Fleeing Europe?

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Europe's dire politics of deterrence is leaving people in a social and legal limbo while others consider escaping what they had previously believed to be a place of safety and rights.

Workshop in Zeytinburnu, Istanbul (collected by Crossing the Mediterranean Boat by Sea, with authorisation from the anonymous photographer)In the summer of 2015 there were many people preparing to go to Europe in Istanbul. This year, a local interpreter explains, things are different. Some consider alternative routes to Europe in light of changing visa regulations for Syrians, intensified border controls, the Balkan route closure, the EU-Turkey agreement, and the development of hotspots on Greek islands. Others are stuck in Turkey, with the Turkey-Greece sea crossing no longer an option open to them.

The conditions that people experience in fleeing to Europe and Crossing the Mediterranean Sea by Boat are dire in many respects. People are often escaping situations of violence, conflict, repression and extreme poverty. Moreover, individuals often experience further violence, conflict, repression and poverty *en route*, in transit or neighbouring regions. Turkey is one of these places. Many people arriving are either unable to find work, or face labour exploitation due to their precarious irregular or temporary status. Recent research has highlighted how a range of basic rights are not being met in Turkey.

One 21 year-old Afghan woman told us of how she had fled an abusive husband and escaped the oppression of Afghans in Iran, along with her brother and sister. She came to Turkey just before the EU-Turkey agreement on the assumption that she would find someone to pay her passage – or a smuggler who would let her go for free. She is now struggling to make ends meet. Her brother has turned to drugs, she works very long hours in a factory, and she feels she won't be able to continue much longer without being involved in sex work.

Then there is the Syrian Kurdish family who arrived in Istanbul in early 2015. They managed to send their eldest son to Germany in 2015, but the rest of the family remains in Turkey. They seriously considered being smuggled in the winter of 2016 when prices for smuggling fell due to the weather conditions. Nonetheless, mostly for financial

reasons but also for safety concerns, they were unable to make the crossing. Their economic situation is very difficult in Turkey. They live in a basement apartment in Istanbul's working class suburbs and the whole family works – including the small children – cutting sleeves of t-shirts or assembling toys. The wages are extremely low—they told us that for every pile of about 30 shirts they get 3 TYL (about 1 dollar).

Dire conditions

These testimonies stand as powerful evidence that support existing condemnations of the EU-Turkey agreement. They also raise questions about how far Europe is willing to go to fulfil its deterrent migration agenda. It is important to highlight the dire conditions in Turkey, particularly in light of an agreement that implicates Europe in people's experience of enduring such conditions. However, it is also important to emphasise that the EU is creating dire conditions of its own.

Though recent reports have drawn attention to the situation in Greek camps, conditions are appalling across the EU much more broadly. From northern France, to Germany and across the continent at large, people on the move in precarious situations face various risks to their personal safety and to their health in camps that are not equipped for long term residents. Again: how far is Europe willing to go to fulfil a deterrent agenda on migration? And how long will it take to acknowledge that a new agenda is needed?

Workshop in Zeytinburnu, Istanbul (collected by Crossing the Mediterranean Boat by Sea, with authorisation from the anonymous photographer)Akbar's story

"Europe is no longer a good place for refugees", Akbar [chosen name], a young Afghan man who lives in Istanbul tells us. He goes on to explain how a friend who made it to Sweden called him recently to say that he wished he had stayed in Istanbul after all. Akbar arrived in Turkey as an unaccompanied minor in 2012. On his first attempt to cross to Europe via the Evros river he was caught and detained in Turkey along with his friend who eventually made it to Sweden, and two others. Akbar has attempted to get to Europe several times.

Akbar's most recent attempt to make the crossing was in the autumn of last year. He became frustrated after many years of waiting for access to the asylum process, while working long hours of work with little pay. Following a similar passage by one of his friends who is now in Germany, Akbar decided to captain a boat across the Aegean Sea to Greece. However, when Akbar's friends in Istanbul found out what he was doing, they persuaded him to return to the

city due to their fears that the crossing was too dangerous. He has now decided to stay in Istanbul to make the most of his life there.

The limitations of deterrence

Akbar's story sheds important light on the limitations of Europe's deterrent policies. He had no legal route to Europe and, despite working in Istanbul, Akbar could not fund his travel via smugglers. In light of this, he felt he had no choice but to turn to smugglers and captain the boat in order to fund his journey to Greece. Deterrence here breeds smuggling, and perpetuates the dire conditions experienced by people like Akbar. Far from an effective policy mechanism deterring people from crossing borders, it becomes an endless game that further embeds precariousness into migratory journeys and experiences.

But what about Akbar's decision to stay and make a life in Istanbul? Does this suggest that deterrence may be working to prevent so-called 'illegal migration' in the ways that some policy-makers hope it can? Certainly, Akbar explained to us that he is now striving to build a life for himself in Istanbul in a way that some of his friends are telling him is not possible in Europe. Yet this does not suggest that anything has changed either in the quality of Akbar's life in Istanbul or in the situation of those who experience multiple pressures to migrate. Instead, it shines a light on the way in which deterrence operates in the most devastating of terms, by rendering conditions in Europe even more horrendous as a means to keep people out.

Reverse smuggling

As Europe's so-called 'migration crisis' deepens, a deterrent agenda is entering a new stage. People are considering new routes, others are becoming stuck in transit (as is Akbar in Turkey), while others still are attempting to flee Europe. Paradoxically, many who seek to flee Europe cannot be returned, because the conditions of 'safe countries' such as Turkey are not guaranteed. Surely when people start to consider escaping Europe in order to return to these conditions or conflict zones such as Syria, a deterrent approach must be questioned?

In our research on European responses to the 'migration crisis' we have heard various stories of people suggesting that they are considering returning to conditions of conflict, violence or repression rather than remaining stuck in disastrous conditions in Europe. People repeatedly tell us that the safety and rights they were expecting to find in Europe are lacking. As it enters a new stage, deterrence is therefore also creating the conditions for a new stage in the smuggling industry, one characterised by 'reverse smuggling' out of Europe. Far from dismantling smuggling networks, a deterrent European agenda risks driving a two-way flow of people whose precariousness multiplies over time.

How far is Europe willing to go to fulfil its deterrent migration agenda? If the aim is to create such dire conditions that people are forced to take flight in the opposite direction, Europe may finally be succeeding with its otherwise failing approach. Yet success and failure are hard to disentangle in this context. Where deterrence fails it can still have productive effects for an architecture of coercion that thrives on precariousness. And where it succeeds, deterrence fails so many people in so many ways. Driving people away or leaving them in a social and legal limbo is not an answer to Europe's so-called 'migration crisis'. A new agenda on migration is long overdue, and needs to be grounded in an appreciation of each person's inherent potential rather than in a drive to deter 'unwanted' people.

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