AKDENIZ İİBF DERGİSİ
Akdeniz İİBF Journal
https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/auiibfd

Conflicts, Irregular Migration and Turkey's Security in the Context of Turkey-European Union Relations[☆]

Türkiye-Avrupa Birliği İlişkileri Bağlamında Çatışmalar, Düzensiz Göç ve Türkiye'nin Güvenliği

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ABSTRACT

Due to its geographical proximity to conflict zones, Turkey has become the target country for asylum seekers and refugees from different countries having diverse ethnic origins. Turkey's emerging role as a target country became even more problematic due to the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, triggered by the Arab Spring. The Syrian conflict not only led to an increased flow of refugees but also destabilized the Turkish borders. In this regard, Turkey has established a set of strategies and transformations to tackle these issues. This paper examines how migration has evolved as a security issue for Turkey in the last four decades, in general. In particular, the study deals with the security-related issues in terms of migration from the Turkish perspective and evaluates the refugee crisis in 2016 and its implications for Turkey and the European Union. The article concludes with reactions to irregular migration and the refugee flow by shedding light on both Turkey and the European Union's perspectives.

ÖZ

Çatışma bölgelerine coğrafi yakınlığından dolayı Türkiye, farklı ülkelerden ve çeşitli etnik kökenlerden mülteciler ve sığınmacılar için hedef ülke haline gelmiştir. Türkiye'nin hedef ülke olarak yeni rolü, Arap Baharıyla tetiklenen 2011 yılında Suriye Krizinin patlak vermesi nedeniyle daha da sorunlu olmaya başlamıştır. Suriye'deki çatışma yalnızca mülteci akının artmasına yol açmakla kalmayıp, Türkiye'nin sınırlarını istikrarsızlaştırmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Türkiye bu meseleleri halletmek için bir dizi strateji ve dönüşüm tesis etmiştir. Bu makale, göçün son kırk yılda Türkiye için bir güvenlik meselesi olarak nasıl evrildiğini genel olarak incelemektedir. Bu çalışma özellikle göçle ilgili meseleleri Türk perspektifinden ele almakta ve Suriye krizi ile bunun Türkiye ve Avrupa için doğurduğu sonuçları değerlendirmektedir. Bu makalenin sonuç bölümünde hem Türkiye hem de Avrupa Birliğinin bakış açılarına ışık tutarak, düzensiz göç ve mülteci akınlarına verilecek tepkiler sunulmaktadır.

1. Introduction

Population movements across borders have been a significant part of international and domestic politics for a long time. Immigration and more specifically conflict-related movements of individuals have been an important phenomenon in the modern world. In contemporary international relations, the migration and security nexus is considered to be one of the most prominent and influential factors among states and societies. Depending on the context and circumstances, some states and societies have become more involved and influenced by international

migration and the flow of refugees[1]. In the last decade, Turkey and Turkish society have emerged as one of the actors most affected in their region, as well as in the world. The Syrian civil war turned out to be a major source of instability not only due to the severity of the conflict and direct loss of human lives but also through its impact on Syrian people that have also had to leave their homes and become internally displaced people (IDPs) or to flee Syria to seek asylum. The catastrophic impacts of the Syrian Civil War are not confined to the country but expand to neighboring countries, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon that have opened their borders to the people who are escaping from the conflict. Only these three countries host 4,7 million Syrian refugees which constitutes 92 per cent of total number of persons of concern (UNHCR 2023). The humanitarian side of the conflict, in the form of refugees, has spread across the regions surrounding Syria. The major destinations for the Syrians escaping from the civil war in time began to divert from the neighboring countries, which have come under the pressure of economic and logistical problems, to the countries of Europe. As the refugees began to arrive in destinations all around Europe, this destabilizing civil war with its regional impact transformed into a European concern, as well. In this process, irregular migration and refugee flows started occupying the top of the political and public agendas all around the world, for better or worse.

Following the introduction part, the second and third sections of the paper reviews the migration to Turkey and the country's evolving security concerns in the last four decades. In this securitized context, the fourth section focuses on the impact of Syrian Civil War on Turkey. This section is complemented by the debates on how Turkey and EU approached to refugee flows. Finally, the last section presents concluding remarks with some key, practical suggestions to also encourage further research.

2. Migration and Turkey's Security in the Last Four Decades

Historically, Turkey has been accustomed to regional instability caused by mass population movements crossing its borders. Iranians who escaped from the purges of the new Islamic regime in Iran made their way into Turkey in the 1980s, before heading to Western countries. Iraqi Kurds who were running away from Saddam Hussein's persecution also crossed the Turkish border *en masse and* sought refuge in the late 1980s and 1990s. Turks who were discriminated against by the Todor Zhivkov regime in the late 1980s, also fled from Bulgaria to Turkey. People from different ethnic origins of the former Yugoslavia also came to Turkey due to the conflicts during the dissolution of former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. However, the refugees who had fled the Syrian civil war reached such unprecedented numbers that any country facing such a flow would struggle to cope with its impacts. From mid-2011 onwards, when the domestic disturbances turned into countrywide violence, Turkey began to apply an "*open door*" policy and started to accept the Syrians that were fleeing the conflict into its borders (The Republic of Turkey,

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[1] In this article, the term "refugee" is used in a broad sense to include individuals with any type of international protection status such as temporary, subsidiary, or humanitarian protection.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Under the dire conditions of the civil war, Turkey applied a humanitarian policy rather than putting security concerns and strictly protecting its border to the forefront in its policy towards the ongoing crisis in Syria. This approach has proven to be very costly for Turkey in terms of its security, economy, and its foreign relations.

Turkey was caught unprepared, just like other regional and international actors including the Europeans to the so-called "Arab Spring" and related instabilities in the broader Middle East. Timing of the upheavals addressed as "Arab Spring" coincided with the Turkey's changing foreign policy which was to redefine the geographical security environment with its neighbors and the Middle East (Öniş, 2012). The expectations for transformation that would bring fundamental changes to the regimes in the region could not be materialized without the emergence of domestic conflicts. The Syrian regime proved that it would resist any plea for change, and would not allow itself to be replaced without a fight on the scale of a civil war and at the cost of the destruction of the country. Turkey has traditionally tended to act with humanitarian concerns during the domestic crises of its neighbors, and helped the people who are fleeing from the conflict area, on one hand. On the other hand, it has been very prudent not to get involved in the domestic affairs of these countries. In fact, Turkey's policy toward Syrian was confronted by "the ethics versus self-interest dilemma" in terms of how to deal with the internally polarized Syria; whether to support reform and put pressure on the ruling authoritarian regimes or support rising opposition movements (Öniş, 2012). In this context, during the Syrian Civil War, Ankara pursued a course of action in favor of supporting regime change in Syria. The "open door" policy was partly the result of this approach, and paved the way for millions of people to escape Syria to come to Turkey. Even though Syrians have constituted the vast majority of refugees in the last decade, a constant flow of irregular immigrants and refugees from other countries, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and some African countries, have continued to arrive in Turkey (Kirişçi & Yıldız, 2023).

3. Security and Migration Relationship from the Turkish Perspective

Turkey's security has been affected by irregular migration and refugee flows at various levels, particularly in the last decade. In this context, the overall impact of population movements on Turkey could be analyzed in terms of state security, economic security, social and human security levels. Securitization of migration in Turkey is mostly argued in the domain of border management (Sula and Sula 2021). However, following the the rapid and constant flow of refugees in the last decade has culminated feelings of insecurity among the local communities especially in terms of demographic change, ethnic balance, sectarian clashes, and triggering social and political tensions (Donelli, 2018).

Moreover, the public perception towards migration has evolved in the recent years with more security-oriented concerns. One of the research surveys conducted in 2022

indicates that only 17,8 per cent of the Turkish citizen participant are satisfied with the Syrian immigrants in Turkey and 62 per cent supports their repatriation (Aydın et al.,2022). Another research report highlights that at the family level, Syrians are perceived more as a security threat than constituting an economic threat (IstanPol, 2020). According to the same research, "Syrian migrants" are listed as the second most important problem of Turkey following the "economy" ranking as the first. It could be argued that Turkey has been as prepared as any other country to accept massive refugee flows. Nevertheless, Turkey, not surprisingly, was caught by that refugee flow almost unprepared. The magnitude and massive scale of the refugee flow into Turkey due to the civil war in Syria forced Turkey to adapt itself and respond to this huge humanitarian crisis.

Turkey's security concerns over border issues have been problematic for a long time. There are structural and issue-based reasons for a lack of security, particularly on its borders, such as in the east and southeast of the country, above all the land borders that are shared with Iran (560 km), Iraq (378 km), and Syria (911 km) (Milliyet, 2021). Furthermore, Turkey has coastlines on the Mediterranean, Aegean, and Black Seas overall exceeding 6,000 kilometers, excluding the Marmara Sea and the islands in these seas (*Turkey at a Glance - Geography*, n.d.). Border security related to the physical security of state borders for the prevention of illegal human movements in or out of the country, and any kind of illegal trafficking are important factors that affect any state's security realm. In the Turkish case, it is not only important for its security, but it also matters as it is a NATO member country, which naturally has impacts related to the Alliance's security on one hand. On the other hand, Turkey, as a candidate to the European Union (EU), is or will be established as representing the outer borders of the EU. In this sense, dealing with irregular migration and handling refugee movements, constitute one of the main and core areas of Turkey and the EU relations and the overarching security concerns for both parties. The second aspect of Turkey's border security has been the infiltration of terrorists and insurgents from neighboring countries where they were based, and in some cases protected by Turkey's neighbors (Okyay, 2017). Especially the developments in Iraq in the aftermath of the United States-led (US) invasion, and in Syria since the outbreak of the civil war, further deteriorated Turkey's national security situation in its regions bordering these two countries. Consequently, Turkey's primarily security- driven approach to border management has been culminated with its increasing border protection measures and the construction of an 837- km concrete wall along its Syrian border and an 81- km security wall at its Iranian border (Turhan and Yıldız, 2021).

The geographical state of Turkey's borders in the regions in the east and southeast constitutes an important challenge for Turkey. The mountainous terrain on the Iranian and Iraqi borders is particularly hard to control. The harsh climate conditions, especially in the winter and summer seasons also affects border security. The cross-border human trafficking of Afghanistan and Pakistan nationals via Iran has been, ironically, a well-established route for decades. Similarly, illicit trade and smuggling to and from Iraq and Syria also have a long history. Despite the general concerns of Turkey and other bordering states, a combination of physical limitations, lack of designated funds and personnel for the security of borderlines, and economic contributions to the communities in the bordering regions, have long prevented effective border control in the region.

Turkey has been dealing with the ethnic-separatist terrorist organization the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party / *Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane*) for decades as the leading threat to its security. One of the main reasons for the terrorist attacks and curtailing Turkey's struggle to end the conflict, has been the PKK's terrorist recruitment and its leadership's presence in Iraq and Syria. To destabilize Turkey, the PKK has immensely used neighboring countries' lack of control over their borders, along with their hosting of its bases as safe havens, not only to launch attacks on Turkey but also to organize human trafficking and material smuggling, to finance its terrorist activities. In this process, many of the terrorists have facilitated their ways abroad, including to many European countries, through organized crime networks working on human trafficking and smuggling for the PKK. Turkey's endeavors to stop infiltrations from Iraq and Syria for terrorist attacks faced resistance from Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad's regimes for a long time. However, neither the toppling of Saddam Hussein with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, nor the change of leadership in Syria after the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000 brought stability to Turkey's borders. On the contrary, the US invasion led to an almost total collapse of state authority and triggered sectarian insurgencies in Iraq, that resulted in the deepening of the severe security problems for Turkey. Consequently, the PKK got a further free hand to operate in Iraq as well as people fearing for their security began to leave Iraq for Turkey (Özcan, 2010).

4. The Syrian Civil War and its Effect on Turkey

In the years before the Syrian Civil War emerged, Turkey was relatively able to keep people leaving Iraq for humanitarian reasons under control. The US-led invasion and the withdrawal of the bulk of its forces by 2011 created a power vacuum, and left a devastated and divided Iraq behind, as well as tarnishing Turkey's economic relations with Iraq (Cordesman, 2020). While the US was withdrawing from Iraq, Syria, under the administration of Bashar al-Assad had come under the effects of the social movements striving for change. The authoritarian Syrian regime's resistance to change and hostile attitude towards the emerging opposition, along with the divisions within the country paved the way for a countrywide armed conflict that rapidly turned into a full-fledged civil war. The Syrian Civil War caused a massive humanitarian catastrophe, due to the targeted attacks on towns, enforcing migration, and the usage of chemical weapons leading to vast civilian casualties (UNSC, 2021). As the humanitarian conditions got worse, the people began to leave Syria for their own good in massive numbers. The Syrian regime's use of indiscriminate force against its citizens drew reactions from the international public opinion as well as from Turkish public opinion. Subsequently, the Turkish government's support for regime change in Syria quickly deteriorated Turkish-Syrian relations.

In the process of ever-expanding instability across Syria and Iraq, within the religious extremists, a group proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

(ISIS) in 2014, claimed sovereignty over parts of Iraq and Syria. The weaknesses of the state structures and fractured societies in Iraq and Syria led these countries to lose their sovereign authority over these parts of their territories, and made Turkey *de facto* neighbor to this illegal violent entity. The spread of ISIS control over the region in the next three years through terror, violence, and mass killings created new waves of people running for their lives to neighboring countries (Hubbard, 2014). Human rights abuses, violent killings and committed crimes against humanity, while forcing local people to leave, global publicity of these developments also had the effect of attracting sympathizers and militants of religious extremism, and encouraged them to go to the ISIS-controlled territories. The waves of violence and the emergence of ISIS resulted in a two-way flow of people in and out of the ISIS-controlled territories of Iraq and Syria with direct opposite motivations; one for survival from ISIS and the other for joining ISIS. The rise of ISIS put forward the "*foreign terrorist fighters*" phenomenon as a global security issue, as many would-be militants had traveled from all around the world to participate in the violent activities of ISIS. The majority of the radicalized militants and their families who lived under the ISIS administration, as ISIS was defeated, wanted to go back to their countries where they were not wanted by their governments. The return of the "foreign terrorist fighters" (FTFs) through legal and illegal ways to their countries of origin became a very important security concern for various states in the years to come (Yalçınkaya, 2016). It was not solely ISIS; the region has begun to be depicted as a place where various terrorist and radical factions engage in conflicts, either among themselves or in support of or opposition to the regime. The PKK and its regional offshoots in Syria such as the YPG/PYD are among these groups, posing a security risk to Turkey's territorial integrity and potentially leading to an influx of additional refugees. Nevertheless, during Turkey's military operations in Northern Syria, the EU's stance leaned towards critiquing Turkey for potentially causing protracted instability in the region and creating an conducive ground for the resurgence of ISIS (European Parliament, 2019).

Based on this background and the context, in the process of the ongoing Syrian civil war, Turkey became the host country for the most refugees in the world, reaching up to 3.2 million (PMM, 2023). This has been an unprecedented number of refugees escaping from conflict zones, sheltered in a single country in recent times. Turkey has mostly been left alone by the international community singlehandedly to shoulder the financial, social, and security burden of the refugees that are not only coming from Syria but also running away from the conflict that hit Afghanistan as recently as August-September 2021, in the process of the evacuation of the US-led international forces from the country. Turkey was also badly affected by the violence that stemmed from the instabilities in Syria and Iraq throughout the last decade, both in terms of the PKK's increasing terrorist activities in Iraq and also the spread of the PKK affiliates' presence and influence on Syria. The PKK terrorist organization carried out attacks in Turkey, and the PKK and its affiliates' hostilities towards Turkish security

units in Iraq and Syria forced Turkey to get further involved across its borders. Turkey had a long-established presence in the conflict zones in some parts of northern Syria bordering Turkey, where other international state actors like the US, Russian Federation, and Iran also have a presence, as well as in the north of Iraq where the US forces remain, and Iran have local allies.

Turkey has also been targeted by ISIS and its affiliates and suffered a series of attacks that caused more than 250, mostly civilian, casualties (Yalçınkaya, 2017) including the worst terrorist attack leading to 103 casualties at a peace rally in front of the Ankara Central Train Station, in 2015 (Habertürk, 2021). Turkey has been dealing with the extremist militants of ISIS and the FTFs, as well as their families in the post-ISIS period. Some FTFs, who have been arrested in Turkey while going into hiding or attempting to return to their home countries, and their families were deported while some countries have objected to the deportation of their citizens and tried to put forward legal obstacles to stop or delay the process. While collaboration against violent extremism and global terrorism requires universal involvement at the moral and practical levels, the reluctance of some states to take responsibility and keep any of their citizens involved in terrorist activities away from their home country, gives wrong signals to the peace and stability seeking international community, and to people who intend to join extremist movements to replicate the ISIS experience. A significant number of the foreign terrorist fighters are from the EU countries, so an important area for cooperation between the EU and Turkey appears to be a common goal of dealing with any type of extremism and people who get involved in terrorist activities with extremist motivations (Papakonstantis & Yalçınkaya, 2022).

5. Turkey and the European Union's Reactions to the Refugee Flows during the Syrian Conflict

When Turkey began to apply its open-door policy, it was as expected reluctant to shoulder the burden of the flow of millions of refugees across its borders alone. This was an unfortunate miscalculation on the Turkish side. A similar miscalculation soon appeared in the EU member states that welcomed refugees within their borders and at the institutional level of the EU. However, Turkey did a relatively good job of providing protection to the people coming over its borders as refugees, even though Turkey does not grant refugee status to people who do not come from Europe, due to a caveat in the form of "*geographical limitation*" that Turkey had kept in the process of putting a signature to the 1951 United Nations Convention Related to the Status of Refugees, commonly known as the 1951 Geneva Convention (UNHCR, 1951). Despite making long-needed arrangements in the field of refugees with the *Law 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection* (*6458 Sayılı Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu*, 11 April 2013) (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Mevzuat Bilgi Sistemi, 2013), Turkey still holds on to this "geographical limitation" concerning refugee status determination. Accordingly, Turkey does not grant "refugee" status to asylum seekers[2] who are fleeing "events occurring outside

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[2] Asylum seekers are defined by International Organization for Migration (IOM) as "An individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone

whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it (IOM, 2023).

Europe". However, it might grant them "conditional refuge" status. 'European countries' are defined as Council of Europe members and the ones determined by the President of Turkey (Law 6458). In this sense, due to geographical limitation and also the arrival of Syrians in the form of mass inflow, people who arrive from Syria are granted "temporary protection" status.

Following the enactment of the Law 6458, an important step taken to institutionalize Turkey's migration management, with the establishment of the Ministry of Interior General Directorate of Migration Management (*T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı*) in 2014.[3] The establishment of a specific and purpose-oriented institution for migration management has positively contributed to the coordination of the state's efforts to handle the massive inflow of refugees, particularly coming from Syria since 2014. Organizing and managing refugee camps, providing protection and basic services including shelter, food, education and health to the people under temporary protection, as well as building up the necessary infrastructure for processing people on their arrival in Turkey, have been done successfully by the professionals of this institution. This institution is also working on the harmonization of Turkey's legislation in the fields of asylum and migration with the *Acquis Communautaire,* as part of *Turkey's National Action Plan for the EU Accession* (Under Chapter 24 - Justice, Freedom, and Security, which has been blocked by the Greek Cypriot administration since 2009, and who later managed to have this turned into an EU position) (The Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021).

As the Syrian Civil War intensified, and ISIS began to further terrorize people's lives, Syrians increased their efforts to flee the country in massive numbers. While Turkey is trying to handle the situation by providing the newly-arrived Syrians with humanitarian aid for all their needs, many started to pass on provided shelters and to be processed under the temporary protection status, in order to make their way to Turkey's western borders and shores so as to travel further west to EU member states such as Germany and the United Kingdom, which was an EU member at that time. The relatively easy and most convenient way was heading to the Greek islands that are located close to the Turkish shores with the help of human smugglers who would provide the necessary sea vessels to these people (Yıldız, 2021). Many people were able to make this risky crossing to the Greek islands or mainland Greece used this route as a steppingstone to reach their desired destinations in Western Europe. As Syrians led the way, others from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan also followed this path to make their way to Europe. Some part of the strain caused by the continuous influx of Syrians into Turkey began to be diverted to Greece, and via Greece to other EU member states. People from various countries other than Syria also perceived these circumstances as an opportunity to begin to use various sea and land routes to reach their final destinations in Europe. Two neighbors and NATO allies, Turkey and Greece, that share the Aegean Sea, faced a difficult task to deal with the waves of refugees.

Greece was not prepared at all to handle such a wave, and the EU was not institutionally organized to give the necessary support to Greece and Turkey. Despite having a framework in the form of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) (European Commission, n.d.), the EU institutionally and at the level of individual member states appeared to be indecisive, politically divided, and without any agreed comprehensive guidance to deal with the humanitarian crisis at their borders. This became a litmus test for the EU and its member states, concerning respecting basic human rights in the form of processing and accommodating refugees and asylum seekers to the EU. It has been a moral test and as it has also been a practical one. The EU and some of its members did not appear to pass this test when helpless people were on their doorstep and were unable to support their member states as well as a candidate state in their time of need.

The tension that emerged on the borders of Turkey, Greece, Italy, and Bulgaria, as well as Germany, Austria, Hungary, Croatia, and other EU member states, reflected a dire image of failed solidarity and collaboration under the conditions of a massive humanitarian crisis in Europe. The need for fair and committed application of global governance principles of migration, refugee, and asylum seeker management, emerged even more clearly. However, as the radicalized domestic political conditions and anti-immigration rhetoric of various political movements began to use the refugee waves for endorsing their own political agendas, developing common policies for migration management, and supporting the countries facing refugee flows at the global as well as at the EU level, became harder and harder to achieve. Despite the urgent need to develop long-term strategies to address the fundamental driving forces of irregular migration and asylum-seeking, by focusing on conflict prevention and resolution, overturning underdevelopment, eradicating poverty, and easing the impacts of climate change, the awareness and commitment for global governance of population movements in the world seem to be lacking. Instead of turning Europe into a "fortress", the EU could set an example for the international community through further deepening collaboration and harmony among its member states in the field of migration and refugee management. This could be extended to EU candidates and partner countries as a way of advancing policy harmonization with these countries, as well.

Turkey-EU relations have been going through a rough patch for a long time. The crisis in the Aegean Sea and the land borders between Turkey and the EU member states made this process even more complicated in the period between 2014 and 2016, when the refugee and irregular migration flows peaked. The forceful, thus illegal and inhumane, "pushbacks" of refugees have been a major problem between Turkey and neighboring EU member states, particularly with Greece since then (Turhan and Yıldız, 2022). Consciously jeopardizing the lives of people who would try to cross borders is immoral, inhumane, and illegal under international law. Unfortunately, this has become a policy on the part of some EU states, and this is tarnishing the reputation and respectability of the EU and EU member

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[3]Moreover, in 2021, with the Presidential Decree No. 85 published in the Official Gazette dated 29 October 2021 and numbered 31643, the status of the General Directorate was changed to the Presidency. Please see The

Presidency of Migration Management, "Presidency", https://en.goc.gov.tr/about-us. (Date of Access: 05.02.2022)

states, in the eyes of the international community, as well as in Turkish public opinion. Turkey and the EU reached a common understanding in managing the refugee waves at the peak of the crisis. The Turkey-EU Statement of 18 March 2016 (Council of the EU, 2016) became the blueprint for a working relationship in the migration governance that would prevent loss of life, prevent the practice of human smuggling, and establish a mechanism to process and solve the settlement and resettlement issues of refugees (The Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). The incentives were high at the time on the part of both parties that are severely affected by the irregular migration and refugee waves. The agreement was based on a *quid pro quo*, set on financial incentives and visa liberalization for Turkish citizens to the Schengen area, in exchange for Turkey's tightening of measures on its land borders and at sea, to prevent illegal crossings and opening the path for the resettlement of refugees who make their way to the EU via Turkey. The parties were committed to the agreement, and this contributed to dramatically slowing irregular crossings across the border. The finance provided by the EU was used to chip in Turkey's huge burden of taking care of the Syrians who are in the country with temporary protection status. The agreement was criticized from the perspective of humanitarian and international law for denying some of the rights of the refugees protected under the 1951 Geneva Convention (Yıldız, 2021; Heck and Hess, 2017; Roman, et al., 2016). One of the criticisms revolves around the contentious issue of whether Turkey qualifies as a "safe third country," as asserted by the EU (Şimşek, 2016). Turkey's adherence to the "geographical limitation" principle was used to justify the return of Syrian refugees to Turkey, along with assessing asylum claims as inadmissible, underpinned by the "safe third country" clause. Another critique highlights the fact that Turkey has leveraged the EU's vulnerability to asylum flows for its own advantage (Leonard & Kaunet, 2021). However, it would be misleading to exclusively evaluate the Turkey-EU Statement based on Turkey's perceived rent-seeking behavior without considering the broader context of the EU's externalization of its migration policy towards Turkey (Yıldız, 2016; Üstübici, 2019). In its generality, the "Turkey-EU Statement of 18 March 2016" was a contingency solution to an ever-growing problem for Turkey and the EU, derived from a realpolitik perspective. Eventually, as the crisis began to diminish, the parties' commitment to following the agreement weakened. Despite the tangible financial side of the EU commitment that had reached over €6 billion, the EU simply put visa liberalization on to the back burner again very much to the chagrin of Turkey, and Turkey responded by questioning the EU's sincerity and threatening to quit collaboration within the scope of the Agreement (Shaheen et al., 2016). Despite its successes in dramatically limiting the loss of human life, improving the conditions of people under temporary protection in Turkey, and of the refugees who had reached the EU countries, the collaboration based on the Statement does not seem to have intensely contributed to enhance the trust and committed relationship between Turkey and the EU. However, the outcome of the Statement was not end up as intended for both parties particularly for Turkey due to EU's reluctance to activate the Voluntary Settlement Scheme as they had committed, as well as very limited number of one-to-one resettlements that were

achieved from Turkey to the EU. The irregular migration continues as a fact of life, and the EU states sustain the inhuman pushbacks of refugees toward Turkey, which continue to cost innocent lives.

6. Conclusion

The refugee crisis has shown how important Turkey is to the EU, and vice versa. Millions of people flowed into Europe through Turkey, and following the signing of "Turkey-EU Statement" of 18 March 2016, the waves of migration and the humanitarian disasters at the EU borders were relatively declined. Although the Statement caused many discussions in Turkey, and the EU extensively benefited from the arrangements, it came about as a result of the need for close collaboration between the EU and Turkey. Indeed, while the EU has managed to prevent significant amount of refugee flows into its borders, Turkey could not get may be the most important parts of the cooperation from its perspective, the resettlement of Syrians in the EU countries and the visa liberation for Turkish citizens. During the Cold War, Turkey significantly contributed to the protection of Western Europe, as a buffer against the Soviets threat for forty years. In the second decade of the new millennium, Turkey once again became a buffer this time absorbing flows of masses towards Western Europe. Those masses of people were not only comprised of refugees but also extremists and foreign terrorist fighters. Standing against extremism and tackling terrorism have been two rare issue areas that have brought Turkey and the EU relations forward.

The recent research on the Syrians in Turkey has shown that the vast majority of the Syrians in Turkey are not willing to return to their home country (Erdoğan, 2020). Therefore, from the Turkish perspective, the primary issue is no longer the stability of Syria, but the asylum seeker policy (Erdoğan & Papakonstantis 2023), which takes the almost 4 million refugees in Turkey into account. Certainly, the need for a comprehensive strategy for their integration or voluntary return are, by and large, of primary concern to Turkey.

Syrians are not the only asylum seekers both Turkey and the EU have been dealing with. The worsening situation in the wake of the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan has also triggered another wave of migration, in addition to other irregular migration flows from other countries that suffer from conflicts, underdevelopment and various instabilities in the South and the East. Under these circumstances, it may be assumed that Europe would continue to be a target region for irregular migration and asylum seekers. It is clear that short-term measures do not lead to development of effective and sustainable solutions to cope with multi-faced problems of irregular migration. Instead, the destination countries should develop medium and long-term policies that take into account their common good as well as humanitarian aspects of migration because it is not the refugees but irregular migration problem itself that constitutes a security problem. In this context, the EU and Turkey should consider their common interests in dealing with irregular migration and while shaping their medium- and long-term policies consider their already reached agreement as a reference point for enhancing their cooperation. However, this refence of cooperation in migration matters is far from perfect. Moving beyond financial aspect of its support and honoring other aspects of

the agreement would be a show of goodwill and commitment of the part of the EU that would lead to gaining support of Turkish public opinion over this cooperation. Hence, the intended cooperation between Turkey and the EU within the migration context must not be leveraged for the EU's externalization of its migration policies. Simultaneously, Turkey should refrain from instrumentalizing migration as a geopolitical bargaining tool. The concept of resettlement in third countries should shift from a mere pledge to an actionable and efficient mechanism. The security apprehensions of both parties must be delicately considered. Additionally, this collaboration should not intensify the securitization of migration and, importantly, should not disregard humanitarian principles. Rebuilding trust and the significantly impaired credibility of the EU should be prioritized. This can be achieved by fostering a cooperative framework where the EU aligns with its core values, such as solidarity and the provision of protection to those in dire need. The 2016 Statement was met with a strong reaction in Turkish society, due to the failure to keep promises on the EU side, especially that on visa liberation. The irregular migration problem will not end soon but will rather increase in the forthcoming years. It is in the interest of Turkey and the EU to address the migration related problems together by thinking further about enhancing cooperation in field of migration management despite the long-lasting problems in other areas of the bilateral relations.

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