



Is Greece an entry point for terrorists?

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As was widely reported, Greece was warned last week that it faces suspension from the border-free Schengen zone if authorities fail to adequately revamp its control of the EU's external borders and deal with refugee arrivals more efficiently. Such a decision would cause much controversy as the Schengen agreement constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of European cooperation. Several EU officials expected or, according to a few news commentators, even demanded Greece to deal with this emergent problem by requesting additional assistance and support from Frontex, i.e. the EU Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders, and by building and improving reception centres as well as registration systems. Greece being under pressure finally agreed on December 3rd to activate a series of EU mechanisms that can contribute to its efforts to address the crisis.

Although it is highly problematic to blame only Greece for the poor handling of the refugee/migrant crisis since several European states have so far been reluctant to bear or share the burden of this crisis equally, my intention in this blog post is to highlight another aspect of what triggered the debate over the necessity of changing the Schengen Agreement; i.e. the potential threats posed by terrorists passing the European borders unhindered. In light of the Paris attacks and allegations that some of the suspects made their way via Greece to Western Europe, critical voices across the continent question that Europe is safe within the current system. Yet, this is, not the first time that the need for a review of the agreement has been brought up. For example, the foiled attack on a French train last August and the fear of mass migration movements from North Africa in 2011 already led to similar discussions.

The result is a general climate of distrust and often hatred diverted towards people who try to escape violence and persecution. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, warned against the consequences of such approaches in a recent statement saying that 'the Daesh (i.e. the Islamic State) strategy is not only to set Europeans against refugees, but within Europe, to set citizen against citizen within communities, community against community within countries, and country against country in the Union.' On the other hand, it would be reckless, at least from a policy perspective, not to take notice of or ignore possible threats arising from such scenarios; however, to put the dimensions of a given problem into perspective is what authorities ought to do without at the same time cultivating the fear of an invincible threat.

In this respect, Daniel Byman, who is Director of Research in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, recently stressed that while concerns of terrorists converging with refugees can be

legitimate, they should not be overestimated or exaggerated. He further explained that the Islamic State, which is responsible for many of the millions of refugees fleeing Syria and Iraq, calls its followers to stay in their countries and fight local enemies, and not to travel abroad. Instead, what needs particular attention are policies in host countries that fail to accommodate the uncertainties of refugees in the long run and as a result may increase the risk of making terrorism attractive to certain groups and individuals. The chances are that over time there will be negative consequences if integration fails and those people continue to live on the margins of society fraught with tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims and often in conditions of relative deprivation.

Finally, an extra dimension that should not slip our mind is the threat coming from homegrown terrorism as well as from individuals who decide to go to Syria and join the fight with ISIS. This aspect may end up being more alarming than the threat of refugees being terrorists. Besides, as Jon Worth argues, it seems that 'the solution is not to abandon Schengen, but to strengthen its systems. An EU border force, a genuine EU investigative agency and a permanent redistributive quota system to replace the Dublin regulation.' Compromising the current system and therefore restricting the free movement of people could be the beginning of future changes that may put the idea of a united Europe in danger.