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IN BRIEF

The EU and the Prospect of a New Migration Wave from Turkey

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THERE IS A GOOD REASON NOT TO REACH STRAIGHT FOR THE PANIC BUTTON IN REACTION TO INCREASED IRREGULAR MIGRATION FLOWS FROM TURKEY. SINCE SIGNING THE DEAL WITH THE EU, TURKISH PRESIDENT ERDOĞAN HAS BEEN TRYING TO RATTLE THE EUROPEANS' NERVES WITH THREATS OF A NEW MIGRANT INFLOW. HOWEVER, THE EU'S POSITION VIS-À-VIS TURKEY IS NOT AS WEAK AS IT APPEARS.

Context

Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, Syrian refugees have been arriving in Turkey in large numbers. The Turkish government and Turkish NGOs have been generously providing protection and welfare to these people. A large inflow of Syrians from Turkey to Europe in 2015–16 caused a massive political crisis from which the EU has not yet recovered. By signing the [EU–Turkey Statement](#) in 2016, Turkey agreed to act as Europe's migration buffer zone, hosting migrants and refugees, preventing departures and intercepting boats, in exchange for the EU's financial support under the [EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey](#).

There are now four million refugees and migrants in the country, most of them Syrians. Being ruled by one

government, as opposed to the EU's 28 governments, and seeking to be a model country for the Muslim world, has made Turkey a much more willing host to Syrian and other refugees compared to the EU. Europe, which has yet to come to terms with being a continent of immigration, has been riven by conflict over dealing with irregular migrants from Asia and Africa and integrating migrants into European societies.

Over the recent months, the relative calm on the Turkish-Greek maritime border has been disrupted. Since September 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his ministers have been repeating their threat to 'open the floodgates' of refugees to Europe. Erdoğan knows that he will get the Europeans' undivided attention whenever he makes such statements. The idea of an uncontrolled flow of migrants and refugees through Greece and then further into the centre of Europe sends shivers down the Europeans' spines, in an echo of the political mayhem of 2015–16.

Turkish measures

To an unprecedented extent, Turkey is now picking fights on a number of different fronts, alienating Europeans, Americans and most Arabs. Among a number of other measures, Turkey has begun gas drilling

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inside the exclusive economic zone of the Republic of Cyprus, which Turkey does not recognise. It has purchased a Russian missile system, to the annoyance of its NATO allies. Claiming a Syrian breach of the 1999 [Adana Agreement](#), Turkey has, in defiance of the European NATO allies, sent its troops over the border to parts of northern Syria. This act, conducted with tacit agreement of the US and with active Russian assistance, is at least partly justified by terrorism perpetrated by Kurdish militants on the Turkish territory. At the beginning of January 2020, Turkey began sending troops to Libya to support the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.

Also, the Turkish game on migration has changed. Since the summer of 2019, the Turkish government has been allowing migrants to cross the Aegean. Since August, around ten thousand people have been arriving on the Greek islands every month, representing about a 30% increase when compared to the monthly figures previously. In addition, Cyprus and Italy began registering an increase in asylum seekers coming from Turkey. (Cyprus and Italy are not covered by the EU–Turkey Statement.)

Turkish motivation

The primary motivation for the new permissive Turkish attitude to the irregular border crossings to the EU, and for the aggressive international stance, is domestic.

Rising unemployment, economic stagnation and political challenges at home play a big role. In June, a re-run of the mayoral election in Istanbul, Erdoğan's political home, brought to power Ekrem Imamoglu from the opposition secularist Republican People's Party (CHP). Imamoglu made a point in campaigning against Erdoğan's flagship policy of hosting Syrian refugees in Turkey.

The Turkish invasion of parts of northern Syria, which began in October 2019, has been motivated by a variety of reasons, including border control and counterterrorism. However, the Turkish authorities are also trying to demonstrate a concern for the sentiments of the population, increasingly hostile to the millions of Arabic-speaking Syrians present in the country.

The lower intensity of interceptions of migrant boats in the Aegean and allowing people smuggling, on the one hand, and the drama of moving Turkish troops to northern Syria, on the other hand, are connected. Following the US refusal to establish a no-fly zone over northern Syria, Erdoğan is pressuring NATO and the EU to support the establishment of a 'safe zone' in the area. During his [speech at the UN](#), the Turkish president said the area could host as many as three million Syrians. The government said it was planning to spend 25 billion euros on constructing settlements for refugees in the zone.

At present, the idea of establishing safety in that zone appears unrealistic. More than two hundred thousand people have been displaced to the safer parts of Syria and to Iraq. Critics claim that Turkey is empowering radical groups to combat Kurdish fighters in northern Syria. Dozens of civilians have been killed. Even if safety in the occupied areas were to be established, maintaining the zone would be an expensive exercise. Turkey-based Syrians would have to be forced to move into the zone *en masse*.

What the EU is doing

What should the EU do in the face of Turkish migration pressure? First of all, despite increasing Turkish hostility towards the EU, institutional cooperation continues unabated. Turkish officials in charge of infrastructure, health and education have made it clear that European financial support is necessary for the country to be able to look after the Syrian refugees. The Turkish foreign ministry [officially expressed](#) the desire to continue hosting refugees in exchange for EU financial support. Resettlement of selected Syrian asylum seekers from Turkey into the EU continues. Inside NATO, the daily routine of military officials is being maintained. The same applies to security cooperation on anti-terrorism. There has even been some modest progress on liberalising EU visas for Turkish citizens.

Second, the EU is better prepared for another migration crisis than it was in 2015. Following a Greek re-quest, Frontex, the EU's border agency, is deploying a large operation on Turkey's maritime and land border, consisting of 650 officers.

In addition, the EU member states have sent vessels and are providing aerial and land surveillance. The European Commission has announced it would take 50 million euros from Turkey's EU accession funding to pay the Turkish Coast Guard to increase the capacity of its search and rescue operations and to improve the conditions in migrant centres.

Third, Greece itself is getting ready, with heavy assistance from the EU and international organisations. The country's asylum system, thus far inadequate to the task, is being overhauled to enable swifter asylum decisions and faster returns of failed asylum seekers. The government is hiring 1,200 new border guards. A single border surveillance agency is being created. Migrant centres are being built on the Greek mainland. (By default, the dismal situation in the refugee camps on the Greek islands serves as a deterrent for large numbers of Syrians to want to enter Europe via the Aegean.)

What the EU could do

Further steps are necessary. To address the Turkish concerns over hosting millions of refugees and in its own self-interest, the EU should agree to negotiations on a new EU–Turkey migrant deal. By the end of 2020, the Commission is obliged to sign all the remaining contracts under the Facility for Refugees. Money for key programmes under the existing migrant deal will be spent by 2021. To speed up disbursements, the new EU–Turkey migrant deal could direct a larger proportion of its funds directly to the Turkish government, rather than to the international NGOs and other international organisations that are currently the main recipient of the EU funds.

To reassure the Turkish partners and to fulfil their own rhetoric on migrant returns, the EU member states should be more cooperative about taking back their own nationals who have gone to Syria to fight with ISIS. Germany, France and Denmark have already accepted individual ISIS fighters. Presumably, these countries will try these individuals under strict security procedures.

More broadly, a more active European participation in the reconstruction of Syria would be in the

security interests of both the EU and Turkey, and it would allow Syrian refugees to return home.

The worst-case scenario

The worst-case scenario of hundreds of thousands somehow making it from Turkey to Greece is very unlikely. There is a high degree of mutual dependency between the EU and Turkey, not least in trade, defence, security and migration. The EU hosts 1.9 million Turkish citizens. The Turks have few reliable allies outside the Western world. President Erdoğan realises that by reneging on the migration deal, he would lose all leverage over the Europeans.

If the worst-case scenario were to happen, Europeans have the means to strike back. Far from being ready—and able—to intervene militarily in Syria, the EU has economic measures at its disposal. With a 50% share of the country's exports, the EU is easily Turkey's biggest trading partner. Erdoğan could ill-afford more economic discontent at home should the EU unilaterally abolish its customs union with Turkey and impose trade restrictions. The EU could also terminate the preferential treatment for Turkish agriculture exports, which are not covered by the EU–Turkey customs union. The EU could terminate the substantial pre-accession funding that it sends to Turkey. (In mid-January, the European Commission demonstrated its willingness to use this punitive tool. In response to gas drilling off Cyprus' coast and the Turkish military operations in Syria, rather than in response to the migration pressure, it [announced](#) it would cut pre-accession aid to Turkey by 75%). Finally, the EU could halt funding entirely under the existing migration deal.

No-one would desire such an escalation. Turkish retaliation would probably follow any European trade sanctions. Industrial production in the EU, and its Balkan members and Germany in particular, would be badly hit. Given the ongoing tensions and maritime disputes, Greek–Turkish military confrontation would no longer be off the table.

To prevent this scenario from unfolding, we need to give diplomacy a chance.

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