

Europe's Border Policy is Designed to Push Refugees into the Sea

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Shortly before a huge migrant boat disaster early this month, The Sun, a daily paper owned by Rupert Murdoch, published a column by British TV star and rightwing provocateur Katie Hopkins calling migrants "[cockroaches](#)" and "a plague of feral humans."

Not long after it went to press, as many as [850 refugees](#) drowned in the Mediterranean when their wooden fishing boat [capsized](#) about sixty miles off the coast of Italy. Days earlier, [400 refugees had drowned](#). The death toll this year has already reached [1,780](#), a more than [50-fold increase](#) from the same time last year. The death toll is projected to rise further during the warmer seasons.

Given the timing, Hopkins' genocidal language generated a great deal of attention and outrage, including a [denunciation](#) from Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the UN high commissioner for human rights, who likened her vitriol to Nazi propaganda against Jews in the lead up to the Holocaust.

Largely unnoticed amid the uproar was the fact that Hopkins' proposed solution — to "bring on the gunships, force migrants back to their shores and burn the boats" — is precisely what Europe's supposedly "enlightened" liberals have chosen to do.

In response to the crisis, [European Union](#) leaders have agreed to [launch military operations](#) against smugglers in Libya using [Apache helicopter gunships](#), to send nearly all migrants who survive the journey back to where they fled and to destroy the boats before they set sail to Europe.

The EU also plans to [outsource](#) its border patrol operations to security forces in [Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Mali and Niger](#) to prevent refugees from reaching the Mediterranean coast, further restricting their freedom of movement and ability to escape persecution and possibly deporting them back to their places of origin, which include Syria, South Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia, Afghanistan and the Gaza Strip.

Death as deterrence

As Europe scrambles to respond to worldwide outrage spurred by this latest migrant boat catastrophe, it has placed the blame squarely on the smugglers.

There is no doubt that the human traffickers have engaged in murderous exploitation of refugees. In September, smugglers deliberately sank a boat, [killing some 500 people](#), almost all of whom were Palestinians from Gaza. However, shifting all the blame onto smugglers deflects from Europe's own culpability.

Smugglers are merely a symptom of Europe's deadly border policies.

Over the last decade, the EU has deliberately sealed its land borders, effectively pushing refugees to use deadly sea routes.

The border between Spain and Morocco, one of just two land borders connecting Europe to Africa, is sealed by [fence](#) that is seven yards high and reinforced with barbed wire. Though the fence hasn't stopped people from trying to climb over it, the barbed wire tearing through their flesh in the process, those who manage to scale the fence alive are [swiftly deported](#).

Bulgaria, which two decades ago celebrated the dismantling of a wall that caged people in, is [building a wall](#) at its border with Turkey to keep mostly Syrian refugees out. Bulgaria became a preferred route after the construction of a fence at the Turkey-Greece border for the same reason.

With land borders cut off, refugees, no less desperate for security, are predictably [risking dangerous sea voyages](#) on rickety vessels to reach safety.

(US Border Patrol employs a similar policy of "[deterrence](#)" at the US-Mexico border, where the wall funnels migrants into the most dangerous desert terrain, where many die of thirst on the perilous trek from Mexico to the US.)

Let them drown?

After nearly 400 African refugees died in the Mediterranean trying to reach the Sicilian island of Lampedusa in 2013, Italy launched Mare Nostrum, a navy search and rescue operation that saved [150,000 lives](#) until it was scrapped in October 2014.

The EU replaced Mare Nostrum with [Operation Triton](#), which is overseen by [Frontex](#), the European border management agency. Though the EU agreed to [triple](#) the budget of Triton in response to the latest mass drowning, the extra funding is unlikely to stem the deaths. Triton's mandate is surveillance and border protection, not search and rescue, and it only patrols up to thirty miles off the Italian coast. Even the head of Frontex stated that the agency's priority is [not to rescue migrants](#).

The British government explicitly refused to take part in any search and rescue operations, arguing, against all available evidence, that saving people encourages migrants to make the dangerous sea voyage. Britain's Home Office minister, James Brokenshire, insisted that halting rescue operations "at the earliest possible opportunity" would [deter](#) potential migrants from setting out on their voyages. (According to Frontex, the number of migrants increased [160 percent](#) three months after Triton replaced Mare Nostrum.)

There are [more refugees today](#) fleeing war and persecution than at any time since the Second World War, according to the UN. The refugee crisis is largely isolated to the Global South due in no small part to the lasting impacts of colonialism and ongoing imperialism pursued by countries in the Global North.

Meanwhile, the EU will only offer resettlement to [5,000 people](#) who qualify for asylum, meaning the vast majority who survive the Mediterranean "will be sent back as irregular migrants under a new rapid-return program co-ordinated by the EU's border agency,

Frontex,” according to *The Guardian*.

Such policies are reminiscent of the treatment of another group of persecuted refugees in the not-so-distant past.

In the lead up to the Nazi [Holocaust](#), Western nations not only placed quotas on Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution, but in some cases boats full of Jewish refugees were turned away. Such was the fate of the [SS St. Louis](#), the infamous cruise liner carrying 900 German Jews who were denied entry in 1939 by Cuba, the United States and Canada, forcing them to sail back to Europe. More than 250 of those on board died at the hands of the Nazis.

Today, Western leaders atone for their nations’ complicity in the Holocaust with cheap pronouncements of “never again,” declarations of unconditional support for Israel and a commitment to fight anti-Semitism and discrimination, all the while denying asylum to today’s persecuted refugees.

Cheap talk

During his 26 April visit to Natzweiler-Struthof camp in Alsace, the only Nazi concentration camp on French soil, French President [François Hollande warned](#), “The worst can still happen. Anti-Semitism and racism are still here.”

“We must not forget anything,” he said.

Just two days earlier, Hollande [announced](#) that he would be seeking a UN resolution to grant the EU authorization to destroy migrant boats before they set sail for Europe.

The fact that most of today’s refugees are Muslim provides an ideological imperative for blocking their entry into an increasingly Islamophobic Europe, with politicians stoking fears of Islamic terrorism and anti-Semitism to rationalize border cruelty.

Indeed, Raymond Shamash, a member of the right-wing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), [explained](#) to the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that he is running for office to protect Jews from Muslim immigrants.

“Most of the people coming over from Libya and Sudan and Somalia and Afghanistan do share one characteristic — that they are Muslims. I feel a demographic shift will make the position of the Jewish community untenable,” said Shamash.

UKIP leader Nigel Farage recently issued a similarly panicked warning, arguing that relaxing EU asylum policies would result in “a million Islamic extremists coming to our countries and posing a direct [threat to our civilization](#).”

Likewise, Kent Ekerot, a member of the Swedish Democrats (SD), insists that anti-Semitism in Sweden is entirely “[imported](#)” due to “unrestricted immigration” of Arabs and Muslims, which he and his party fervently oppose.

Rooted in fascism and the country’s neo-Nazi movement, SD captured 13 percent of the vote in the last general election, making it the [third most popular](#) political party in Sweden.

Israel’s existence as an exclusionary settler state is deceptively justified on similar grounds

— as a necessary response to the world’s indifference to the Nazi genocide of European Jews. Meanwhile, Israel refuses to grant asylum to [non-Jewish African refugees](#) fleeing genocide in places like Eritrea and Sudan, preferring instead to round them up into detention and deport them.

Openly referred to as “[infiltrators](#)” by Israeli government officials, Africans seeking asylum have — like Palestinians — been labeled a threat because they are not Jewish. Earlier this month it was discovered that [three Eritreans](#) who Israel deported were among those beheaded in Libya by [Islamic State](#) (also known as ISIS) for not being Muslim.

Israelis on social media [rejoiced](#) at the news, with some heaping praise on the killers. “It’s a shame [Islamic State] doesn’t catch them before they reach Israel,” commented one Israeli. “Now we understand how to deal with the problem, bring here ISIS and they will take of the Eritreans and Palestinians,” remarked another.



This is the hatred European leaders are endorsing when they exploit the Holocaust to justify Israeli apartheid. But European support for Israeli discrimination is more than just empty penance for the past. After all, Fortress Europe benefits from Israel’s cruel policies of occupation and exclusion.

Israeli technology created to make the control and removal of Palestinians more efficient may be procured by the EU to militarize the borders of [Fortress Europe](#), as The Electronic Intifada’s David Cronin has [reported](#).

As the Mediterranean Sea becomes a graveyard for refugees, it’s more apparent than ever that Europe has learned all the wrong lessons from one of the darkest chapters in its history.

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