

## Establishing ‘safe zones’ in Syria remains the most realistic route to tackling Europe’s refugee crisis

*Many of those that have left Syria since the start of the country’s civil war have passed through Greek islands on their way into Europe. James D. Athanassiou and Effie G. H. Pedaliu write that the situation for refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos constitutes a humanitarian crisis and requires urgent action from the international community. They argue that aside from short-term support to those in need, the most realistic solution to the crisis remains the creation of ‘safe zones’ in Syria.*

Thirty years or so ago, an American author, John Calvin Batchelor, wrote a prescient novel ‘The Birth of The People’s Republic Of Antarctica’. In this, Batchelor suggested that the mass migration of peoples, should it occur, would be unstoppable. Now Europe is trying to deal with thousands of refugees. They come from Syria and other MENA countries and are fleeing wars or civil strife. Some want simply to escape to a better life in the West.

Right now, France is trying to recover from the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November. The European Union is seeking urgent solutions. Europeans are unsure of how to cope with this massive influx – up to 760,000 people this year of whom, over 600,000 have reached Greece according to the UNHCR. The refugees who have managed to get to Europe have been welcomed with forced smiles, clenched teeth and in some EU countries, with clenched fists. The main route to Europe for the refugees – to call them what they call themselves – is by boat across the few miles between Turkey and nearby Greek islands such as Lesbos and Chios; from there to Athens and then, onwards and upwards through the Balkans, on to Central Europe and finally, if they are lucky, to Germany.

Peter Sutherland, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for International Migration and Development wrote recently that ‘the UN refugee agency’s funding for Syria has received about one-third of the \$4.5 billion needed this year. The World Food Program, the key support mechanism of the refugee system has met only two-thirds of its 2015 funding needs, compelling it to slash support to hundreds of thousands of Syrians’. Even though the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees makes it clear that every country in the world shares a responsibility for the Syrian refugees, in practice, it is the EU that is bearing the brunt of their migration. And therein lies the conundrum for Europeans.

They are trying to grapple with two problems. On the one side, there are the obvious concerns arising from the principles of humanity and charity. These are heightened by the horror felt when seeing TV coverage of the bodies of refugees, especially of young children such as Aylan Kurdi, lying alone on the shore. According to the UNHCR, in 2015, 3,440 people have died or are missing having attempted the hazardous journey to Europe. Hundreds have drowned crossing the Mediterranean trying to reach the sanctuary of a Greek or Italian island.



A Syrian couple locked in a hug after safely arriving on Lesbos, Greece. Aris Messinis / AFP (CC BY 2.0)

While daily images of death are distressing, many in Europe despair, too, at the futility of trying to cope with the numbers arriving. This feeling is exacerbated by the fact that many Eurozone countries cannot even cope with the social and economic distress of a significant number of their own citizens. Then there are the matters to do with that perennial topic of contention about immigration to the EU from the Middle East and North Africa. How can the predominantly Muslim refugees be absorbed culturally?

This question comes to be posed over and over again – frequently by the political right and right wing media and sometimes by the security agencies. They point to the dangers that can arise tomorrow as a result of the unmet expectations of the refugees. Several European countries such as the UK and France have experienced difficulties with some of their second and even third generation British and French Muslims. Both countries have suffered jihadi inspired domestic terrorism and have become wary of the numbers of refugees they take in. The events in Paris have served to increase such apprehensions.

### **Greece, the European Union and refugees**

Currently, the EU's very own state-in-crisis, Greece, is the first port of call for the refugees' boats. Lesbos Island, just off the coast of Turkey in the northern Aegean, took in nearly 350,000 migrants from January to September this year, according to Frontex, the EU border agency. It is an irony that, in the not too distant past, many of Lesbos' inhabitants were themselves refugees from the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922.

Today's conditions for refugees in Lesbos are appalling. There is poor sanitation, no heating and volunteers from around the world are needed to assist the locals and supplement the limited help the Greek state can offer. A British Member of Parliament and Chair of The Refugee Taskforce, Yvette Cooper, visited Lesbos recently, and in a letter addressed to the Prime Minister David Cameron, she laid out the problems and pleaded for additional humanitarian aid.

Greece has a fence to deter illegal entry at the Evros River on the north-western Greek-Turkish border, just as several EU countries are planning to build or have already erected. But, the Greeks cannot build fences or walls to keep migrants away from reaching Greek islands. This is for a very simple reason. If the refugees do not succeed in getting over island walls or through the national frontier traced out at sea by Greek Navy patrols, they drown.

For security reasons, the Greek state is reluctant to agree to joint sea patrols with Turkey to police migrant flows, and has recently earned the scorn of European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker who, curiously, does not seem to be too well informed on international law. The refugees continue to come and the moral choice that Greeks now face daily is whether to save them or to let them drown. Of course, in this matter a choice does not exist at all. By contrast, Hungary, Slovenia or Austria for example, do not face the same dilemma.

Germany has not and does not intend to build walls, yet, but in any case, the refugees cannot easily cross Central Europe to reach the country. As a solution therefore, walls do not work for Greece – they cannot be built on a beach or at sea. And if they do not work for Greece, then for similar moral imperatives, they will not work for other EU countries. Unless that is, the EU region becomes something of a panopticon surrounded on all sides by walls, watchtowers and military hardware in order to keep out those who are starving on the other side.

### **A Greek Ellis Island?**

To get into America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, millions of immigrants had to pass through Ellis Island at New York. Despite the hostility and the obstacles that were laid at their feet, these migrants helped to build the America of today. The migrants had one thing going for them: at Ellis Island, no one labeled them economic migrants and put them on the next boat back to Europe.

Once they were through the door, they entered a nation composed of states united in constitution, economy and in law. There were no formal restrictions on travel or where to make their home. Of course, unless they had relatives

awaiting them, there was no welcome mat put out and few organisations existed dedicated to helping them become Americans. In compensation for their initial hardships though, somewhere in America, a new life lay before them.

Today, reluctantly, Greece has become a people-processing centre. Thousands of refugees, many rescued from the sea, arrive daily. They are fed and clothed as well as an almost bankrupt state can feed and clothe them; however, the registration processes are inadequate and there are not enough staff to administer properly the large numbers of people arriving. Once they have been ferried to Athens, most of the refugees are then left to their own devices to make their way to northern Europe.

Parts of central Athens have become permanent ‘temporary’ camps and some Greeks greatly resent this. Golden Dawn, an extremist right-wing grouping, polled about 7 per cent in the recent Greek general election and has 18 seats in Parliament – the third largest party. Its supporters ‘fear of the other’ is slowly spreading in Greece. It is nurtured as well by the dire state of the Greek economy and the perception of many Greeks that the EU is out to punish them in some way.

Any sensible observer would point out to those who wield power in the EU that it is better to prevent any further rise of right wing extremism by taking refugees away from Greece as quickly as possible. But this is not being done. Instead, many EU countries want Greece to become one of the countries to host so-called ‘hot spots’ for providing temporary shelter and to process the migrants. Such hot spots may slow down the refugee flow north, but that is all. The EU knows full well that the refugees do not want to be in Greece, but in Germany – as quickly as possible.

In its very early days, Ellis Island might have looked like a refugee camp, too, even though it was a place to process migrants. But an Ellis Island or hot spots will not work in Greece, even as a form of calculated administrative manoeuvring by the EU to stall for time. In America, people were ‘processed’ and not too much later, they became Americans. In contrast, while today’s refugees to Europe may be given some papers and allowed residence in some countries, they will not find themselves in a united continent. It is unknown whether they will have the right to move from country to country at will.

As Jean-Claude Juncker put it in his State of The Union speech in Strasbourg on 9 September: ‘there is not enough Europe in this Union. And there is not enough Union in this Union’. Already, the Schengen Agreement governing the free movement of people in Europe is fraying and coming under challenge from the European right. It may not survive the current upsurge in migrants. The EU has shown itself to have the same weak leadership on this issue as it has in numerous other problems it has faced in the recent past.

### **Is there a way to resolve the refugee crisis?**

The best solution to the crisis is one that has been suggested before. It would be a solution for the refugees and both the EU and the United States – since the latter will also encounter these demographic movements. The proposal is to provide safe havens or safe zones in Syria where Syrians of different beliefs can live together and rebuild their lives.

To create such areas would not mean a repeat of the invasion of Iraq. Here, the West achieved rapid regime change, but without having to hand clear-cut strategies and plans to hold a demographically and regionally disparate nation together. In Syria, by contrast, the goals would be limited and specific. They would be humanitarian: to identify areas in Syria that can be defended, to resource and develop them and, most importantly, to protect them effectively with overwhelming military strength.

If some call this ‘war’ by another name, the counter to that is that it would be a ‘good war’. It will cost billions, but it will still be cheaper in the long run for the EU and the United States. It would greatly reduce the stress being placed on countries adjoining Syria, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Best of all, it will enable the Syrian refugees to start living again in their own homeland.

This will require the EU and U.S. dealing and working with the Russians and the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. But western leaders have made such compromises in the past. On 8 November, the U.S. Defense Secretary, Ash

Carter, indicated that the country was re-assessing Russia's role in Syria. When questioned about closer work with Russia in the region, his response was 'it is possible – we'll see – Russia may play a constructive role in resolving the civil war'. On the same day, British Foreign Secretary, Philip Hammond declared that 'Britain will escalate its military campaign against the Isis militant group in Syria as soon as a consensus can be reached in Parliament'.

External intervention is happening right now in Syria and will escalate. Incidents such as the downing of a Russian jet by Turkey may happen more than once. But, with a reasonable level of coordination between the outside powers, the creation of safe areas can be achieved speedily. President Hollande's efforts to build a grand coalition against ISIS / Daesh should take precedence over any potential public or political outcry in the West, such as accusations of diplomatic collusion with Assad. If a grand coalition can save thousands of lives, such concerns are likely to abate.

It will also strike a mortal blow to ISIS and offer a solution to the Assad problem. By incorporating future elections in any joint agreement to provide safe areas, this will give him a face-saving way out down the line. This is the most realistic way for the EU and the U.S. to approach the issue of Syrian refugees and if implemented correctly, could halt the flight of Syrians to Europe, while also making discussions over the construction of walls and establishing a Greek 'Ellis Island' irrelevant.

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

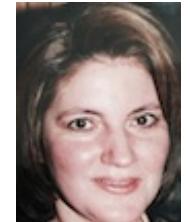
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