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Regaining control in an unsettled Europe



A female refugee from Syria reacts moments after she arrived in an overloaded rubber dinghy on the Greek island of Lesbos, Greece, November 14 2015. (Orestis Panagiotou/EPA)

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

AMSTERDAM — Objectively speaking, the unprecedented, bloody terrorist attacks in Paris on Friday night were not related to the European refugee crisis that has rumbled on for many months. Certainly the attacks could not have been caused by France's acceptance of refugees because France, unlike Germany and Sweden, has not been accepting large numbers of refugees. Nor is it credible to believe that recently arrived refugees from the Syrian war were primarily responsible for organizing a complex series of attacks. People who climbed mountains or crossed the Mediterranean on rafts did not arrive in France and transform themselves immediately into armed terrorist killers.

The actual killers knew Paris very well. At least one has already been identified [as a French national](#), known to the police. Others drove a [Belgian rental car](#). I don't care how all of the other killers entered the country: This operation was not planned by refugees. They picked targets — bars, a theater, the national stadium — in integrated neighborhoods, places that were frequented by young Parisians of all backgrounds.

The human brain is not rational, however, and within minutes of the news breaking — before the identity of any of the murderers was known — many, many people began making the link between the two issues. Not all of them were Europeans: [Ben Carson](#) helpfully declared that the United States, in the wake of Paris, must now close its borders to Middle Eastern refugees. But of course European writers, tweeters, citizens and politicians also made the same statement in large numbers.

It is important to separate these issues again. But before doing so, it is also important to understand why, to so many people, they seem to be linked.

At the deepest level, the refugee crisis has unsettled people because it seems that Europe has lost control of this problem. This sense has been building ever since the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, unilaterally decided to change Europe's asylum rules in the summer. Merkel's gesture — hugely popular in Germany at the time — immediately encouraged thousands more people to make the dangerous trip across the Mediterranean. Despite colder weather, some 250,000 every month — [8,000 per day](#) — are now entering the European Union, desperate to get in while they still can, overwhelming refugee services in even the most generous countries. As a result of this influx, Europe's Schengen treaty, which eliminates borders between those countries that are members, is under mortal threat. Sweden has reintroduced temporary checks at its border crossings, just to monitor the flow of people. Slovenia and Hungary have [put up fences](#) on their borders with Croatia.

The logistical crisis pales beside the political crisis. For years — decades, really — Germany had positioned itself as the keeper of Europe's rules. Whether dealing with the Greek crisis or the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Germany has always stuck solemnly to whatever treaties it signed or promises it made. When Germany suddenly shifted the policy without consultation at the European level, and forced everyone else to accommodate, widespread disaffection began to spread.

There is no avoiding it: These terrorist attacks will consolidate this sense of insecurity, the feeling that no one at the national or international level is in charge of policy toward terrorism or refugees, even in those European countries that have no terrorism or refugees at all. And unless the sense of control returns, the political consequences could be severe. Across the continent, a surge in support for far-right, anti-European or anti-immigrant political groups has already begun, in Poland, the Netherlands, Sweden and France itself. The anti-E.U. movement in Britain is poised to benefit. So is Viktor Orban's nationalist right government in Hungary, which successfully manipulated the refugees for its own benefit in the summer.

Europe now needs to restore security, stability and confidence. France and its allies will have to show that it is possible both to maintain a tolerant society and to fight — fiercely, competently

— against the institutionalized terrorism of the Islamic State. In the longer term, Europe needs a consistent military strategy designed not to control the Islamic State but to destroy it. In the short term, in order to preserve freedom of movement within its borders and to prevent a wave of far-right governments from taking power, Europe as a whole must reassert control over its outer borders, create refugee processing centers at entry points and patrol its coasts.

Again: This is not because there is any real connection between refugees and the events in Paris, but because extremists cannot be allowed to capitalize on the feeling of insecurity, or to manipulate it in order to win power.

Compassion is vital, and the victims of Syria's brutal war cannot be forgotten. Eventually it may even be possible to resettle some of them inside the E.U. But they need to be supported, accepted and invited in an orderly manner, as Europe has historically accepted refugees in the past. There isn't a choice. If Europe itself becomes dysfunctional, then Europe will be incapable of helping anyone else.

