

## Offshoring Security: Protecting Migrants and the Schengen Zone

Externalising asylum processing accompanied by enhanced search and rescue efforts and border protection would benefit all concerned.

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[On April 15](#) and [April 20](#) crowded migrant boats heading from Libya to Europe sank in the Mediterranean resulting in the deaths of more than 1000 migrants. The death toll this year is now more than 1500, which according to the International Organization for Migration is “[roughly 30 times higher than the equivalent figure from 2014, which was itself a record](#)”. In the face of this humanitarian crisis, European leaders agreed on measures to be taken in order to deal with the influx of migrants crossing the Mediterranean. However, it has been claimed that these measures do not go far enough and there have been calls for the establishment of [offshore processing centres](#) to allow migrants to lodge asylum application without having to make the dangerous journey to EU member states by sea. Offshoring aspects of migration control could simultaneously protect both migrants and the integrity of the Schengen zone's borders. However, it would need to be combined with longer-term actions to address the causes of the crisis, and carefully managed to ensure that the EU and Member states live up to their stated values and legal commitments – something that offshoring strategies elsewhere have failed to achieve.

### **Analysis:** Possibilities and pitfalls of externalising migration control.

The conclusions of the emergency summit of EU leaders on April 23 [fell short](#) of expectations that had been raised by the level of public outcry and strong statements from politicians in response to the increasing death toll. The EU's unambitious and hesitant plan of action failed to include provisions for exploring the possibility of externalizing the initial processing of migrants' asylum claims to third countries. The clearest advantage of this approach is that it would remove the needs for the dangerous sea journeys. Establishing such 'triage' facilities, along with what would amount to refugee camps, on the Mediterranean's Southern shore, would allow for migrants in need of international protection to be identified and separated from economic or lifestyle migrants. Refugees could then be transferred safely to receiving states, as [Vietnamese boat people](#) were [previously](#). Operating in tandem with a naval search and rescue (SAR) force, which could intercept boats before they reach the high seas and transfer migrants to the processing centres, would effectively deal with the most immediate and fatal aspect of the crisis.

Externalisation would need to be thoroughly thought through to avoid its potential downsides, which are evident in [Australia's brutal implementation of a similar policy](#). The EU would need to find suitable partners to host processing centres, while ensuring that conditions in the camps adhere to its commitments to protect the [fundamental rights and human decency](#) of migrants. Although this has not always been the case [previously](#), increased international and public

attention should spur better standards in future. Failure to agree on effective sharing of refugees will mean that some EU states may need to engage in unilateral offshoring or to create coalitions of those willing to do so. The EU and its member states also need to increase the possibilities for regular migration for those – including low skilled workers – who wish to improve their lives by moving there. Experience shows that increasing regular migration possibilities and clamping down on irregular migration benefits both migrants and receiving states.<sup>1</sup>

Providing these possibilities and ensuring that migrants rights are respected would allow the EU to stay true to its values and commitments on international protection to international law. Externalisation, along with enhanced border protection measures would also boost the integrity of Schengen external frontiers.

## Outlook: Introversion versus Externalisation

Despite not appearing in the summit conclusions some member states, such as Germany and Italy, are keen [to explore the possibilities](#) of both [externalisation](#) and an enhanced SAR effort. The [UK](#), [Sweden](#) and [Belgium](#) have pledged naval and air resources to support operations in the Mediterranean. Yet their narrow focus on border protection instead of SAR shows nervousness rather than decisive and imaginative action.

Furthermore, the [EU has emphasised](#) the need to tackle the people smuggling networks that operate with impunity in the wake of state collapse in [Libya](#), where most migrants depart for Europe. The summit conclusions also include provisions for [enhancing cooperation](#) with and support to neighbouring countries such as Tunisia, Sudan, Mali and Niger.

In the current political climate, however, these initiatives may not lead to the next logical step of establishing external processing facilities. To comprehensively deal with the migration crisis and preserve its own standing in the world – as well as the viability of the Schengen zone - EU leaders must stand up to the increasingly xenophobic discourse on migration, on top of addressing the policy's institutional shortcomings. Despite the scale of the tragedy in the Mediterranean, the will to do both seems to be lacking which is bad for migrants and bad for the EU.

## Recommendations:

- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should explore the possibilities for establishing external migration facilities and asylum-processing, as well as the practicalities of unilateral or multilateral (but sub-EU level) arrangements for offshoring and refugee sharing.
- ◆ **Involved member states – and the EU** – should ensure NGOs and IGOs have access to monitor the camps in relation to fundamental rights and human decency..
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should build on the established networks of cooperation they have with African countries to address the crisis at source and also to find suitable partners for externalised processing centres.
- ◆ **The EU and its member states** should establish a dedicated Naval SAR mission – organised similarly to [EUNAVFOR-Atalanta](#) - to operate in tandem with externalisation and complement the border protection provided by the Frontex operations Triton and Poseidon.

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