

Layered Response

TURKEY'S ADAPTIVE POLICY ON REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

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The Republic of Turkey hosts over four million refugees, the most of any state in the world; a country comprising 1 percent of the world's population hosts 15 percent of its refugees.¹ Turkey also hosts at least two million migrants—most from Africa and various parts of Eurasia, including at least three hundred thousand from Afghanistan alone²—with a resultant total migration stock of over six million.³ With the Taliban seizure of power in Afghanistan, Turkey may see another wave of migration to or through its national territory, with attendant strains on the national economy and hospitality. European states have struggled with severe social and political challenges while hosting migrant populations far smaller than Turkey's, and the Turks' ability to provide some order to the steady stream of south-to-north and east-to-west population movements has far-reaching implications both for Europe and for Turkey itself.⁴

These strains on Turkey should be of great concern to US foreign policy makers for several reasons, foremost among them Turkey's central role in the American security architecture. Instability in this important NATO ally can pose a threat to US interests and security arrangements. In addition, as discussed below, Turkey may be experiencing a "weaponization of immigration" as a tool of hybrid warfare by our adversaries, requiring a rethinking of relevant policies. Finally, and more broadly, the Turkish experience with immigrants and refugees is ultimately a distinct rather than unique case in the contemporary phenomenon of mass cross-border population flows globally, including in North America. There is therefore much to learn from the Turkish case regarding the challenges facing US immigration policy.

Turkey's evolution as a destination for migrants and refugees, the choices facing Turkish leadership, and possible impacts for the US and Western Europe of this problem—a Turkish problem in the first instance but shared problem in the mid and longer term—deserve more attention than they have received to date. From an American policy perspective, Turkey is a fascinating case study that parallels US dilemmas: a relatively high percentage of migrants within the total population, a functional but flawed assimilationist approach, and the geopolitical challenge of living astride massive twenty-first-century population flows.

Modern Turkey's Migration History

Turkey's geographic location at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa has long made it a central axis of global population movements.⁵ Republican Turkey has gone



through dramatic shifts in the nature of migration and related government policy over the past century. In its first decade, Turkey saw massive population movements, absorbing hundreds of thousands of Muslims expelled from former Ottoman territories in the Balkans and the Middle East and an outflow of Christians remaining after the First World War and War of Independence. This included an agreed population exchange (*mübadele*) with Greece, under which roughly a million Christians (including ethnic Turks) departed and 460,000 Greek Muslims arrived, together with an estimated 450,000 Muslim arrivals from other parts of the Balkans.⁶ Ancient Muslim communities in the Balkans and the Caucasus, such as ancient Christian communities in Anatolia, were uprooted or destroyed, with shell-shocked survivors populating brand-new states.⁷ The non-Muslim population of the Turkish state dropped from 19 percent in 1914 to 3 percent in 1927 (roughly 1 percent by the 1950s).⁸ It is hard to overstate the cataclysmic demographic change wrought by this bidirectional migration, on top of 2.5 million war dead and a similar number of internal refugees displaced by the wars.⁹ The country would spend three decades recovering from the physical destruction and assimilating the transformed population into a new national identity.

Massive migrations ended by the end of the 1920s. During the 1930s and 1940s, Turkey adopted policies to facilitate migration by culturally similar communities abroad and to allow under strict conditions the entry of those with no real prospects to assimilate into the Turkish national identity.¹⁰ From roughly 1925 until 1955, Turkey became a country of refuge for many fleeing war or oppression in the Soviet Union and fascist Europe. Roughly one hundred thousand Jews from German-occupied Europe sought refuge in Turkey, though many subsequently settled in Palestine (later Israel). Many Muslims and some Christians from Nazi-occupied Europe also sought refuge in Turkey—from Bulgaria, the Aegean, and the Dodecanese Islands. Most returned home after the war, although some Bulgarians stayed on because of the change of regime in their country. Some Greeks stayed in Turkey throughout the Greek Civil War. Turkey thus became a destination of refuge for a diverse, though numerically small, array of migrants.¹¹

The period from 1950 to 1980 was marked by intense urbanization and movement from rural areas to cities within Turkey, and mass emigration of Turks and Kurds to Europe for economic reasons. Turkey and Germany facilitated the travel of Turkish guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*) to aid in Germany's dramatic economic reconstruction (*Wirtschaftswunder*) following the destruction of the Second World War. The *Gastarbeiter* traveled from Turkey by the hundreds of thousands to Europe, and many stayed; the ethnic Turkish population in Germany today is 2.5 million, with another million or so spread among a dozen other European countries.¹² Turkey during this period became an emigrant-sending country. Labor recruitment typical of this period ended by the early 1970s, but the formation of large expatriate Turkish communities was an accomplished fact by then, and natural population growth ensured that these communities would continue to grow and influence the economic, political, and social realities of host countries.¹³

Two events at the close of the Cold War marked a new stage, one in which Turkey would begin accepting large numbers of migrants for the first time since the 1920s. The first of these was the Bulgarian suppression of its ethnic Turkish minority, driving a new wave of some 340,000 arrivals to Turkey.¹⁴ These migrants came with a language and culture in common with other Turks, assimilating with little problem. The second was the first Gulf War, especially Saddam's reprisals against the Kurds in 1991 after his cease-fire with coalition troops. A million or more Kurds fled to the mountains of Turkey, creating security concerns and popular discontent in Turkey. Western powers, including Turkey and the United States, launched Operation Provide Comfort to help resettle Kurds back into northern Iraq and to protect them in a safe zone. Seared into the Turkish collective memory from this period is a sharp increase in terrorist attacks and separatist violence by the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), which grew in reach and capabilities partly because Saddam Hussein equipped and subsidized them to punish both Turkey and Kurdish parties opposed to both Baghdad and the PKK.¹⁵ Turkish fears that large waves of migrants fuel terrorism, and that external actors can instrumentalize them in ways that destabilize Turkey, stem in part from this experience. When European politicians assert that Turkey is "more suitable" for refugees than Europe, bad memories among the Turks are exacerbated, prompting the reply that Turkey "will not be a border guard or a refugee camp of the EU."¹⁶

Since the 1990s, greatly increased flows of irregular labor migrants, transit migrants, refugees, and regular migrants have transformed Turkey into a "migration transition" country, with a shift from emigration to immigration.¹⁷ Increasing numbers of migrants are staying rather than passing through. In recent decades, over 80 percent of refugees from Africa and Asia have stayed in developing countries or countries, like Turkey, that straddle the line between economically developed and developing, and the lack of effective mechanisms for coordination or cost sharing is a source of policy tension.¹⁸ In the 2000s and 2010s, a number of complex, protracted conflicts have further driven sustained high levels of forced population displacement, with nearly 80 million people fleeing their homes within or across borders.¹⁹ Management of massive population flows has become an endemic rather than episodic feature of the international system.

The Syrian war marked a new epoch for Turkey in terms of the sheer number of arrivals, their predominantly non-Turkish ethnic identity, and their duration of stay. As the Syrian uprising became a civil war in 2011, Ankara welcomed the initially limited number of refugees on a "temporary" basis. New arrivals rose from eight thousand in 2011 to more than 140,000 by the end of 2012, half a million in 2013, and more than a million in 2014. By 2015 it was clear that the number was not self-limiting, nor was the need for refuge temporary. Responding to public pressure, Ankara implemented a number of measures to improve border security, provide support and security on the Syrian side of the border, and encourage returns. The 3.6 million UN-recognized Syrians resident in Turkey are only part of the story, with hundreds of thousands more unofficial refugees in various parts of the country.²⁰



Unlike the Kurds fleeing Saddam's attacks in the 1990s, these Syrians enjoy no multinational effort to create a safe haven for their return and survival. As the Syrian war drags on, fewer plan to return to Syria—ever. A longitudinal study of Syrians living in Turkey shows that the number determined never to return to their homeland rose from roughly 17 percent in 2017 to 52 percent in 2019.²¹ The Syrians who fled the Assad regime's brutal oppression have only relatively unstable areas to return to, run by the Turkish-aligned Syrian National Army or the PKK-aligned Syrian Democratic Forces, prospects checkered enough to lead most refugees to remain in Turkey. Ankara's determination to form and protect "safe zones" in Idlib, northern Aleppo, and northeast Syria represent in part an attempt to replicate the Provide Comfort model of making conditions livable within the country of origin, so that refugees and migrants can return home.²² In the case of the Syrians, little or no international support has been forthcoming.

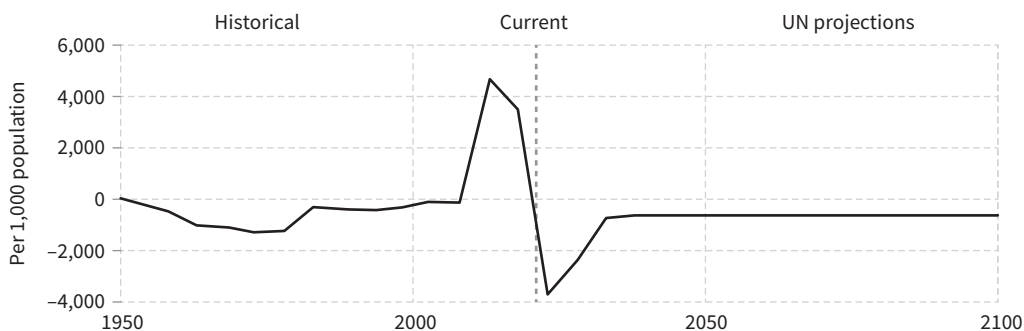
Turkey today thus hosts a Syrian community that plans for the most part to stay, plus a significant and rising number of Afghans—who together compose perhaps 5 percent of the country's current population.²³ It sees a continuous flow of economic and humanitarian migrants from diverse backgrounds, especially Africa and Asia. The country is also home to expatriate communities of Uighurs (an estimated 50,000),²⁴ 142,000 Iraqis, 39,000 Iranians, plus dissidents, tourists, and investors from across the Arab world, who in some cases have been granted Turkish citizenship.²⁵ Ankara is managing a complex and massive balancing act on migration issues, one that will inform its business and security policies in the coming decades and will greatly impact its neighbors and allies.

Trends and Projections

The Center for Global Development ranks Turkey as the world leader in support of refugees, with forty-five per one thousand population, compared to an average of four per one thousand among other developed nations. The center's Commitment to Development Index measures how more-developed countries contribute to developing economies and found that Turkey devoted a higher percentage of its gross national income (1.02 percent) to development finance than other advanced nations. Ankara's approach to supporting migrants has had its problems, too—insufficient transparency and overreliance on favored contractors to the detriment of local businesses, for instance—so Turkey's overall rank is lower than its financing and support to migrants suggests (nineteenth overall on an income-adjusted basis). The data demonstrates both significant Turkish commitment to hosting refugees and other migrants but also Turkey's improving economic conditions in sending countries and tightening controls to reduce migrant flows.²⁶

UN data suggests that Turkey's spike in net migration over the past decade was an anomaly, given prevailing trends in demography and out-migration. Figure 1 shows the net migration per one thousand residents from 1950 projected through 2100, suggesting that the torrent

Figure 1. Turkey's net migration 1950–2100



Source: United Nations, “Turkey Net Migration Rate,” World Population Prospects, accessed August 30, 2021, <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/TUR/turkey/net-migration>.

from 2011 to 2020 will be followed by a sharp decline, followed by net out-migration in the coming decade.

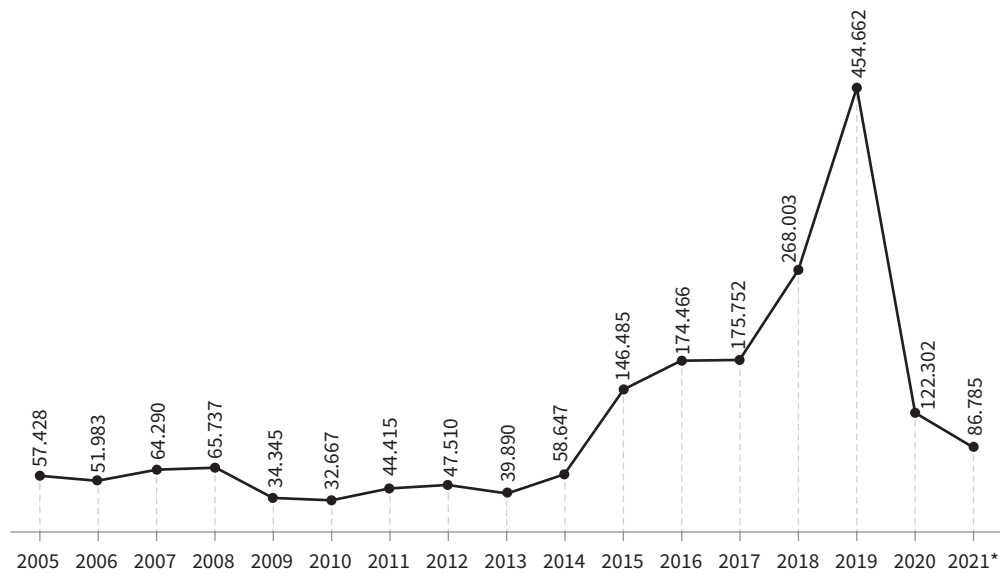
Turkish government data pertaining to irregular migrant arrests reflects a similar trend in sharply decreasing arrivals in 2021. Figure 2 shows a spike in nonrefugee irregular migrants from 2014 to 2019, and sharp decline thereafter. The decline coincides with rising political costs for the Turkish government stemming from the high number of refugees and migrants, and consequent measures taken to better manage and restrict the flow.

Ankara has taken a number of steps to put the brakes on arrivals: physical barriers, stricter legal enforcement, stabilization operations across national borders, and other measures discussed in the next section. It seems reasonable, given these measures, to expect more manageable numbers of refugees and migrants arriving to Turkey in the coming years. In that sense, the six million or so foreign nationals currently living in Turkey likely represents a high-water mark. Yet many of these millions will likely stay, and thousands will continue to arrive in any case. President Erdoğan has stated that Syrians and others who learn Turkish, adapt to the country, and develop professional skills will be welcome to stay. Those who do not will be helped back to their original countries as conditions stabilize. Turkey will not, in his words, be “Europe’s refugee warehouse.”²⁷

Some states have remained open to migration and tried to leverage benefits from it, while others impose more restrictive controls to reduce or prevent it. Turkey is subject to internal and external pressures pushing in both directions, and it may be the case that Turkey continues to straddle the two categories once the spike driven by the Syrian and Afghan conflicts further recedes.²⁸ The urgency of the past decade’s migrant crisis has driven a number of short-term policy reforms, covered in the next section.



Figure 2. The number of irregular migrants who have been captured, by year



*Data for 2021 as of August 19.

Source: Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, “Statistics: Irregular Migration,” accessed August 30, 2021, <https://en.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration>.

The Evolving Turkish Response to the Surging Arrivals

Turkish policy response to the massive influx of refugees and migrants over the past decade has been adaptive and multifaceted. The Turkish policy response can be characterized as unfolding in four different phases, each with a different emphasis, the first being an *emergency relief phase* from 2011 through 2013. Ankara expected the Syrian crisis and refugee problem to be of limited duration. It passed legal reforms (the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, or LFIP) to systematize procedures governing the entry, stay, and exit of foreigners from Turkey. By mid-2013 the Turkish disaster relief agency AFAD, along with the Red Crescent, had established seventeen camps housing nearly two hundred thousand Syrians, generally viewed as well run and effective.²⁹ At the time, this represented roughly half of all refugees. As the number of total refugees skyrocketed, though, newer arrivals were hosted in Turkish cities and towns, especially Istanbul and Gaziantep, and the relevance of the camps receded.³⁰ As of March 2021, seven camps housing roughly fifty-eight thousand refugees (1.6 percent) remain in operation.³¹

An internal *harmonization phase* can be considered to have started in 2014, with extensive implementation of the LFIP. The strategy of harmonization reflected in LFIP rests on building mutual understanding and social acceptance between native-born and foreign-born populations, as opposed to imposition of the dominant culture (assimilation), or the

assertion of equal standing (multiculturalism).³² For Syrians in Turkey, harmonization entailed integration activities permitting access to counseling, education, and health care for those under protected status at or near the standard afforded Turkish citizens.³³ Turkey also increased employment opportunities for Syrians in Turkey; Syrians formally registered more than seven thousand companies in Turkey by 2019, and the number has steadily risen. Integration activities were viewed with some skepticism by Turkish citizens, with many believing the benefits accruing to Syrians were more generous than those afforded average Turks—although direct benefits were quite modest, and the alleged subsidies and preferences were generally either funded by EU grants or wrongly attributed to the government of Turkey based on misinformation.³⁴ Over time, resentment of Syrians mounted, and it was reflected both rhetorically and in occasional street violence or attacks on businesses. As EU funding slowed far short of its stated goal, the spirit of harmonization morphed into something more like tense tolerance and unease, and public resentment of Syrians escalated.³⁵

As the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict became unambiguous, and the expanded scope of Turkey's migrant and refugee challenge more evident, Turkish response entered a *regional diplomacy phase* for addressing migrant flows in 2015 and 2016. Turkey recognized that broad multilateral approaches to negotiating an end to the Syrian war (and thus the return of Syrians from Turkey to Syria) had stalled or failed altogether—including the UN Security Council, the Friends of Syria group, and the Geneva talks.³⁶ Turkey watched with dismay as the United States and its European allies refocused efforts away from ending the conflict in Syria toward building a coalition focused narrowly on defeating the Islamic State, abjuring serious efforts to end the conflict or protect refugees.³⁷

Turkey responded to the failure of multilateral diplomacy by pursuing its own diplomatic initiatives: an agreement with the European Union for burden sharing and coordination related to Syrians in Turkey, and increasingly close coordination with Iran and Russia to de-escalate and manage the conflict between the opposing sides they supported. The EU deal grew out of a convergence of interests as Turkey passed its designated threshold for unilateral support (2.5 million arrivals and over US\$8 billion in expenses by 2015) and European countries started to see large-scale arrivals of their own. The deal aimed to limit new arrivals to Europe via Greece by a combination of Turkey's tightening border controls and accepting from Greece the return of new migrants across the Greece-Turkey border, in exchange for two tranches of 3 billion euros and renewed discussions of Turkish EU accession. The agreement successfully stemmed the flow of refugees to Europe and offset a portion of Turkey's costs but left both sides frustrated: the Turks by the slow disbursement of funds and the lack of accession progress, the EU by continued threats from Turkey to stop restraining migrants from travel to Europe.³⁸

Ankara also pursued discussions with Moscow and Tehran. The Turks' motive was to de-escalate fighting between Assad's forces and the armed opposition in order to create safe zones that



would protect Syrians from regime attack and enable some refugees to return. A remarkable Russo-Turkish convergence on Syria occurred, stemming from mutual concern over the open-ended US presence in Syria and support to the Syrian Democratic Forces, whose main element (the People's Protection Units, or YPG) had ties to the anti-Turkish terrorist PKK.³⁹ Putin and Erdoğan understood that Assad would survive the war but could not achieve stability without a deal that eased Turkey's domestic refugee problem as well as Assad's international isolation. Cease-fires brokered by Russia and Turkey after the fall of Aleppo in December 2016 generally held, with the exception of major fighting in Idlib in early 2020. Bringing Iran into the discussions within the Astana format from 2017 onward enabled the three to manage escalation risks and to provide an alternative forum to the largely moribund Western-led Geneva process. Most importantly for Ankara, the Astana process provided a degree of assurance that regime forces would not attack Turkish-supported safe zones and would keep a Syrian opposition intact as a local stabilizing element.⁴⁰

From 2017 onward, Turkey's approach to migrants and refugees, as well as to regional conflicts generating them, shifted to a hard-power-dominated *securitization phase*. This phase featured major military operations to seize, clear, and stabilize terrain on the Syrian side of the border, including Operation Olive Branch (2018), Operation Peace Spring (2019), and Operation Spring Shield (2020). These operations created what became Turkish-monitored safe zones in northern sections of Idlib, Aleppo, Raqqqa, and al-Hasakah provinces. Each aimed to clear ISIS or PKK-affiliated forces from safe zones along the Turkish border, to develop some self-administrative and self-protective capacity on the part of Syrian partners within them, and to protect the zones from external attack.⁴¹ We might consider Turkey's continued engagement in Afghanistan despite US withdrawal and Taliban control as a complementary step designed to help stabilize Afghanistan and reduce the flow of potential refugees from that direction.⁴²

Turkey has also implemented significant new security measures within its national borders. One step has been the construction of a 140-kilometer border wall along a portion of its border with Iran, aided in part by European funding, with plans to complete a wall along all 295 kilometers of this border.⁴³ This complements a Turkish-funded wall covering 764 kilometers of the 911-kilometer-long Turkish-Syrian border.⁴⁴ Another measure has been the transfer of gendarmerie (*Jandarma*) special operation battalions to southeastern provinces, and an increase in checkpoints and patrols to apprehend irregular migrants.⁴⁵ The nine battalions of Turkey's 6th Border Brigade Command have also been augmented by units from the Turkish Land Forces and the General Directorate of Security. Turkey since 2018 has also increased the apprehension, detention, and deportation of irregular migrants not deemed to have protected status, affecting some Syrians, Afghans, and others.⁴⁶

The hard-power turn in Turkish statecraft since 2017 has not only been about safe zones and refugee flows. Turkish military operations in the region in northern Iraq, Libya, the Caucasus, and the eastern Mediterranean involved power-projection activities with

primarily counterterror or geopolitical aims.⁴⁷ The operations in Syria have been attributed by critics to narrowly anti-PKK motives or even a goal of ethnic cleansing.⁴⁸ Such polemical attacks ignore the actual motives detectible in discussions among Turkish officials, policy analysts, and the public, which focus on the intertwined issues of terror and the flow of refugees and migrants. Erdoğan's government has concluded that proactive application of hard power to secure borders and stabilize neighboring regions on terms acceptable to Ankara forms an integral part of effective border and migrant management, a position with broad public support.

The evolution of Turkish policy toward spiking migration over the past decade thus has had four overlapping layers: emergency relief, harmonization, regional diplomacy, and securitization that all played a leading role at various times. None has proven singularly effective, but in combination they have proved more effective than the Turkish toolkit circa 2011. The Turkish public has not been impressed with either the speed or sufficiency of the response, and President Erdoğan's flagging approval ratings can be attributed in large measure to popular dissatisfaction over refugees (in addition to economic problems and slow response to wildfires).⁴⁹ The nature of the policy challenge may have shifted from critical to chronic but likely will remain a key shaper of Turkish domestic politics and regional strategy in the coming decade.

Longer-Term Challenges

Given the stated intention of many migrants to stay, Ankara faces an enduring integration challenge whether it effectively limits new arrivals or not. Turkey will certainly become more ethnically diverse. Three percent of Turkish citizens (around 2.5 million) identify as ethnically Arab, according to 2018 polling; if half of the four million Arab refugees and migrants remain for the long term, and maintain relatively high birth rates, this portends at least a doubling to 6 percent of the total population.⁵⁰ Turkey meanwhile faces continued integration issues with portions of its Kurdish population, which totals roughly 16 percent of the population by the same polling data.

New arrivals require health care, education, and social services, unduly burdening Turkey's social safety net. There will be competition for lower-wage jobs likely to be filled by immigrants, putting some Turks out of jobs or potentially driving down wages.⁵¹ Integrating millions of new arrivals with only domestic resources exceeds Turkey's capabilities, according to Turkish experts, yet international support has been halting and partial. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Turkey operations budget as of June 2021 was requested at roughly \$350 million but only \$82 million (23 percent) was received. The EU has provided roughly 4.1 billion euros of the 6 billion promised.⁵²

Ankara faces a mounting problem of popular antipathy toward Syrians, related to, yet distinct from, popular disapproval of Erdoğan's handling of the refugee and migrant crisis



as a matter of political performance. A 2020 study by the Turkish-German University found that Turkish public opinion has soured on the Syrians: among respondents, 82 percent feel no cultural commonality with Syrians, 74 percent believe public services will suffer because of them, and 72 percent think Syrian refugees will harm Turkey's sociocultural harmony. A majority of the Syrians in Turkey, on the other hand, feel grateful rather than discriminated against in Turkey. Turkish attitudes may soften over time, or Syrians may develop a new desire to return to Assad's Syria; otherwise, the need for conscious and robust integration approaches will only grow.⁵³

Another potential problem for Turkey is that long-term refugee populations can be vulnerable to radicalization and terror recruitment. A study by the RAND Corporation found that refugee populations who faced severe loss of personal opportunity, official repression or popular abuse, unmonitored militant organizing, and a lack of integrating programs were most likely to experience radicalization.⁵⁴ Syrians in Turkey who live in cities rather than camps participate in the economic and social life of the country and suffer from few of RAND's risk factors, but absent effective integration, the risks could begin to rise. Turkey has Salafist networks that have spawned underground support for and recruitment by al-Qaeda and ISIS in the past, especially from 2011 to 2015.⁵⁵ From 2016 on, Turkey effectively targeted and suppressed ISIS at home and in northern Syria, but latent risk and clandestine presence remain.⁵⁶ The reasonably favorable conditions for Syrians in Turkey, coupled with the effective counter-ISIS campaigns in Turkey and along its borders, reduce but do not remove radicalization risks.

Integration of millions of the newcomers involves an ideational challenge, though not an insuperable one. The line between Turkish and non-Turkish identities has traditionally been a permeable barrier, both in Ottoman times and in the republican era. The Ottomans recognized all Muslims as members of a common national group, or millet, within the Empire. Atatürk and his successors considered Muslims from neighboring regions, including Kurds, Arabs, and Balkan Muslims, as assimilable if they learned Turkish and embraced citizenship in the Turkish Republic.⁵⁷ On the other hand, the assimilative process has been fairly harsh, and premised on a rigid type of civic nationalism that subordinates, rather than blends, other ethno-cultural identities within the Turkish national identity.⁵⁸ Turkey's concept of national identity combines civic, ancestral, and cultural dimensions but has never functioned in an entirely evenhanded manner.⁵⁹ This has exacerbated tensions with parts of Turkey's Kurdish population and might do so with portions of the growing Arab population, if integration is not carefully handled.

Finally, Turkey shares with Europe a vulnerability to the strategic manipulation of migration as a tool of unconventional warfare. States and substate actors relatively unconcerned by the reputational or human costs of forced migration—and who view the costs of possible retribution as acceptable—have proven willing and able to cause, exacerbate, and instrumentalize migrant or refugee flows.⁶⁰ Senior NATO officials have asserted that Russia

and the Assad regime did exactly that in 2016: mindful of political vulnerability in Europe and Turkey over the increasing burden of hosting long-term migrants, they bombed civilian population centers to cause mass exodus in order to spread instability, rid themselves of excess or politically unreliable populations, and pressure receiving states. Criminals and political extremists benefit from such flows as well.⁶¹ Ankara undoubtedly operates with the geopolitical instrumentalization of migration as a known threat.

Potential Longer-Term Upside

Over the long term, increased migration flows and a pool of potentially integrable new arrivals need not be only a burden or a threat. There are potential upsides and opportunities. To begin with, Turkey is going through a demographic transition involving decreasing mortality and decreasing births. The population has been forecast to peak in 2050, with attendant rise in the average age of the population, and to decrease thereafter. While the problem of an aging and then shrinking workforce is less immediate for Turkey than for most European countries, the economic and social impacts are real.⁶² If effectively integrated, an additional several million young migrants with higher average birth rates can help Turkey manage the back end of demographic transition after 2050. Policies to support working women and families take time and political will to enact and to take effect; southern European countries did not do so in a timely manner, and several have entered demographic decline as a result.⁶³

Turkey currently enjoys a window of demographic opportunity: with an aging but relatively young population, a strong entrepreneurial and innovative class, an educated and digitally savvy population, and a resilient economy, the tools for integrating disadvantaged population segments and addressing socioeconomic challenges are in place. If Turkish policy responds by using technology and social programs to better integrate marginalized groups—including Syrian and other immigrants—they can help offset looming pressure on retirement, health care, and elderly care that comes with an aging society. Repatriating a large pool of potential contributors to economic dynamism and social support programs, or leaving them poorly integrated, would constitute a tragically missed opportunity.⁶⁴

Turkey has an opportunity to offset the loss of some of its own “best and brightest” by being a welcoming haven to the best and brightest from Africa, the Middle East, and Eurasia. The Turkish political opposition highlights increased emigration of Western-leaning young professionals and millionaires as a “brain drain” with foreboding long-term consequences. It is easy to exaggerate both the scope of such out-migration and the role of hopelessness about the future of Turkey under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) as a driver.⁶⁵ In fact, Turkey remains a country of great innovation and intellectual dynamism, so the brain drain effect can easily be exaggerated. Turkish start-up tech companies are attracting significant attention, while defense industries and engineering have made significant leaps in the past decade as well.⁶⁶ Turkey remains a strong STEM education country and



an attractive investment opportunity. In any case, the possible contributions of young, ambitious migrants have fueled innovation and development in the United States, and they may do the same for Turkey.

The integration of new arrivals comports with Turkish strategic thought of the past two decades. Turkey under the AKP has adopted a “geocultural” approach to regional strategy, as reflected in (but predating) Ahmet Davutoğlu’s “strategic depth” doctrine.⁶⁷ The geocultural approach holds that historical ties of language, religion, and allegiance are policy tools that can create cooperative opportunities and bonds of trust between states, and that countries or peoples sharing such bonds have a natural advantage over economic or political-military relationships lacking them.⁶⁸ From a geocultural perspective, Turkey can leverage ancient affinities to secure political, economic, and military cooperation abroad. The mobilization of Indian Muslim (from what is today’s Pakistan) financial and political support to the Turkish War of Independence in the 1920s is an example of how this can work.⁶⁹ Turkish support to and growing strategic ties with formerly Ottoman Balkan countries is a more modern example.⁷⁰ The integration of Syrians, Afghans, Turkic peoples, and Muslims of diverse backgrounds into the Turkish body politic can strengthen this effect by leveraging the constructive role that diasporas can play under the right circumstances.⁷¹ Turkish engagement with and intervention in regional countries is potentially rendered less “alien” or intrusive through such ties of affinity and kinship. In a larger sense, adopting the role of a country that accepts, hosts, and integrates a large number of migrants successfully enhances national normative or “soft” power, conveying the image of responsible power.⁷²

Policy Implications for Turkey and the West

Turkey’s challenges and opportunities with mass migration parallel those of Europe but trail it by a generation. Europe transitioned from being an exporter of labor and population to an importer in the decades after World War II. Popular discontent and social challenges to immigration became prominent in Europe after the end of the Cold War and have accelerated even as Turkey’s backlash has newly emerged. Turkey’s policy must deal with trends echoing the European experience:

- Migrant populations in wealthier countries have increased in recent decades and are likely to continue to grow; as Turkey’s economy grows, it will likely mirror this trend.
- Periodic spurts of mass migration will punctuate the steady flow from developing to wealthy countries, placing a premium on effective control of arrivals and entry as well as procedures for asylum, resettlement, and return.
- Labor migration is declining as a driver of total arrivals, while family reunification and humanitarian migration has increased. This creates a need for additional measures to integrate migrants into the labor force.

- Migration will play a significant role in shaping the structure, as well as the size, of national populations, creating challenges to social cohesion and identity that require policy remedy.⁷³

Turkey must address each of the dynamics outlined above with appropriate policy adaptation, but in each case it has the tools to do so. The country has recently gone through the process of absorbing a surge in migrants, dealing with them humanely, and enabling their access to work and education. It has taken steps to enhance physical border security and enforcement of immigration laws within the country. It has experienced some social tensions stemming from a large refugee population, but these are balanced by success stories as well.⁷⁴ Through refinement of the four layers identified earlier (emergency response, harmonization, regional diplomacy, securitization) and enhancement of existing integration programs, the migrant flow will be kept to manageable proportions, and existing migrant stock will become an asset rather than a burden over time. President Erdoğan and other Turkish leaders—including the opposition CHP (Republican People’s Party), which has used migrants and refugees as a rhetorical cudgel against the AKP government—must also do a better job of preparing the Turkish public for long-term integration.

The sine qua non for successful adaptation is a stable and growing Turkish economy, one that preserves opportunities for refugees and migrants without damaging opportunities for Turkish workers. Europe and the United States have incentives to see this happen, both for the well-being of Turkey as a NATO ally and EU partner and to prevent massive new waves of migrants from passing through (or bypassing) Turkey to get to Europe. What can the West do to ensure that Turkey passes its test and protects Europe to mutual benefit?

President Biden could exert practical and moral leadership by pressing Europe to fulfill its promise of direct aid to refugee and migrant communities in Turkey and other host countries, but also by pursuing trade facilitation that benefits both the hosts and the hosted. Specifically, in the case of Turkey, the EU and the United States should invest in and import from industries in Turkey that employ migrants. A significant commitment to partner with Turkish businesses and provide favorable trade terms for their products will help defray the economic impact of hosting and decrease the incentive for onward migration. Specific commitments from Western governments to purchase goods from Turkey in quantity from industries that employ refugees can reduce the dependency of those refugees and reduce their burden on public resources.⁷⁵ The combination of direct aid from Europe, raising the current very strict limits on migration to the West, and trade facilitation to improve economic conditions and prospects in the hosting countries together can be effective but require greater coordination and US leadership. The November 2021 summit of the World Trade Organization would be a great place for the Biden administration to put a proposal on the table.⁷⁶ For its part, Europe must reconcile the current contradictory position of keeping the door largely shut to new migrants but fulfilling aid commitments



only slowly and partially, and calling for migrants and refugees to stay in Turkey while doing little or nothing to support them doing so.

Conclusion

The migrant surge in, around, and through Turkey over the past decade has been portrayed primarily as a humanitarian emergency, but sustained migrant flows appear to be a durable element of the twenty-first-century international system. For Ankara, this presents both costs and opportunities. Turkey has the tools and traditions to deal with integration successfully and has applied a four-track policy that presents opportunities to strengthen its society and economy. With the mass migration of the past decade ending, and with a more sophisticated and layered policy in place, Turkey is positioned to gradually turn the new arrivals into a strategic asset—but still faces a near-term crisis.

Europe and the United States should recognize that the challenge is not Turkey's alone. There are two parallel problems: political unrest driven by migration, and managing collaboration. Erdoğan faces a political revolt from his own base as well as from opposition parties on permissive refugee and migrant policies, as do European and American political leaders increasingly as well.⁷⁷ How Erdoğan balances a traditionally permissive stance on refugees and migrants with an increasingly damaging political backlash may be instructive for those with similar problems. The experience of Europeans and Turks in collaboration through the partially successful 2016 migrant deal can also be instructive for US policy makers working on the “stay-in-Mexico” deal and other measures to produce a more sustainable flow of migrants.⁷⁸

By pursuing aid and development policies that spread the cost of integration, the West can ensure that Turkey's success is a shared one. It can also build down the threats of impoverishment, further unregulated surges of migration, beggar-thy-neighbor contests across the Mediterranean basin, and radicalization that might ensue should integration fail. This would serve common interests and perhaps blunt rising anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, in Europe, and in the United States.

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