



NATO Foundation
Defense College

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STRATEGIC TRENDS

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EMERGING CHALLENGES

The impact Syria's refugee crisis on EU's immigration and Schengen

Even if it is too soon to make a prediction about the effectiveness of the recent ceasefire in Syria, it is clear that many challenges lie ahead. Although the major international players (USA, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, EU) and local proxies involved in the Syrian crisis are looking to achieve their goals through a negotiated compromise, the Syrian refugee emergency remains one of the most daunting problems facing Syria's neighbours and Europe.

What makes the Syrian crisis and its humanitarian emergency unique is the almost genocidal scale of destruction and displacement that has occurred. More than half the population, 12 out of 23 million – has been driven from its homes. Over 5 million are external refugees and approximately 7 million are internally displaced, with 12 million in need of humanitarian assistance and a million injured. Some 250.000 people – 111.000 of

them civilians – having been killed. Compared with the geopolitical consequences of the Syrian crisis, the effects of the humanitarian catastrophe may produce irreversible changes in the neighbouring countries and in the lifestyle of European citizens.

Despite their political and economic difficulties, adjoining countries have been able to receive more than one million five thousand hundred refugees (Lebanon), more than two million five hundred thousand (Turkey) and approximately 629.000 (Jordan).

Compared with the relatively small number of Syrian refugees who arrived in Europe, approximately 350.000 according to the most reliable sources dating back to August 2015, it is quite clear that the European countries have not been able, since 2011, to face this challenge.

Furthermore, the debate between the European Union and Turkey about the temporary solution to finance, by European countries, approximately € 3 billion in refugee facilities for Ankara may not be enough to solve the refugee emergency. In fact, since the summer of 2015, the flow of refugees increased and it reached Germany, the heart of Europe, through the Balkans.

European citizens are concerned about the flow of refugees and these fears have been exploited by xenophobic and extremist political parties that have increased their political presence in many European countries. The reaction of European citizens is shaping a common European strategy to contain the flow of refugees in order to help the host countries. Despite this many countries, especially in Central and South-Eastern Europe decided to act unilaterally in close regional co-ordination.

Almost all European countries are strengthening border controls and the Schengen Agreement is likely to be challenged with huge consequences for the free movement of persons in the Continent. A lack of tangible initiatives will erode both national political establishments and the European *acquis*, bearing in mind that anti-immigration slogans often may rally the vote of dissatisfied and impoverished middle and lower class voters, who are particularly hit by the decade-long economic crisis and austerity.