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Europe desperately needs to control the wave of migrants breaking over its borders. This is how to go about it

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SYRIA'S five-year civil war has killed hundreds of thousands of people and displaced millions more. It has sucked regional powers into a geopolitical vortex. It has inspired terrorists and fanatics, and exported violence to a historically volatile region. It has also given rise to Europe's worst refugee crisis in recent times.

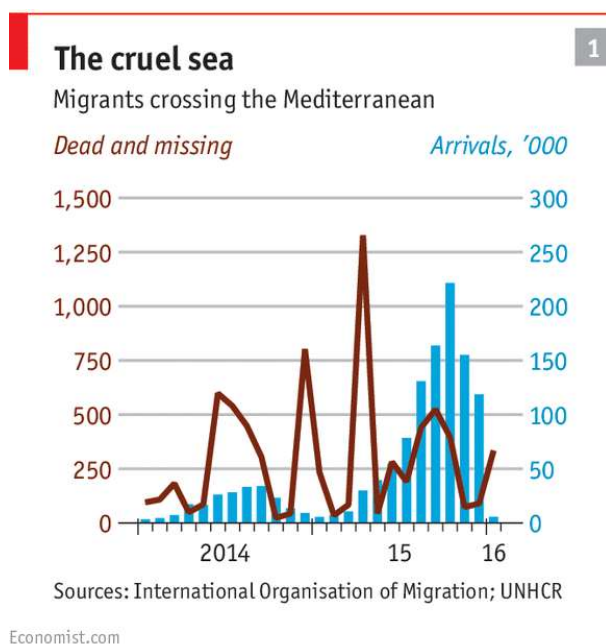
The numbers are, in themselves, not overwhelming: the European Union, with a population of 500m, received 1m illegal migrants last year, slightly fewer than the number of Syrian refugees accepted by Lebanon, which has only 5m people. But the chaos of the flows and the

determination of migrants to reach a handful of wealthy countries has set governments against each other and opened cracks in Europe's piecemeal approach to asylum. No country can resolve the problem alone. But most have responded by unilaterally closing borders and tightening asylum rules, leaving migrants to endure dangerous journeys at the hands of criminal smuggling networks—which elude every attempt at disruption.

An ever-growing number of border controls undermines the EU's supposedly border-free Schengen area, hampering trade, commuting and tourism (see article). Political pressure at home may yet force Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, to close her country's doors, setting off border closures across the continent. Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, says the end of Schengen could cause the collapse of the euro and even the single market, one of the EU's outstanding achievements. That is an exaggeration, but it would threaten European co-operation in other areas and knock back a club already beset by crises.

More broadly, the migrant crisis is fuelling the rise of right-wing populist parties across Europe. Anti-immigrant violence is growing in countries that have shouldered the largest burden: this week a German police chief spoke of a "pogrom atmosphere" after a spate of attacks on asylum centres. The Paris killings and sexual assaults by asylum-seekers in Cologne have added terrorism and cultural neuralgia to a toxic brew. Xenophobic nationalism has already set parts of eastern Europe against Germany. The resentments that it creates are a threat to the EU, too.

While Europeans bicker, the migrant situation remains grave. The death rate in the Aegean Sea has soared in wintry conditions: 365 migrants crossing from Turkey to Greece died or went missing last month (see chart 1). Registered daily arrivals in the Greek islands fell to just under 2,000 in January compared with almost 7,000 last October. But Germany is taking in 3,000 migrants a day, suggesting that the true number reaching Europe is somewhat higher. When spring arrives the flows will surely return to their autumn peaks.

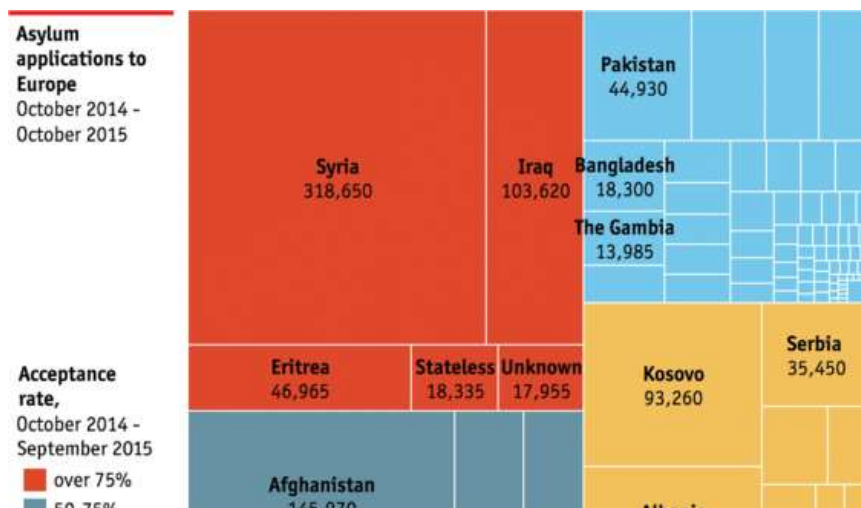


Most proposed solutions look unfeasible, repugnant or pointless. A settlement in Syria is more remote than ever. This week the latest attempt to start peace talks were suspended without making progress. Libya, the gateway to Italy, has no functioning government. Inside Europe, the fences built by politicians like Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orban, merely displace the problem. Yet EU governments are bound by law to provide refuge to those fleeing war. They cannot push back migrant-laden boats from Greece (as a Belgian politician reportedly suggested). Ejecting Greece from Schengen, as some urge, would deter nobody, for it shares no land borders with other Schengen countries.

Plans cooked up in Brussels, meanwhile, are too ambitious, leaving governments to squabble while the migrants pour in. A quota scheme to relocate asylum-seekers across Europe has succeeded only in reviving an east-west split in the EU. Mutual recognition of positive asylum decisions across the EU, which would give refugees the freedom of movement that ordinary citizens enjoy, is years away.

Instead, the priority must be to restore a sense of order to the migrant flows. That will help overburdened countries like Germany plan for arrivals and reassure worried citizens who see no end in sight. Europe also needs to get much better at distinguishing refugees with a genuine claim for international protection from migrants fleeing hardship, a growing number of whom have started to join the highway to Europe.

These immediate measures should buy time for Europeans to provide protection for those who need it, to work out how to share the asylum burden more equitably and ultimately to accept more refugees in an orderly fashion. But for that to happen, all the pieces in the puzzle need to fall into place, and in the right order.



The work begins in Turkey, partly because it hosts 2.7m refugees, most of them Syrian, and partly because it has become a gathering ground for refugees and migrants from elsewhere. There are two parts to the European strategy. The first is a deal hastily assembled last year that rewards Turkey for reducing the migrant flows—including a pledge of €3 billion (\$3.3 billion) to help refugees and visa-free access to the EU for Turks in exchange for the implementation of a plan to take back migrants.

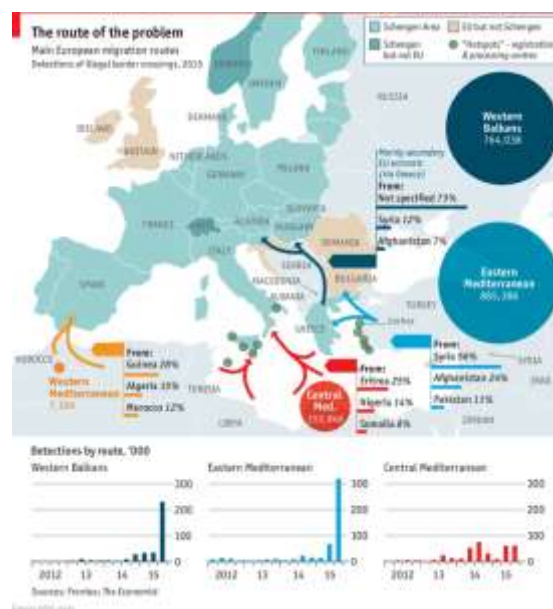
The grand bargains envisaged in the deal are probably too ambitious in the limited time Europe has; all EU governments will have to approve the visa deal, which seems unlikely. The EU dithered before finding the cash this week—and then it is only a fraction of what is needed. The agreement has had some effect: Turkish police targeting smugglers have made 3,700 arrests. But the number of migrants landing on Greek shores has not fallen by as much as the Europeans had hoped.

Other elements of the deal might prove more fruitful. Turkey recently introduced a limited work-permit scheme for Syrian refugees. Freeing tens of thousands of them from the grip of the country's vast grey economy could help keep some in place. It has also slashed the number of Syrians arriving from Jordan and Lebanon, many of whom were travelling onwards to Europe, by imposing visa requirements.

Unburdening the poor

Much more must be done to ensure that the burden on those countries does not become intolerable. This is the second part of Europe's approach. Together, Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon host over 5m refugees, including 2m children. Most are poor. Under huge strain, governments are now doing their best to keep refugees out. Some 20,000 Syrians languish in the desert next to Jordan, which refuses to let most in. Lebanon has closed its borders.

Conditions inside these countries are bad and getting worse, making the hazardous journey to Europe seem more appealing. Half the Syrians in Jordan say they want to leave. Up to 150,000 Syrians sailed from Lebanon to Turkey last summer, seeking to join the migrant trail to Europe.



A donors' conference in London on February 4th, as we went to press, aimed to secure nearly \$9 billion of funding for the region. Britain this week pledged £1.2 billion (\$1.75 billion) of new money. Cash is needed for schools and overburdened infrastructure, such as Lebanon's strained water supply. One idea is for donors to press Jordan and Lebanon to ease restrictions on refugees

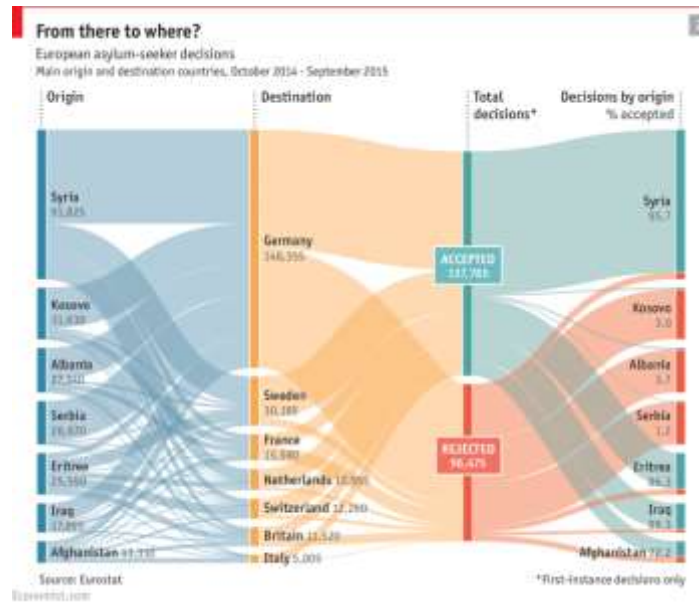
seeking jobs. European countries can help by ensuring that markets are open. If refugees have reasons to stay, fewer will risk the trek to Europe.

Stemming the flow across the Aegean saves lives and dents the smugglers' profits. But the clamour to reach Europe will continue: routes are too well established, smuggling networks too strong and demand too robust. Perhaps two-thirds of Syrians reaching Greece are fleeing the country directly rather than upping sticks from Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon.

Large numbers will therefore continue to land in Greece. In response the EU has tried to establish "hotspots" on the five islands where most migrants land. But only one of these processing and registration centres, on Lesbos, is fully functional. (Of the six in Italy, one is reportedly working well.) Here, migrants are screened, fingerprinted and interviewed. Interpreters test the claims of self-identified Syrians; many other Arabs claim to come from Syria to improve their chances of getting asylum. Identity cards are checked for fraud under ultraviolet lights. At the end, confirmed north Africans are taken to Athens, from where they are supposed to lodge an asylum claim or face deportation. Most others are given a document that allows them to move on to the Greek mainland independently. Most do so immediately.

On other Greek islands locals have held up the establishment of hotspots, fearing the impact on tourism. The army is now responsible for opening the remaining four; officials say all will be operational by mid-March. But a spring surge could still overwhelm the hotspots, and there is plenty of anecdotal evidence of migrants evading registration or gaming the system.

A bigger problem is that registering immigrants will not stop them moving on if they have no fear of being sent back. Since November officials on Greek-Macedonian border have only let through Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans, who have good grounds for asylum (see chart 2). Other countries on the route are starting to do the same. The idea is that word of stricter controls will spread, deterring some from making the journey in the first place. Sub-Saharan Africans, once a common sight in the Serbian border town of Presevo, are almost entirely gone, bar the odd Somali. North Africans are trying to get across, but must use smugglers or act alone, traipsing through woods or ripping up fences. Some are robbed or beaten. Many freely admit that they are coming to Europe for a better life.



Making borders harder to cross is one thing. But Germany and the European Commission are considering sealing Macedonia's border with Greece altogether. Nikola Poposki, Macedonia's foreign minister, says that is not feasible, and that the priority is clamping down on illegal routes. But border closures farther up the line would leave Macedonia with no choice, if it wanted to avoid a vast build-up of migrants on its own soil.

Sealing the border to asylum-seekers could create huge bottlenecks in Greece. The EU's relocation scheme, which aims to move 66,400 asylum-seekers from Greece (and 39,600 from Italy), is supposed to tackle this problem. For Brussels bureaucrats the plan holds much promise: it turns unpredictable flows of asylum-seekers into orderly distribution and shares the burden equitably across Europe. "It is not for migrants or refugees to choose where to go," says Dimitris Avramopoulos, the EU's migration commissioner.

But fewer than 500 asylum-seekers have been moved so far. EU countries have refused to play their part, smothering the process in red tape. The migrants who agree to move are often woefully ill-informed. One group of Eritreans, preparing to leave Rome for Sweden, remarked to journalists that they were looking forward to leaving Italy's cold weather behind.

The EU is sticking to its guns, but even the most optimistic projection will not cope with the short-term build-up in Greece should its northern border close. The government expects to have 40,000 reception places ready in a few months, but may need many more. The UNHCR and EU governments are preparing support. In exchange for Greek co-operation some in Berlin and Brussels have murmured about treating Greece's vast public-debt pile more leniently when the issue comes up later this year.

If there is an iron law of illegal migration, it is that border closures shift routes—even fewer people take them. Anticipating a sealing of Greece's northern border, criminals in neighbouring Albania are sniffing out smuggling opportunities. Officials have observed more flows through Bosnia via Serbia. Italy fears the re-emergence of the central Mediterranean route, which is more

dangerous than the Aegean crossing. More could cross into Norway or Finland via Russia. It is harder than ever to predict what sort of diversion will emerge, says Elizabeth Collett of the Migration Policy Institute Europe, a think-tank.

Europe's hardening mood appears to be inspiring many to move now, before it is too late. "You can feel the fear," says a UNICEF worker on the Macedonian border. "They want to get through as fast as possible." It is only that rapid flow that stopped Greece from collapsing under the weight of migrants last year. No one can be sure that this year will be better. "We may be talking about millions of people," says a Greek official. "No matter what contingency we put in place, it will overtake us."

Too hot to handle?

One way to alleviate Greece's burden would be to hasten the return of some migrants to Turkey from Greece. "Hot returns" of migrants whose asylum bids fail, or who choose not to lodge one, are controversial. But an existing deal between Greece and Turkey to send back asylum-seekers could work if Greece declares Turkey a safe place for third-country nationals and Turkey upgrades its rules to allow them to apply for full asylum (currently only Europeans are eligible). In theory returns could take place in days; in practice it is often more complicated. The aim should be to convince nationals with little chance of protection, such as Moroccans or Pakistanis, that there is no prospect of moving on if they reach Greece. Sources say Turkey may be willing to take such people back, though not the far larger numbers of Syrians or Afghans.

But deporting failed asylum-seekers once they have reached their chosen destination is hard. Some disappear; others exploit generous legal systems. In Germany three-quarters obtain temporary permission to stay after their asylum bids fail, often on dubious grounds like the absence of a passport or self-diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Sweden's recent announcement that 80,000 of its asylum-seekers were probably eligible for deportation is more a cry of despair than a plan for action. Countries are often reluctant to accept the return of their nationals, not least because they can be a useful source of remittances. No wonder just 40% of failed asylum-seekers across the EU are returned.

So what will work? Not simply dumping people on planes, as Greece learned in December when most of the 39 Pakistanis it returned home were sent straight back by the authorities in Islamabad on spurious administrative grounds. Similarly, there has been a misguided focus on the bureaucratic fictions of readmission agreements cooked up by the EU with sending countries. Instead European governments must build partnerships with their developing-world counterparts that go far beyond migration policy. The success stories in Europe involve bilateral relationships with long and deep histories: Britain and Pakistan, Spain and Morocco, Italy and Tunisia.



The focus should thus be political, not legal. The Germans are thinking about how trade and aid may be used as diplomatic leverage and a source of jobs, particularly with countries that rely on remittances. Improved channels for legal labour migration would help. Governments might also club together to forge return deals with sending countries. The EU is working on a common list of “safe countries”, to which it is assumed most asylum-seekers can be returned. Last year Germany slashed claims from Kosovars and Albanians by placing their countries on its own such list. This week it did the same for Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Let's get resettling

Rich countries should not rely on poor ones to shoulder as much of the refugee burden as they have. Once flows have started to fall, Europe could begin a much more ambitious attempt to resettle refugees directly from the region around Syria. A starting point might be 250,000 a year, with the bulk coming from Turkey. To reach this number countries may need to be less picky about who they take in. Some may want to work with Turkey directly, bypassing the UNHCR, which usually brokers resettlements. EU countries could join forces in identifying and screening candidates to save time and money. Reuniting divided families will be a priority.

Countries such as Germany and Netherlands will have to be in the vanguard of resettlement; with luck, others will follow. The failed attempt to impose relocation by diktat from Brussels shows that quotas inspire only rancour. But some of the huge unused relocation numbers (from within Europe) can be shifted to the politically easier task of resettlement (from outside). Britain and France can do much better.

A series of international refugee conferences this year, culminating with a summit in New York in September, will offer a chance to do more. European action might inspire rich countries like Canada and Australia to chip in. The Gulf states could add to their informal share of Syrians by formally resettling more. The presidential campaign may rule out any contributions from America before November, but after that, if there is international momentum, even a Republican president might help.

The consequences of inaction look clear: tighter borders, more people-smuggling, misery for refugees. Crucially, if the numbers do not fall Germany may lose its appetite for a European solution and follow the unilateral course charted by others. Yet there is an astonishing lack of real urgency among Europe's leaders. Only Mrs Merkel appears to think beyond the constraints of national politics.

That may not change. But even self-interest demands a more pressing approach. Otherwise governments that value Schengen may find themselves locked out of it, and countries that thought themselves immune to migration may see their territory turned into refugee marching grounds. Failure to contain the crisis would be a terrible outcome for Europe as it battles to hold itself together. It would be worse still for the refugees it has a duty to care for.