of Turkey that do not square with the goal of limiting migration. For example, Turkey insisted that the Nato mission would not operate in the southern Aegean. Turkey disputes the sea border between its southern coast and the Dodecanese islands in Greece, hence it wants to avoid this border being implicitly recognised in the operational plan of a Nato mission. As a result, migration flows will simply be diverted from islands in the central and northern Aegean to the south.

Even more crucially, by accepting Nato involvement the EU agrees to deal with Turkey in a setting where Turkey will be better placed to trade off its contribution in the migration crisis for support for its actions in Syria. Europeans have long realised that the migration crisis can only be effectively dealt with at its source, which is Syria, and that they cannot simply shield themselves from the outside world. But due to its extreme vulnerability, internal divisions and strategic limitations, the EU may find itself being involved in Syria on Turkey's terms.

These developments highlight the EU's chronic strategic irrelevance, even in the eyes of its members. It is telling how quickly European countries rallied around Nato. The idea of the EU deploying its own forces on the other hand was barely raised. The lack of operational capacities is not an excuse since the Nato mission will be made up overwhelmingly of forces from countries that are also EU member states. The EU has decided since last November to run a similar mission against human smugglers in Libya after all, and it is striking that such a solution was never considered for the Aegean.

Ultimately, Nato's mission in the Aegean will do little to influence the dynamics of the migration crisis as the EU hopes. Effective management of the problem still relies on effective Turkish cooperation, and this will be contingent on Turkey's wider strategic considerations. By signing up to the Turkish demand to make Nato the main arena for their deliberations, Europe's interests are in danger of being entangled with Turkey's agenda in Syria. Finally, in seeking recourse to Nato for what is essentially a question of defending Europe's borders, the EU has once again proven its weakness as a strategic actor.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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