

Strategic Sectors | **Culture & Society**

Turkey, the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Changing Dynamics of Transit Migration

Franck Düvell

Senior Researcher

Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS)

University of Oxford

For more than two decades, Turkey has enjoyed relative political stability and increasing economic growth. It has also introduced visa-free entry for citizens from many countries. In addition, in April 2013, a new and long-awaited “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” came into force that is characterised by a comparably humane and liberal approach. Finally, Turkey is virtually surrounded by troubled neighbours: the volatile regions of the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. This combination makes the country a logical destination for travellers, migrants and refugees both from these neighbouring countries and from many other parts of the world, including Somalia, Bangladesh and Algeria. Migration and refugee flows are not a new phenomenon in Turkey, but rather date back to Ottoman times (Latif, 2002). In the late 1970s, large numbers of refugees from Iran, many of them Baha’i, began to arrive in Turkey, and there are now up to 100,000 of them. In 1991, around 460,000 Iraqi Kurds fled to Turkey, though almost all returned within six months. In 1992, 20,000 or so Bosnians and others arrived from the Balkans; they were followed, in 1999, by 18,000 Kosovar refugees. In addition, there are significant communities of Afghans, who number in the tens of thousands, some having relocated from Iran, and smaller groups of Armenians fleeing poverty and Uzbeks and Kyrgyz fleeing persecution. All of this shows that Turkey and its government and society have significant experience dealing with sometimes large-scale influxes of refugees. Meanwhile, the

Turkish media, which in other European countries often fuels anxiety if not outright xenophobia, remains relatively prudent. What is most surprising, however, is the incredible social and political resilience shown with regard to these inflows; in most other European countries, they would normally cause a moral panic, but not in Turkey. So far, only a few incidents related to anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiments have been reported, although the latest terrorist attack in May 2013 has increased anxiety.

Record Levels of Syrian and Other International Refugees

Most recently, in March 2011, when civil war broke out in Syria, the displaced populations fled to various, mostly neighbouring countries, as is usually the case in such conflicts. One of Syria’s neighbours is Turkey, which kept its borders relatively open to these people. In spring 2013, a total of 880,000 international refugees were registered by the UNHCR, although the actual total is assumed to be around 1.1 million; 230,000, or about one quarter, of these were registered in Turkey. Turkish sources cite much higher numbers and estimate that, so far, there are about 400,000 Syrian refugees in the country (UNHCR, 2013). About 190,000 of these refugees have been placed, mostly in tents, in 17 camps, some of which are huge, such as Ceylanpinar, which accommodates 28,000 people. However, the majority have been staying with friends or in rented private accommodation across the country, not least to have access to (irregular) employment. Meanwhile, the government has begun to register this group, too. Refugees have also been reported to be returning in significant numbers. Thus, the overall situation is rather fluid.

In January 2013, 32,900 new refugees were registered. During the first eight months of 2012, around 12,000 asylum seekers of other nationalities arrived, almost twice as many as during the same period the previous year. Turkey is thus once again facing a significant influx of refugees from several crisis regions, including Syria, but also Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Somalia, as well as migrants from sub-Saharan countries, the Maghreb and Morocco.

What is most surprising, however, is the incredible social and political resilience shown with regard to these inflows; in most other European countries, they would normally cause a moral panic, but not in Turkey

The Turkish Red Crescent and the Prime Minister's Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate (AFAD) have provided food, shelter, education (including access to universities) and basic medical services to Syrian refugees. By January 2013, the cost of this aid amounted to €1 billion (Hürriyet, 12/03/2013); by December 2012, the EU had spent €313 million – a third of what Turkey had spent – of which only €25 million went to Turkey to cover a meagre 2.5% of its total costs (Delegation of the European Union to Turkey, 24/12/2012), not much considering that Turkey is an EU candidate country. So far, the EU has refused to resettle refugees in the EU to offer relief to Turkey, as several actors have suggested. Only Germany, on 15 March 2013, two years after the mass displacements began, has announced that it would accept 5,000 Syrian refugees, a mere 0.45% of the total or a drop in the ocean. Canada has likewise agreed to resettle 5,000 refugees of other nationalities from Turkey to free resources to tackle the Syrian refugee crisis.

Changing Transit Migration Routes and Practices in the EU

Turkey, as Europe's most southern and eastern outpost, has long been not only a destination country

for migrants and refugees but also a major point of departure for people aspiring to move to the EU. Some intend solely to transit through Turkey from the very outset of their journey, while others move on after spending time in Turkey, driven by constraints in the country and drawn by the opportunities in the EU. On the one hand, there is the much lamented geographic limitation of Turkey's asylum law, which excludes non-European asylum seekers from refugee status in Turkey, the dispersal of asylum seekers to so-called satellite cities, the overcrowded camps (notably, those for Syrian refugees), the long waiting periods and the somewhat unfavourable employment and housing conditions. On the other hand, the proximity to Greece and, thus, the EU, the images of better asylum systems and employment opportunities, and the well-functioning and relatively affordable human-smuggling systems encourage on-migration. Thus, some Turkish conditions function as deterrents to staying in the country, whilst other real or imagined conditions in the EU act as additional incentives to leave.

The specific routes and practices, however, are constantly changing, usually in response to the EU's, other Mediterranean countries' and Turkey's border control politics, but also as a result of the smuggling services on offer. Since other routes through Morocco, Libya and the Ukraine have been successively closed, the transit route through Turkey is now the main route left. Overall, irregular migration fell from 92,000 in 2001 to 44,000 in 2011 (Turkish National Police, 2013). In 2008 and 2009, the Aegean coast was the main point of departure from Turkey, and Izmir was the main hub; from there people moved to the Greek islands, on to Athens and then to other countries. In the second half of 2010, Turkish authorities began to intensify controls, and irregular migration in the Aegean faded out. Instead, migration – and with it, the smuggling operations – shifted to the north-western land border between Turkey and Greece; Istanbul, already the main destination of migrants and refugees, became a hub for these movements. In 2011, however, Turkey reopened an immigration detention and deportation centre in Edirne, partly funded by the EU under a UK-Turkish twinning project. Additionally, in April 2012, at least one major raid was conducted in the border regions, sending strong signals to smugglers that the land route was going

to be tackled. At the same time, in 2012, Greece finished building a 12-kilometre fence on its north-eastern land border with Turkey; in July, it also sent an additional 1,800 troops to Thrace (“Operation Aspida”) to control its land and river borders with Turkey.

The EU had spent €313 million – a third of what Turkey had spent – of which only €25 million went to Turkey to cover a meagre 2.5% of its total costs, not much considering that Turkey is an EU candidate country

In summer 2012, the route once again swung back to the Aegean coast. With it came the smuggling services, though on a much smaller scale. There are increasing reports of refugee arrivals on the Greek islands of Rhodes, Symi, Leros, Samos and Lesbos. Whilst according to figures from February 2013, arrests in the Evros region were down 95% from the previous year, from 6,000 in June 2012 to just 65 in January 2013, arrivals on the Greek islands began to rise again from 161 in August 2011 to 397 in August 2012. A smaller route runs from Turkey through Bulgaria and Serbia to Hungary, where it merges with another route of onward migration from Greece to other EU countries. In total, however, irregular entries from Turkey to Greece, which peaked in 2011 at 55,000, were down 50% in the third quarter of 2012 (Frontex, 2012a and b). Finally, according to *ad hoc* observations, irregular migrants and refugees are also returning to Istanbul in small numbers; this is due to the deterioration of the situation in Greece in combination with the blocking of onward routes.

Maritime Disasters

On 6 September 2012, disaster struck a boat carrying 103 refugees that was due to depart from Izmir, Turkey. The boat was bound for the Greek islands of Samos and Lesbos, just opposite Izmir and a mere two to three hours away. According to

reports, there were many more people waiting on the beach than places on the boat. A struggle broke out, and the smugglers apparently panicked, locked up the boat and tried to leave. But the boat was thrown onto the rocks and sank. Whilst the people on deck could be rescued, those locked below, some 60 altogether, drowned. This seemed to be the first tragedy of its kind and scale on the Aegean coast since 2010.

One day later, on 7 September, more boats were apprehended by the Turkish coast guard. The first boat, an inflatable dinghy, had left from somewhere in Bozburun near Marmaris and was on its way to the Greek island of Symi. It was allegedly sinking when the coast guard apprehended it. There were 39 people on board, mostly Palestinians, according to different accounts, as well as some Iranians and Afghans, including men, women, one of whom was pregnant, and children. A second boat was apprehended near Didim, south of Izmir. It was carrying 28 people, alleged to be Palestinians, Burmans and two Ivorians. And on 8 September, a boat with 36 people was apprehended by the Turkish coast guard near Kucukkuyu, north of Izmir, in the waters between mainland Turkey and Lesbos, Greece (all figures are taken from various news reports).

Syrian Refugees Also Seek Entry to the EU

Syrian refugees are also amongst those crossing over to the EU, or attempting to do so, notably to Greece; in 2012, they were the second largest group. Many seem to have relatives in the EU. Nevertheless, only a tiny proportion, 25,000 or 2.5%, of all Syrian refugees have made it to the EU to apply for asylum. In February 2013, a Greek NGO reporting from Mytilene noted that more and more Syrian refugees were arriving, including a family of 16 refugees, including 11 children, arrested by the coast guard on Lesbos on 3 February, as well as a group of 51 nationals, among them families with children and babies, who arrived on Chios on 24 February. These refugees were often said to be Palestinians from Syria suffering another displacement.

Such refugees are normally categorised as “illegal immigrants,” and the Greek police and coast guards, with support from Frontex, the EU border

control agency, try to prevent them from entering. For instance, on 8 December 2012, *The Guardian* reported that one night on the Evros River border, about 100 Syrians along with some other refugees were unlawfully and forcefully returned to Turkey. According to NGO reports from Mytilene, those who are detained in Greece, have reported terrible, humiliating conditions that are an insult to their human dignity.

Most of the victims of the 6 September maritime disaster were also said to be Syrians, primarily families. In March 2013, another nine Syrians from Aleppo, five of them minors, went missing whilst crossing the Aegean from Dikili (Turkey) to Mytilene (Greece). Hence, some who survived the civil war in Syria have died whilst trying to escape to the safety of the EU.

Syrian and Other Refugees Sandwiched between Turkey and the EU

To conclude, use of the irregular migration and refugee route in the eastern Mediterranean through Turkey decreased significantly in 2012, mostly due to tightened controls in Greece, but also due to some measures taken in Turkey. At the same time, the influx of Syrian and other refugees to Turkey peaked

and the refugee population reached record levels. Turkey hosts several hundred thousand refugees and other persons of concern. Although the country is thus shouldering a significant responsibility, the EU's contribution to a humane solution is limited. Instead, the EU has preferred to fortify its borders and fund Turkey's detention facilities. As a consequence, the country has finally become the "buffer State" so often predicted.

Sources

- FRONTEX. *Annual risk analysis*. Warsaw: Frontex, 2012a.
- FRONTEX. *FRAN Quarterly*. Warsaw: Frontex, 2012b.
- LATIF, Dilek. "Refugee policy of the Turkish Republic." *Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, vol. 33, p. 2-29, 2002.
- SYRIAN MONITOR BLOG. *Info on Syrian refugees in Turkey*. <http://syrianmonitor.blogspot.de/> (ongoing).
- TURKISH NATIONAL POLICE. *Illegal migrants and migrant smugglers in Turkey*. Ankara: UTSAM, 2013.
- UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES (UNHCR). *Turkey Syrian Daily Sitrep*. Ankara: UNHCR, 2013.