Europe Wishes to Inform You That the Refugee Crisis Is Over

But the humanitarian and political crises of the great Syrian exodus are just beginning.

By James Traub

BRUSSELS and LESBOS, Greece — Skala Sikaminias is a little beach town on the northern coast of the Greek island of Lesbos. A year ago, rickety wooden boats and dinghies packed with Syrian refugees began plowing into the narrow stretch of beach next to the taverna in the town square. Within days, the flotilla had swelled to vast proportions; as many as 7,000 Syrian refugees were landing on Lesbos every day. It is a mountainous island, especially in the north, and the road from Skala Sikaminias climbs uphill in dizzying switchbacks. The refugees — wet, hungry, and exhausted after the trip from the Turkish shore 15 or so miles away — had to toil up the road, dragging their belongings in the blazing heat, to meet up with a bus that might or might not come to bring them across the island to an intake center in the main town of Mytilene. Those who couldn't make it up the road each night, usually 300 or 400 men, women, and children, collapsed in the square and slept there until they could be fetched.

This summer, at the height of the tourist season, the taverna was nearly empty. Only a few customers were eating grilled fish by the seaside, the boats bobbing gently in the harbor. The refugee crisis has reduced tourist traffic on Lesbos by at least half — even though the human flow has slowed to a trickle since March, when Europe succeeded in stanching the flow of refugees. Lighthouse Relief, a charity that provided food, clothing, and rudimentary help to the refugees last year, has been reduced to "eco" work — cleaning local beaches of refugee flotsam, chiefly life jackets. When I arrived in Lesbos in mid-July, two boats had just landed from Turkey carrying a total of 54 refugees. They had been given bottles of water and put on a bus to Mytilene, where two camps host more than 3,000 refugees. The next boat might not arrive for a week.

The refugee crisis is over. At least that is what I was told by a number of diplomats and officials at the European Union's headquarters in Brussels. "We have a grip on the flow," said Pieter de Gooijer, the permanent representative of the Netherlands to the EU. "Our worry now is slippage" — small groups of refugees escaping into Bulgaria or Macedonia from the big, fenced-in camps in northern Greece. That doesn't mean there are no refugees, however. Tens of thousands keep pouring out of Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but Turkish authorities now stop them from boarding boats for Lesbos and other Greek islands.

From the point of view of Europe's political leaders, who must be attentive to increasingly frightened publics, the refugee crisis was above all a crisis of borders and thus of state sovereignty. It was the refugees, that is, who posed the crisis. The flow had to be stopped — and it was. That is not how events

were understood at the outset, a year ago. Then, the crisis was the plight of the refugees, desperately fleeing savage war in Syria and Iraq and hoping for shelter in Europe. Looking back over that year, however, it becomes clear that what began as a moral drama turned into a political one as Europe seemed to lose control of its borders.

Europe has at least temporarily succeeded in solving the political problem — but not the humanitarian one. Although Germany and Sweden have taken in refugees in numbers exceeding 1 percent of their own population, most Southern and Eastern European countries have taken in few or none. About 66,000 people remain trapped in the Greek mainland and the islands, and that figure is growing by the hundreds every week as refugees continue to find ways of reaching the shores of Europe. Some won't qualify for refugee status and will be sent home as economic migrants; most, however, have a claim to international protection. But it will be years before even these lucky ones receive a new home in Europe. The endless wait has already produced a mixture of fury and despair so toxic that refugees in Moria, the larger of Lesbos's two camps, set fire to the facility in late September and left it a smoldering ruin.

Events in Syria or elsewhere may swell the numbers yet again. European leaders give the strong impression that they are hoping that Turkey, like a giant sponge, will continue indefinitely to absorb future waves of refugees. That is almost certainly wishful thinking — this summer's attempted coup d'état in Turkey, and the ensuing crackdown, makes it less likely still. As one U.N. official told me, "Many European leaders are waking up with a hangover, trying to figure out what happened last year. They are not ready to look at Plan B. What if the deal with Turkey collapses? What to do? It's a crisis of responsibility, of leadership, of solidarity or trust among member states. And nobody wants to take responsibility."

The gathering storm

The Rue de la Loi in Brussels — in English, the "Street of Law" — is the aptly named shrine to Europe's postwar principles. Here stand all the institutions of the European Union, an organization founded to bind the continent back together in the aftermath of World War II. The Rue de la Loi is dominated by the vast three-sided structure of the European Commission, a secretariat that devises programs to embed those abstract principles into European policy and law. (The European Parliament, which must actually adopt those proposals, is located 280 miles away in Strasbourg, France.) Across the street from the commission is the European Council, which is made up of the political leaders of its 28 member states and defines the EU's overall political direction. The very fact that the EU, unlike the U.N. or the IMF, includes such a body serves as a blunt reminder that, whatever its founding principles, the European Union is still a club of states.

EU commissioners — one from each member state — serve six-year terms; the most recent began in 2014. Frans Timmermans, a Dutch civil servant, diplomat, politician, and former foreign minister, serves as the commission's first vice president, responsible for all policy matters inside Europe, including migration. He speaks six languages, and his English is flawless and idiomatic. Timmermans is the beau ideal of the Eurocrat, that functionary held up to so much ridicule in Britain's recent vote to leave the EU; he even wears the squared-off, thin-rimmed spectacles that seem to go with the job. He

is, nevertheless, a worldly, blunt-spoken figure, not at all inclined to technicalities or tangled legalism. When I noted that the commission anticipated many of the problems of the refugee crisis in a report issued several months before it began, Timmermans said, “It ain’t rocket science. To analyze the problem is not that difficult, and to also point to solutions isn’t even that difficult. The difficulty is to get member states to come together on those solutions.”

By the time Timmermans took his job, hundreds of thousands of Syrians had already fled into Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. It was clear that they would run out of space before long. According to the most recent figures from the U.N. refugee agency, or UNHCR, those countries harbor 1.034 million, 656,000, and 2.734 million Syrian refugees, respectively. At the same time, the number of migrants illegally seeking access to Europe, most of them Africans arriving in Italy, reached 278,000 in 2014 — almost three times the figure of the year before. Thousands were drowning on the way.

You didn’t have to gaze very far out in the horizon to see massive storm clouds building.

You didn’t have to gaze very far out in the horizon to see massive storm clouds building. Elizabeth Collett, the director of the Migration Policy Institute’s Europe branch, said she heard “time and time again” from EU officials that the refugee situation was under control but knew very well that an influx from Syria would utterly overwhelm officials in Greece, where the refugees would first hit European shores. In 2014, she began convening meetings with senior national and EU officials to figure out, she said, “What do we do if a huge number arrives?” No one in power was listening. European political leaders had what felt like much more urgent worries about Greece, which was reeling under vast debt and a ruinous recession and was threatening to leave the eurozone.

One person who did get it was Timmermans, whose job involved looking over the horizon. In early 2015, he and his team set to work devising proposals to prepare for a Europe in which mass influxes of both refugees and migrants would be normal, not aberrational. “A European Agenda on Migration,” issued in May 2015, called on member states to triple the budget for naval operations to save refugees at sea, target smuggler networks, and strengthen the capacity of Greece and Italy to deal with mass migration. More controversially, it proposed a “mandatory and automatically triggered relocation system” to share the burden of caring for refugees across Europe in the face of an emergency. The report also proposed long-term changes to strengthen weak states in Africa and the Middle East that export migrants and to increase opportunities for legal migration in Europe.

The report aroused little interest among the leaders of the 28 member states, most of whom were quite content with their own responses to the problem. “What I learned coming here,” Timmermans said, “is that it’s one thing to come to the analytical recognition that we need to start doing things differently, on a European level. It’s another thing to try to convince authorities, political and governmental, in the member states that they’re going to be under European guidance on these issues.” Timmermans and Collett were like scientists warning about climate change before any icebergs had melted. Europe’s politicians weren’t ready to hear them. And so the first phase of the refugee crisis — the opportunity for early, systematic policy reform — petered out.

The broken system that Timmermans had proposed changing seemed perfectly adequate to most European leaders. The essential principle, codified in 1990 in what was known as the Dublin Convention, stipulated that refugees would be registered in whichever European state they first reached and would henceforth become the responsibility of that state. All European countries acknowledged the international obligation to extend asylum to refugees, though each had its own standards for doing so and its own system of protections and benefits extended to refugees.

Then came the flood.

A wave of humanity

Starting in the middle of August 2015, hundreds of thousands of Syrians, Iraqis, Afghans, and others began to make an epic journey through Turkey and on to Europe. Some walked for months. Other crossed borders hidden in trucks, suffocating to death when drivers abandoned them by the side of the road. In some countries, including Bulgaria and Hungary, the refugees were beaten by security forces or set upon by dogs to force them back. Wave upon wave of rubber boats — jammed beyond overflowing with desperate families — landed on the shores of Greek islands.

In a moment, as Elizabeth Collett puts it, “the refugee crisis went from politically irrelevant to too relevant.” Thus began a new phase shaped by the tremendous outpouring of public sympathy for desperate victims of war provoked by such terrible images as that of the corpse of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, who washed ashore in Turkey. In Malmo and Munich and elsewhere, thousands of volunteers welcomed the newcomers with food, clothing, and offers of shelter, demonstrating Europe’s commitment to its professed values. It was not the moment to ask about consequences; it was the moment to act.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, deeply aware that 75 years earlier her own country had provoked the greatest refugee flight in European history, decided that Berlin could not stand on the Dublin rules; on Aug. 24, 2015, German officials announced that the country would take all Syrian refugees no matter where they first reached Europe. A few other Northern European countries, above all Sweden, followed Germany’s lead; most did not.

> While Sweden threw open its doors, Denmark took out ads in Arab newspapers warning potential migrants that they would not be welcome in the streets of Copenhagen.

The refugee crisis quickly demonstrated — as the eurozone crisis had the year before — that in the face of an emergency that touched deeply on matters of national interest and national sovereignty, there was no such thing as “Europe,” only individual states. The choices those states made were driven by their own political culture and geographic location. While Sweden threw open its doors, Denmark took out ads in Arab newspapers warning potential migrants that they would not be welcome in the streets of Copenhagen. While Serbia allowed refugees eager to reach Germany to pass through its borders, Hungary — led by the avowedly anti-immigrant Fidesz party — built a fence at the border, at times turning fire hoses on the swelling crowd of refugees. When I was in the Hungarian capital of Budapest soon afterward, both liberals and conservatives ridiculed Merkel’s contention that taking in refugees

constituted the kind of fundamental humanitarian obligation upon which Europe had been re-founded after the horrors of World War II.

The refugees had provoked precisely the emergency that the European Commission report had anticipated, demonstrating the irrelevance of the Dublin rules and the hopeless insufficiency of the existing system. Greece and Italy, rather than registering the migrants and asking if they wanted to apply for asylum, left them off the ledgers and happily sent them deeper into Europe — to be someone else's problem. The other member states were outraged, but, as Timmermans points out, "the Greeks and the Italians had been asking for assistance for years. And the reason they started waving people on is that they were frustrated because no one was listening to them and nobody was helping them."

Why, after all, should the whole burden fall on the poorer countries at the edge of Europe? Jean-Claude Juncker, the president of the European Commission, tried to solve the problem by picking up on Timmermans's proposal for mandatory shared relocation. In September 2015, he proposed that the member states agree to take 160,000 refugees massed at Europe's borders, suggesting a quota system based on population and wealth. The council agreed, though four Central and Eastern European countries, including Hungary, opposed the measure. The agreement was binding; once made, however, the pledge was largely ignored. To date, only 2,500 have been relocated under the agreement from Greece and other border countries to other European countries, with commitments for 7,000 more.

It's hard to say when, exactly, the Alan Kurdi phase came to an end. Perhaps it was Nov. 13, 2015, when nine Islamic State terrorists, two of whom appeared to have hidden themselves in the refugee stream, killed 130 people in Paris. Or perhaps it was Nov. 24, when Sweden's deputy prime minister wept as she announced that the country had run out of space and could no longer welcome refugees. The last straw came Dec. 31, when refugees were accused of perpetrating sexual assaults on New Year's Eve in Cologne, Germany. Until these events, it had been considered wrong, at least for Europe's liberals, to think about the practical consequences of what appeared to be an unequivocal moral obligation; now the consequences had presented themselves, albeit often in grossly exaggerated form. And while liberals fretted, right-wing populists had a field day, which of course only made liberals fret that much more. Viktor Orban, Hungary's prime minister, who from the outset had fanned fears over the refugee flows, appeared to have been vindicated. "Terrorists," he announced, "have exploited mass migration."

The era of generosity had ended almost as quickly as it began.

The release valve

In September 2015, the refugees were a humanitarian crisis; by the winter of 2016, they were a political crisis. And although Europe could not bring itself to act collectively in the face of the first, it would do so in the face of the second. Many European leaders and diplomats had bridled at what they viewed as moral grandstanding by Merkel and senior European Commission officials like Juncker and Timmermans. As Pierre Sellal, France's ambassador to the EU, said to me, "You can commend the German policy on moral grounds, but it's quite clear that the decision taken was not discussed at the European level. These policies were not shared by most member states, and no thought was given to

the European impact of this national choice." What Sellal means by the last phrase is that Merkel's noble gesture sent a signal to refugees that Europe's doors were wide open — a signal that neither France nor even Germany wished to give.

Sellal argues that the entire humanitarian-first policy was a mistake driven by public emotion. "What we very much heard from Timmermans or Juncker last year was the need for burden sharing. 'We have 500 million inhabitants; we certainly should be able to add 1 percent to the total.' That was a huge mistake. You can't tell the Hungarians, or some region of France that has 30 percent unemployment, that they must be part of the average and take in their fair share of refugees. It's very difficult to force people to be generous," he said. The official EU term for refugee burden sharing is "solidarity." Sellal thinks the policy should have focused on borders first, solidarity second.

The EU did, in fact, begin scrambling to enforce borders soon after the refugee dam broke. On Sept. 23, 2015, the European Council called for a "reinforced dialogue" with Turkey on refugees. In October, the commission proposed a "joint action plan" that would offer additional assistance to help care for refugees in Turkey (as well as in Lebanon and Jordan), in return for which Turkey was to improve conditions for refugees and crack down on the smugglers who were enabling the illegal passage to Greece. Later in October, Juncker met with leaders of Balkan countries to seek coordinated action on border enforcement. Nothing really changed, however, until late February 2016, when Donald Tusk, the Polish president of the European Council and a borders-first hard-liner, proposed at a council meeting that Macedonia be permitted to close its border with Greece, thus blocking the way to Western Europe. Merkel strongly objected but ultimately agreed. Tusk triumphantly declared, "The days of irregular migration are over." And they were. The refugee torrent diminished to a manageable stream. As Sellal puts it, Merkel sent one signal by opening Germany to refugees, and "the opposite signal came when Macedonia closed its borders."

Representatives of member states like France's Sellal or the Netherlands's Pieter de Gooijer are unapologetic about the sharp turn away from the humanitarian emphasis of the first months. In January the Netherlands took over the rotating presidency of the EU Council, which adopts EU law, and de Gooijer told me that his tenure marked a shift from "fairly distributing refugees" to stemming the flow. Their constituents were voters, not refugees. From their point of view, after flailing for a few months, they had struck the right balance.

One senior EU official I spoke with insisted that the bleeding hearts had gotten the whole story backward. "This has been the opposite of a failure," he said. "This has been an unprecedented victory. No one has ever gotten such refugee flows under control is so short a time." This impolitic figure, who insisted on anonymity under EU rules that permit only the highest officials to speak on the record, pointed out that the resettlement of the "boat people" who fled South Vietnam in the late 1970s, to which the current crisis is often unfavorably compared, required a global effort over 20 years. Yet Europe, by itself, had gained control over the refugee flow after about six months. "This crisis," he went on, "will end the way every refugee crisis over the years has ended — when you get control over the borders." To sacrifice that control in the name of some higher moral principle, he continued, would have been suicidal. "Europe," he said, "is not this hippie community that people think it is."

I pointed out that since the EU holds itself to higher standards as a community of morals, and not simply of shared interest, it should be judged accordingly. “You know what Europe’s No. 1 value is?” he shot back. “The rule of law.”

> Turkey had continued to allow smugglers to ply their trade, and refugees kept pouring into Europe.

The climax of this third phase of the refugee crisis — the phase of sovereign reassertion — came on March 18, when the European Council confirmed a deal with Turkey that Merkel had hammered out along with senior EU officials. The deal superseded the one that Timmermans and other diplomats had reached the previous fall; at that time, Turkey had continued to allow smugglers to ply their trade, and refugees kept pouring into Europe. With the Macedonian border closed, Turkey no longer had the leverage it once had to turn the refugee flow on or off. Timmermans also suggests that the Turks had come to belatedly conclude that the smugglers, who also worked with organized criminal networks, threatened their own security as much as they did Europe’s.

But Merkel had also thrown a great deal into the pot. Turkey would get €3 billion in assistance, with €3 billion more to come. In exchange, Turkey would commit itself to what it had said it would commit itself to back in the fall. This promise allowed the EU to deem Turkey a “safe” country for refugees, which meant Europe could legally begin returning at least some of them there. In order to show that Turkey was not, in fact, expected to shoulder the whole burden of hosting refugees, it would be permitted to send back one Syrian to be resettled in Europe for each Syrian it readmitted from Greece.

The EU-Turkey deal was widely denounced, above all by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the field, as a gross act of cynicism by European leaders unwilling to face down their increasingly frightened and angry publics. The medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) took the extraordinary step of announcing that it would henceforth accept no funding from the EU. In Lesbos, I met with Adam Ruffell, MSF’s local coordinator, and asked why the group had taken such a stance. “If a refugee is seeking protection from another country,” he said, “and you send him back where he came from, it’s a violation of his rights as a refugee.” Yet the deal was the initiative of Merkel, the heroine of the crisis, and had the wholehearted support of Timmermans and other EU officials. Timmermans points out that the farther refugees go from home, the less likely it is that they’ll ever return. “The cornerstone of our deal with Turkey,” he said, “is that we provide support to give these people a decent life where they are.” That does not, Timmermans said curtly, amount to a “bribe.”

Yet that’s not all the deal was. Timmermans is a bureaucrat with a former politician’s habits. Poring over constituency-level voting patterns in the aftermath of the Brexit vote, he came to understand a dark reality: that the politics of migration had become so toxic that even figures like Merkel could no longer afford to do what they considered the right thing. Indeed, the deal with Turkey was also designed to buy political space for leaders who wanted to address the underlying humanitarian disaster. Once people understood that their borders were under control, Europe could resume accepting refugees.

Timmermans said his conversations with pro-refugee activists always seem to go the same way.

“If you don’t like our policies,” he asks, “what do you think we should do?”

“*Let the people in. Bring them to Europe*.”

“What country is going to support that?”

“*Well, it’s the right thing to do*.”

But what if doing the right thing ultimately leads to the wrong thing? If European publics are faced with the choice between taking everyone and taking no one, Timmermans said, they will take no one. And if incumbent leaders take the principled moral stand urged on them by advocates, they might well bring to power xenophobic rabble-rousers who will bar the door to immigrants of all kinds. That, in a nutshell, is why the refugee issue is the hardest one Europe faces — harder than the eurozone crisis and harder than the Russian threat to Ukraine and Europe’s eastern border. The politics and the morality of it run in opposite directions.

The deal with Turkey held out the possibility of fusing the heretofore conflicting principles of humanitarian obligation and national self-determination. People like Timmermans hoped that it would open a new phase of the refugee crisis. That hasn’t happened, and the fact that European heads of state are still refusing to honor their obligations to relocate refugees is a source of deep bitterness for the deal’s backers. “In the member states,” Timmermans told me, “if there’s nobody coming, the sense of urgency disappears. I find that so difficult to cope with emotionally, because I’ve been to the camps. When we were trying to bring this deal together, several EU member states would say, ‘If we could get them down to 2,000 a day, that would be such a success,’ or, ‘If we could really get the Turks to comply, we could take in another 500,000.’ I would be at peace with all this if the member states would allocate billions [of dollars] on a yearly basis to Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey to take care of the refugees. But to fall short of that, and at the same time not resettle or relocate is …” — here Timmermans, so linguistically adroit, cast around for a suitable expression but found only the bluntest of words — “morally wrong.”

The unwanted

In 2015, some 800,000 asylum-seekers crossed from Turkey to Greece; more than 800 died along the way. Sixty percent of the traffic came through Lesbos, which at its closest point lies barely 10 miles from Turkey. Every day, 100 or more boats — most of them rubber dinghies meant for 10 but crammed with up to 70 people — limped onto shore. At first, the boats landed at beaches like Skala Sikaminias along the northern coast, but later they began appearing along the main road between Mytilene and the airport. Ancient women in wheelchairs and newborns were carried ashore; some women gave birth moments after debarking. After receiving food, water, and emergency care, virtually all of the refugees, no matter how infirm, wanted nothing more than a ticket onward.

They queued by the thousands in the harbor of Mytilene, Lesbos’s main city, in order to receive a *laissez-passer* from the police. Then they bought a ferry ticket for the mainland and resumed their journey. This rolling daily population reached as high as 27,000 — almost equaling Mytilene’s native population. Greek authorities converted the military barracks at Moria, just outside of town, into a

refugee camp. Municipal authorities opened up a smaller camp, known as Kara Tepe, and dozens of NGOs administered what care they could in an atmosphere of utter chaos.

The week I arrived in Lesbos, four migrants had drowned when their wooden boat capsized near shore. That was highly unusual; deaths in the Aegean Sea have dwindled almost to zero as overall traffic has plummeted — the one unarguable humanitarian success of the deal with Turkey. Now that migrants are no longer permitted to continue westward across Europe, but must remain in Lesbos in order to seek asylum, the two camps have become homes to those who crossed the sea. It was Moria that was recently leveled by fire. It's not hard to understand why the refugees may have destroyed their own shelter.

Moria is a terrifying-looking place, with high concrete walls topped by rolls of razor wire.

Moria is a terrifying-looking place, with high concrete walls topped by rolls of razor wire. Journalists are not allowed inside; I took literally one step in the gate to have a look and was ordered out by a policeman at the guard house. At the time of the deal with Turkey, refugees had been forcibly detained here. UNHCR had refused to work at the camp on the grounds that the Greeks were not honoring internationally agreed-upon principles for the treatment of asylum-seekers. The U.N. ultimately returned, but conditions remained harsh and only worsened with overcrowding. Built with a capacity for 700 people, Moria housed roughly 2,500 refugees when I visited; it had reached 4,000 by the time of the fire.

Kara Tepe, by contrast, is about as close to summer camp as refugee housing is likely to get. The facility is used for "vulnerable" populations, including women with children, the elderly, and others who require special treatment. Refugees are permitted to come and go as they please: While I sat at the entrance waiting to be admitted, I watched mothers pushing strollers down a dusty path to the little shops along the road, where you can buy water or ice cream or a gyro. The camp's director, Stavros Mirogiannis, refers to it as a "hospitality center" and to his charges as "visitors." He showed me the weekly schedule — morning lessons in English, German, Greek, and French; afternoon handicrafts, gardening, and fitness; movies at night. Food is delivered door to door, and the menu changes every week. One of the refugees told me that anyone who acts out is threatened with being sent to Moria.

Kara Tepe is not, however, a camp you would want to spend any time in. In July, when I was there, it was blazingly hot outside and even worse inside the boxy white prefabricated units that serve as homes. The cicadas shrill unremittingly, sometimes rising to a crazed crescendo before briefly dying out. There are snakes, though only three of the 12 species on the island are poisonous. But none of those inconveniences matter very much compared to the elemental fact of being stuck in the middle of nowhere with no prospects for the future. When I asked Murtaza Hosseinzada, a slight 28-year-old from Kabul who was there with his wife, how he felt about conditions in the camp, he said, "I don't like anything. I don't care about the food or the camp. I just want to go and make a good life."

Murtaza and his wife may not qualify for refugee status. When I asked him why he had left what sounded like a decent life, with a tailor shop and a job in production with Tolo TV, Afghanistan's biggest private media firm, he said, "Family problems." Greece has already begun processing the many

Pakistanis in Moria, virtually all of whom will be sent back home as economic migrants unworthy of international protection. Most of the people I talked to in Kara Tepe are good candidates for asylum. There were two Syrian Yazidi men whose daughters had been killed by the Islamic State; three sisters and their parents who had fled government bombing in Aleppo; Iraqis from Kirkuk who abandoned a comfortable life, they said, when their 16-year-old daughter narrowly escaped being abducted by unidentified men a few steps from her home.

But virtually no one I talked to had received any signals about the future. The Aleppans had an interview with Greek asylum authorities scheduled for December; no one else had one at all. As I was leaving the little bench where the Ahmeds, from Kirkuk, passed the day out of the stifling heat of their house, Baida, the mother, burst out in a plaint that 16-year-old Noor translated for me. “We don’t know how long we’ll be here. We don’t know when we’ll get an interview. All the other countries get an interview, but we don’t.” The Afghans told me the same thing. Everyone thought they were last in line.

Unequal to the task

Much of the misery, chaos, and confusion could have been avoided had the EU been able to reach consensus on anything beyond shutting down borders. For months, the hopelessly overwhelmed Greek authorities were left to try to sort out the problem for themselves — although, as French Ambassador Sellal pointed out to me, the Greeks stubbornly resisted help so as not to give the impression that they had surrendered control over their own borders. Greece was so hopelessly unequal to the task of processing the vast tide of newcomers that at one point the refugees seeking to apply for asylum could do so for only one hour a week, by Skype, when an Arabic speaker was available.

By the time I reached Lesbos, the EU had begun to mobilize to bolster the Greek effort. Officials from what is called the European Asylum Support Office were interviewing refugees in Lesbos, Chios, and Samos and were expanding to other islands. The EU border control agency, known as Frontex, was helping the Hellenic Coast Guard patrol offshore waters. After 20 years of debate, the European Parliament had just approved a 1,500-person border and coast guard agency that, unlike Frontex, could deploy in emergencies even when local authorities did not request or even want it. The EU had finally begun using its resources to do something other than close borders.

And yet so few asylum officers had arrived — not even a dozen in Lesbos — that they barely made inroads into the backlog of required interviews. Scarcely anyone from the camps was either going forward to the European mainland, or backward to Turkey. The EU-Turkey deal rests on the broad principle that refugees should be able to seek protection either in the first country of asylum or in a safe third country. And the EU has accepted that Turkey is a safe country for the purposes of international protection. That’s one of the reasons for the hue and cry: Turkey has turned some refugees back into Syria and kept others from entering. Nevertheless, Turkey has given shelter to almost 3 million Syrian refugees at a time when most European countries have taken only a handful. Turkey’s camps are modern and safe, and the 90 percent of refugees who live outside the camps have generally been free from mistreatment.

Yet very few of the refugees now stuck in Greece have been returned to Turkey or are likely to be anytime soon. First of all, the only non-European refugees who enjoy formal legal protection in Turkey are Syrians. For this reason, non-Syrians are not being sent back to Turkey. That's why none of the Afghans, Pakistanis, or Iraqis I met at Kara Tepe have yet received an interview to determine whether or not they can be sent to Turkey. But Syrians considered vulnerable to mistreatment, whether because they are women or children or because they belong to a group that is persecuted in Turkey like Kurds, are also exempt from return. And those Syrians who are found eligible for return to Turkey enjoy the right under Greek law to appeal the decision with the help of a lawyer. This process is so cumbersome that to date no Syrians have been involuntarily returned to Turkey. The Turks, meanwhile, have sent only a few hundred Syrians to Europe for readmission as refugees. The "one-for-one" arrangement, with Syrians going from Greece to Turkey matched by those going the other way, exists almost only on paper.

> And so the refugees sit and stew and wonder what kind of conspiracy is operating against them.

The refugees' goal, of course, is the security of Europe. Those who are considered "admissible" to Greece after hearings conducted by U.N. officials are then supposed to have their application for asylum in Greece administered by Greek officials. But because that system is overwhelmed, very few Syrians, and even fewer non-Syrians, have actually had their applications heard. And so the refugees sit and stew and wonder what kind of conspiracy is operating against them.

The EU's side of the deal was to administer the funds to help Turkey provide a decent life for the refugees. A number of European countries have hesitated to disburse the funds pledged, fearful that the money might never reach the intended beneficiaries. The failed coup in Turkey has only deepened that worry. As of this writing, less than €500 million has been distributed. The needs are overwhelming. Only 39 percent of Syrian children in Turkey are now enrolled in school. Vincent Cochetel, the director for Europe at UNHCR, observed that "access [to] education is key for the parents in their decision to stay or move on." If children aren't going to school, or adults aren't allowed to find work, he said, the refugees will start heading for Europe once again.

The deal itself is hardly ironclad. As part of the compensation for serving as Europe's refugee sponge, Turkey insisted on achieving its long-sought goal of visa liberalization, meaning that Turkish citizens would be able to travel visa-free in Europe for up to 90 days. The EU agreed but only after Ankara reached a series of benchmarks governing political and economic behavior. Turkey's draconian anti-terrorism law, which plainly violates European standards, has emerged as the most intractable obstacle. And the violent crackdown in the aftermath of July's failed coup attempt has raised a storm of protest in Europe. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, meanwhile, has begun threatening to let the deal collapse if Europe doesn't pay the full €3 billion while his senior officials have reminded their counterparts in Brussels that visa liberalization is a nonnegotiable condition.

While more than 12,000 refugees languish on Greek islands, another 54,000 have been stuck in camps on the mainland since the Macedonian border closed. (Greek authorities have begun sending some

refugees from the islands to the mainland camps, which in general are no better.) They cannot be returned to Turkey because they crossed through before the deal was signed. They can be sent elsewhere in Europe according to the deal reached in September 2015, which will "relocate"160,000 refugees from their European port of entry — i.e., Greece or Italy. Here, too, progress has been agonizingly slow; to date, EU countries have taken only 6,000 refugees through the relocation process.

A number of EU members, including France, have publicly committed to taking many more refugees than they have so far. But those promises shouldn't be taken at face value. French President François Hollande is facing an election this coming spring, and his chief opponent, former President Nicolas Sarkozy, has relentlessly hammered away at the government's policy regarding immigrants and terrorism. Hollande is not likely to risk his position yet further by taking large numbers of Syrian refugees.

That political reality, blandly enough acknowledged in European capitals, is a source of agony for those stranded in Mytilene; that, after all, is what Timmermans meant when he said, having spent time in the camps, he cannot accept the narrative that the crisis is over.

The damned

While I was in Kara Tepe, a young man came up to me and asked if I would come find him later in "51" — his house number. When I asked where he was from, he grinned and said, "You'll see with your own eyes." In a place where almost everyone seemed on the edge of despondency, Atoo Yazidi appeared almost theatrical. He had a lick of dark hair falling over his brow, limpid brown eyes, and a trimmed beard. I took him for the camp jokester. In the stifling heat of 51, he pulled out a big sign on which he had scrawled: "Yazidis no life without international protection."

Atoo saw that sweat was pouring off me, and we went out into the shade, where he began to unfurl a series of rolled-up paintings. Accompanied by the childish drawings he had made, he told me his story. I realized, to my shame, how wrong my first impression had been.

One drawing showed arrows, representing Islamic State fighters, surrounding Mount Sinjar, the heart of the Yazidi homeland in Iraq, as the jihadis prepared their campaign of extermination on the night of Aug. 2, 2014. Atoo, then 26, was living with his family in a town southwest of the mountain. He and all his male relatives fought from 2 a.m. to 7 a.m. that following morning with whatever weapons they had before retreating up the mountain with the rest of the Yazidi community. A key on one side of his drawing listed the casualties — 1,500 dead in Atoo's town, 1,000 more on the mountain, 1,500 who died trying to break out to the southeast. (The death toll was later put at 5,000.) He did not include the thousands of women taken as slaves.

Atoo and his wife, along with the 50,000 remaining Yazidis, were finally saved by a combination of American airstrikes and a daring rescue effort by Syrian Kurdish fighters. Atoo escaped into Syria and then spent a year and a half working for an NGO in the Iraqi Kurdish town of Dohuk. He earned enough money to cross into Turkey, paid $1,400 to a smuggler, and reached Lesbos on March 29.

> That evening, when I returned to my hotel, the night manager said that he had been driving past Kara Tepe and seen a terrible sight — a woman standing in the middle of the road holding a knife to her throat.

But that wasn't even the worst part of Atoo's story. Before fleeing, his wife had seen the Islamic State slaughter her neighbors. "She was no farther away than you are from that toilet," Atoo said — some 20 feet. She had had a breakdown. On the escape into Syria, he said, she had "fallen down 30 times." She was living with him in the camp, but their unsettled life had only made her condition worse. Five days before we met, a friend told Atoo that his wife was standing in the road outside the camp, trying to commit suicide. He raced out in time to see her saved and now was spending his days by her side in the hospital. Atoo felt that they were just holding her there, with no plan for treatment. That evening, when I returned to my hotel, the night manager said that he had been driving past Kara Tepe and seen a terrible sight — a woman standing in the middle of the road holding a knife to her throat. It was Atoo's wife. Another woman, also a passing stranger, had calmed her just enough for a man to creep up behind and grab the knife.

Atoo was hoping to be accepted by Portugal or Germany, though he said he would be happy to go anywhere in Europe. But now he was feeling desperate, because his wife needed treatment. He told me that everyone, even Palestinians, was getting in line ahead of Iraqis. I tried to reassure him that as a Yazidi, he was bound to receive protection in Europe. But when? And would his wife survive another year in Kara Tepe?

The road to nowhere

So where to from here? Europe cannot take in all legitimate aspirants for asylum, at least until public opinion becomes far more permissive on the subject. Every terrorist attack makes that less likely. What's more, the acute refugee crisis blurs into the larger phenomenon of global migration, as people flee not only violent states but weak and failing ones, where even those living in relative peace see no hope for the future. Before the war in Syria, virtually all migrants coming to Europe were Africans crossing the central Mediterranean to Italy. With Aegean traffic blocked, that route sprang back to life this spring and summer: In the week before I reached Lesbos, 258 migrants landed illegally in Greece, while 6,437 made it to Italian soil. The largest contributing countries, in order, are Eritrea, Nigeria, Gambia, Somalia, and Cote d'Ivoire.

The death toll has risen drastically as well: Some 3,600 migrants have died crossing the Mediterranean so far this year. Some of those who make it to Italy might well have a legitimate claim to refugee status, but most, whatever very real suffering they have endured, would be classified as economic migrants — and sent back home. Africa has 1.2 billion people, with a population due to double in scarcely more than 20 years. Not even the blithest European official can foresee a solution to the problem that is African migration.

How, then, can we think about a fourth and decisive phase to the refugee crisis? The hard part, as Frans Timmermans said, is not figuring out the right policy. The kinds of solutions the European Commission laid out back in May 2015 still apply today — even more so than before the crisis. Writing in Foreign

Policy this summer, the philanthropist George Soros proposed a comprehensive plan: Europe agrees to take 300,000 refugees every year while the rest of the world makes an equal commitment; the EU allots 30 billion euros annually to pay for the care of refugees inside the continent, to support refugee-hosting countries, and to bolster economic development and good governance in weak states that now export migrants; the EU fortifies border control and refugee assistance in Greece and Italy; and Europe collectively commits itself to expanding legal pathways for immigration.

> The mere fact that Europe happens to sit on top of the Middle East and North Africa does not absolve the rest of the developed world of the universal moral obligation to give shelter to refugees.

The problem is political will. Plainly the rest of the world needs to come to Europe's aid, as Soros suggests. The mere fact that Europe happens to sit on top of the Middle East and North Africa does not absolve the rest of the developed world of the universal moral obligation to give shelter to refugees. It would not be fair to say that the world has done nothing in response. In mid-September, at the U.N. General Assembly, both U.S. President Barack Obama and outgoing U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon presided over summit meetings designed to elicit new commitments of help. From the latter event came the so-called "New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants," in which world leaders pledged to raise standards for the treatment of refugees but refused to adopt Ban's proposal that each year they resettle 10 percent of the world's 21.3 million refugees. The Obama summit, according to the White House, produced promises of $4.5 billion in new aid while the 50 heads of state who attended collectively vowed to double the number of refugees they would accept. It is very rare, however, for such pledges to be redeemed in full.

The United States is hardly in a position to lead on the subject. The Obama administration has managed to resettle 10,000 Syrians this year despite severe political constraints, but that figure is inconsequential compared both to the scale of the problem and to the generosity of nations like Germany and Sweden. Meanwhile, Donald Trump, the Republican nominee for president, is running on a vow to accept no immigrants from countries he deems a threat to American security, which would certainly include all the ones now sending large numbers of refugees to Europe. The refugees, in short, constitute a global problem to which there will be only a regional solution.

The EU has begun to make serious efforts to assist border states like Greece, as I saw in Lesbos. More broadly, the utter collapse of the Dublin rules has prompted efforts at reform. In May, the European Commission issued a report reiterating the obligation of states to register and care for refugees who arrive at their borders; the report also reiterated the right of states to return those who had already reached a country considered safe for asylum. In order to prevent border states from being overwhelmed, the report proposed that refugees be redistributed once any given country had taken more than 150 percent of its allotment according to an agreed-upon formula. Of course, previous attempts to establish mandatory systems of redistributing refugees have met with stout resistance from many states.

It is widely agreed, at least in theory, that Europe must spend far more money building law enforcement capacity and fostering broad economic development in Africa if it hopes to stem the tide

of migration. Last fall, at a conference in Malta, EU officials unveiled a $2 billion “emergency trust fund” for Africa and just put forth plans for a package of aid and loans designed to leverage private investment in the continent. The EU is already the most generous donor to Africa, but the billions of dollars spent in past years have done little to reduce migration.

The idea of Europe

This is the work of a generation or more. Federica Mogherini, the EU’s high representative for foreign affairs, is now seeking to negotiate pacts with five countries in Africa (Mali, Senegal, Niger, Nigeria, and Ethiopia) that would target funding to hard-hit areas that produce large-scale migration, as well as help with border enforcement. When I spoke to Mogherini by phone, she was at pains to tell me that illegal migration constituted as serious a problem for the sending countries as for the receiving ones, and thus the pacts offered a “win-win approach” rather than a package of bribes to block migration — which is how I heard them described by several migration experts.

This isn’t just a moral issue. There is near-universal agreement that Europe must increase legal channels of immigration. Migrants won’t turn to dangerous smuggling routes so readily if they know they have at least a decent chance of gaining legal admission. And increasing legal migration is also plainly in Europe’s self-interest. Europe needs new blood to revive flagging — or even negative — population growth. Angela Merkel is hoping that relatively well-educated Syrian refugees will, with sufficient education and training, keep Germany’s manufacturing machine humming. But migration policy has traditionally been left to national governments, and Europe, collectively, offers only the most modest programs, such as the so-called “blue card” to attract highly skilled workers. One European diplomat told me that he thought it would take “10 or 20 years” before the EU could fashion a regime of legal migration remotely equal to the magnitude of the problem.

> Right-wing parties are rising both in countries that have behaved well toward refugees and in those that have behaved badly.

Europe seems to be blocked in every direction. Merkel, one of the few leaders to act bravely in the face of the crisis, has suffered a collapse of political support so grave that her party recently lost to the far-right Alternative for Germany in parliamentary elections in the chancellor’s own home province. But this nativism isn’t just a local phenomenon. Right-wing parties are rising both in countries that have behaved well toward refugees and in those that have behaved badly. And every terrorist attack in Europe gives another fillip to their popularity.

The problem cannot be solved with walled borders. Refugees and migrants have now learned that getting to Europe is not a hopeless dream but a dangerous venture — a risk worth taking when life at home looks utterly bleak. That lesson will not be unlearned. Soon enough, the refugee flows will resume, and they will come to be seen not as a “crisis” but as a more or less permanent state of affairs. The barometric pressure of a poor and growing continent next to a rich and shrinking one cannot be sustained forever.

Europe is bound to become less white, less Christian, and less homogeneous. Americans know that a pluralistic society can send fresh blood coursing through a nation’s veins; but even many Americans are

turning against immigrants and refugees. It's all too easy to cater to those fears, as political leaders in the United Kingdom discovered during the Brexit debate. It's so much harder to say, as Merkel did, that honoring the obligation to accept refugees will "occupy and change" a country in the years to come. Political leaders must find a language that will acknowledge citizens' legitimate fears without exploiting them. If they fail, Europe could fall into the hands of leaders who stir up primeval passions once thought extinct. We may be a few generations removed, but the carnage of that hatred and fear still smolders. It's not just the EU's arcane rules that are at stake, or even the EU's capacity for collective action. It is the very idea of Europe.

Top photo credit: ARIS MESSINIS/AFP/Getty Images

James Traub is a contributing editor at Foreign Policy, a fellow at the Center on International Cooperation, and author of the book *John Quincy Adams: Militant Spirit*. (@jamestraub1)

http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/10/18/europe-wishes-to-inform-you-that-the-refugee-crisis-is-over/