

ASYLUM AND REFUGEES

by ICMPD Turkey

1. Introduction

Turkey is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, but maintains a geographical limitation to the Convention. Due to this geographical limitation to the definition of a refugee, Turkey considers Syrians as temporary protection status holders and other non-European nationalities as international protection status holders. Besides providing temporary protection status to Syrian, Turkey thus retains resettlement to a third country as the most preferred solution for refugees arriving due to events occurring outside of Europe. The Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), established in 2014, is the sole authority responsible for the registration, asylum adjudication and migration management in Turkey.

2. Turkey and the Region

In 2020, Turkey continued to host the largest number of refugees in the world, while Syria remains as the country that produced the most refugees in 2020.

According to official statistics, in 2020 Turkey continued to host 3.6 million registered Syrians under temporary protection¹ (SuTP) and close to 56,417 international protection applicants of other nationalities, notably nationals of Afghanistan, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Iraq.² As 73 % of migrating refugees either go to developing or neighbouring countries per UNHCR data³, Turkey is both a destination safe country and a transit country for many asylum seekers and refugees coming from the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

The provision of asylum and protection services to Syrians continued to put a significant strain on the neighbouring countries, most notably Turkey, trying to address the multifarious legal, protection, durable solution needs of very high numbers of refugees. The negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has been visible in Turkey. Turkey had to work in restricted capacity for registration, refugee status determination and resettlement operations from April till August 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic is expected to increase migration to Turkey and neighbouring countries in 2021 due to the existence of better public health services and opportunities.

Whilst the international community continues to assist Syrian refugee hosting countries in responsibility sharing, the resources allocated are limited. Yet due to the Covid-19 pandemic and aversion of a new migration crisis in March 2020, in addition to the ongoing projects

¹ Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, data available as of 23 December 2020, statistics on Syrian refugees <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

² Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management,, data available as of early 2020, statistics on other nationalities, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/uluslararasi-koruma-istatistikler#>

³ UNHCR, 18 June 2020, Figures at a Glance, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

funded by the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey the EU has allocated additional €531.7 million in humanitarian funding in 2020. €485 million of it will be spent on extending the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) and Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) projects supporting Syrian refugees until 2022.⁴

March 2021 will mark the tenth anniversary of the conflict in Syria. The Syria Crisis remains the largest displacement crisis in the world, with over 6.6 million persons internally displaced in Syria and over 5.6 million registered refugees in neighbouring countries who fled for their safety.⁵ As of end of December 2020 there are 5,574,088 registered Syrians abroad, residing in Turkey (3,641,370), Lebanon (865,531), Jordan (662,790), Iraq (242,163), and Egypt (130,577) and in other Northern African countries (31,657).⁶ Almost a decade after the surge of the crisis in Syria, there has not been a marked improvement in the security situation in the country. Multiple actors, including the regime in Syria, Russia, Iran, Turkey, as well as multifactorial rebel armed forces in Syria continue to have an impact on the security and military situation in Turkey, while the US maintains limited presence inside Syria following its decision to withdraw from northern Syria in October 2019. While temporary peace agreements have been established in restricted zones of Syria, over the same period in 2020 displacement crisis have cyclically increased. According to the Response Coordination Group 700,000 civilians fled their homes to relatively safer areas near the Turkish border between January and March, following the attempts of the regime in Syria to consolidate its control around Idlib. Some residents were able to return to their homes in Idlib, after a ceasefire was brokered by Russia and Turkey.

Turkey continued its military mobilization, with Operation Spring Shield launched end of February 2020, to create a safe zone in northern Syria, where some number of SuTP can be resettled from Turkey through voluntary return.

While efforts for a political solution to the country's civil war continued in 2020, with the Syrian Constitutional Committee holding meetings regularly, the fourth and the latest of which took place between November 30 to December 4, the process has so far not delivered any concrete results and is not expected to lead to a breakthrough in 2021.

3. Trends in 2020

Temporary Protection

As of 31 December 2020, Turkish authorities recorded a total of 3,641,370 SuTP. This represents a 1.81% increase since 2019⁷. However due to Covid-19 and de-facto interruption of registration services between March and August 2020 there may be more arrivals who could not yet be registered. There is a backlog of registration cases, thus the initial figures of

⁴ EU Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, https://ec.europa.eu/echo/where/europe/turkey_en#:~:text=In%20addition%20to%20ongoing%20projects,in%20Turkey%20until%20early%202022.

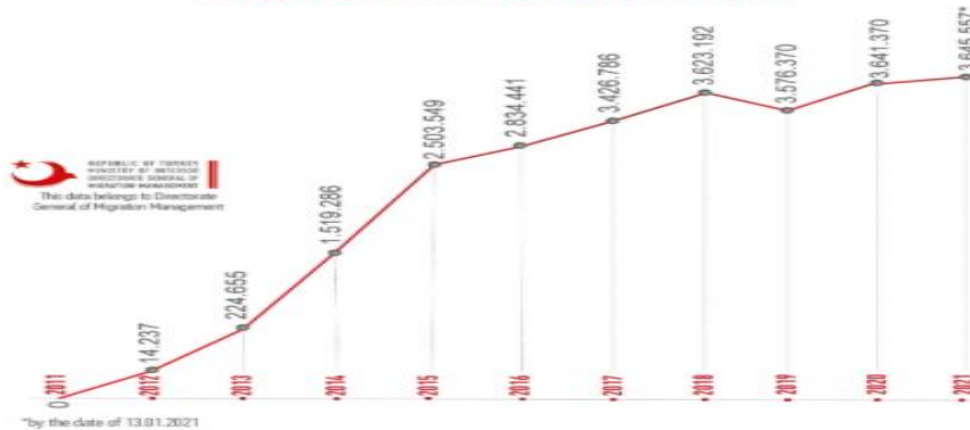
⁵ UNHCR, Syria Emergency, please see <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

⁶ UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

⁷ <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

incoming Syrians to Turkey in 2020 are expected to be higher. Only 58,782 of SuTP in Turkey live in camps, whereas the vast majority live in urban areas integrated with the local population. While

DISTRIBUTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE SCOPE OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION BY YEAR



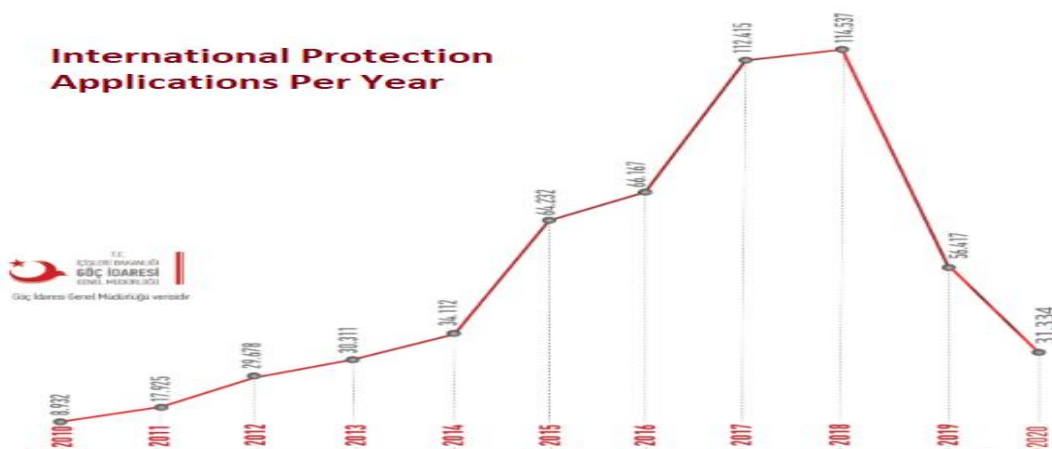
Istanbul, Gaziantep and Hatay host the largest Syrian refugee population; Kilis (73.91%) Hatay (26.6%), Gaziantep (21.72%) top the list of provinces hosting the largest refugee population as a percentage of the total population of the province.

Source: DGMM, Turkey

In view of the vast spread of Covid-19, deteriorating public health and economic situation (culminating in the collapse of the Syrian pound in June 2020) in Syria due to the Covid-19 pandemic and sanctions risk further exacerbating the humanitarian situation in parts of Syria and may trigger fresh migratory movements towards Turkey in 2021.

International Protection

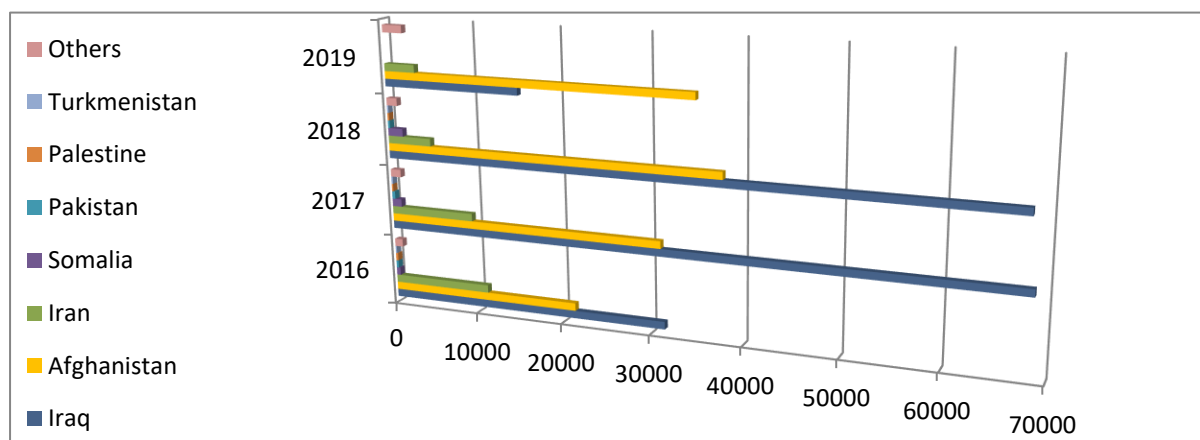
International Protection Applications Per Year



Source: DGMM, Turkey

According to the DGMM, a total of 31,334 new international protection applications were processed in 2020, which is a stark contrast to the figure of 56,417 applications in 2019 due to Covid-19 restrictions.⁸ The annual trends also indicate a sharp decline in international protection applications in 2019, compared to previous years.

A breakdown by nationality of international protection applicants over the years reveal that Iraqis have topped the list in recent years until 2019 when Afghans have taken over.

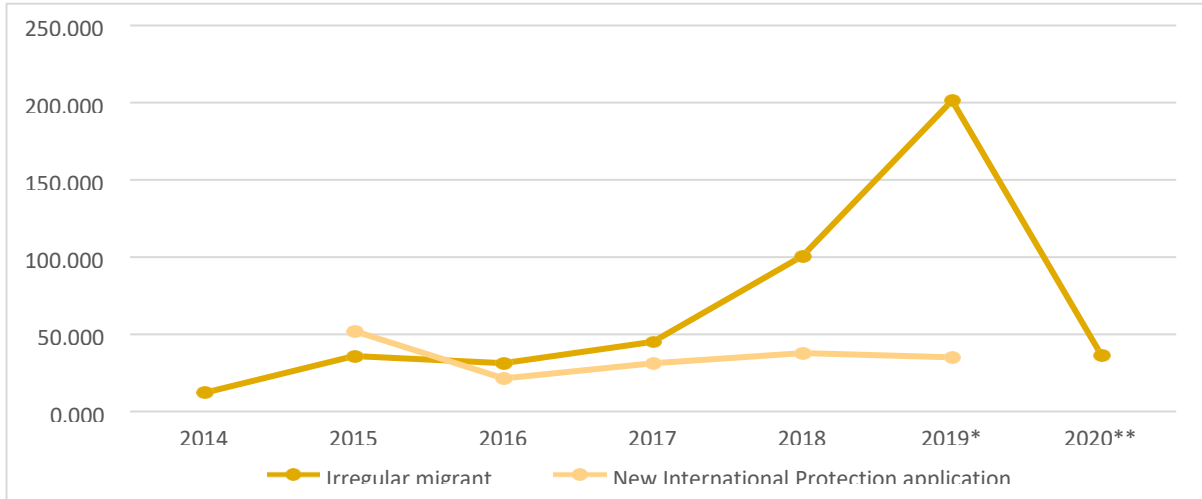


Source: DGMM, Turkey

Turkey witnessed a substantial increase in the number of Afghans entering the country through irregular routes in recent years. While, the number of irregular Afghan intercepted in Turkey reached more than 200,000 people in 2019, double from the previous year; there is not a similar increase in the number of international protection applications by Afghans in Turkey, suggesting problems in registration or that many Afghans consider Turkey as a country of transit, en route to Europe.

⁸ Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, International Protection Statistics, data available as of early 2020, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/uluslararasi-koruma-istatistikler>

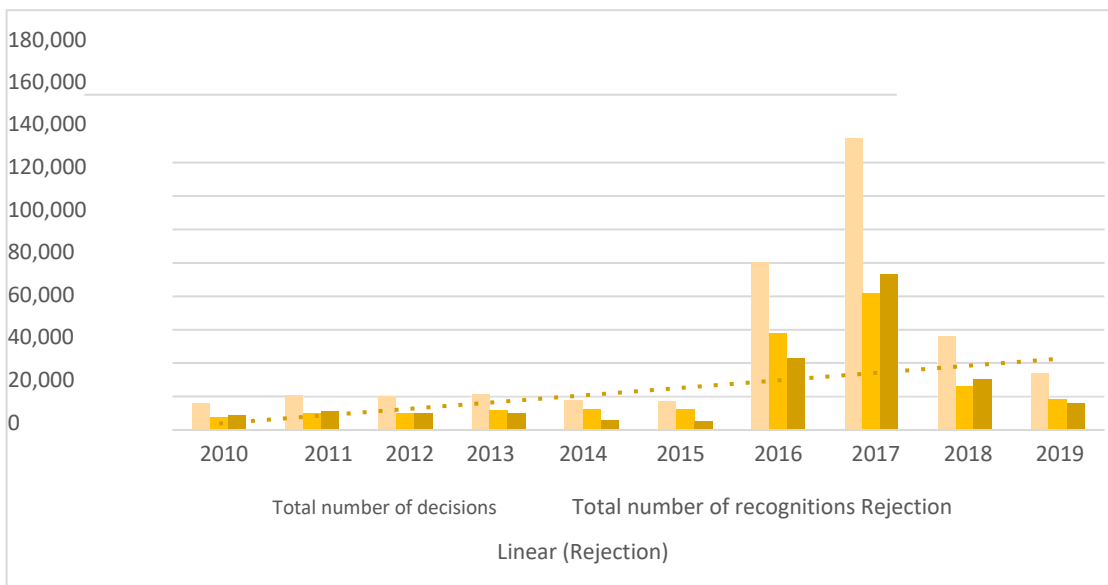
Irregular Afghan Migrants and New International Protection Applications by Afghans by Year in Turkey



Source: DGMM, Turkey

Meanwhile, while the applications for asylum in the European Union have increased, the number of rejected applications have also increased. The general trend suggests that there may not be a substantial change in the asylum recognition rates regarding international protection applications to the EU countries. Therefore, this may result in that higher numbers of Afghans, who wish to travel to the EU through Turkey, staying in Turkey for longer in the coming years.

Results of Protection Applications made by Afghans in the 27 Member States of the EU between 2010 and 2019

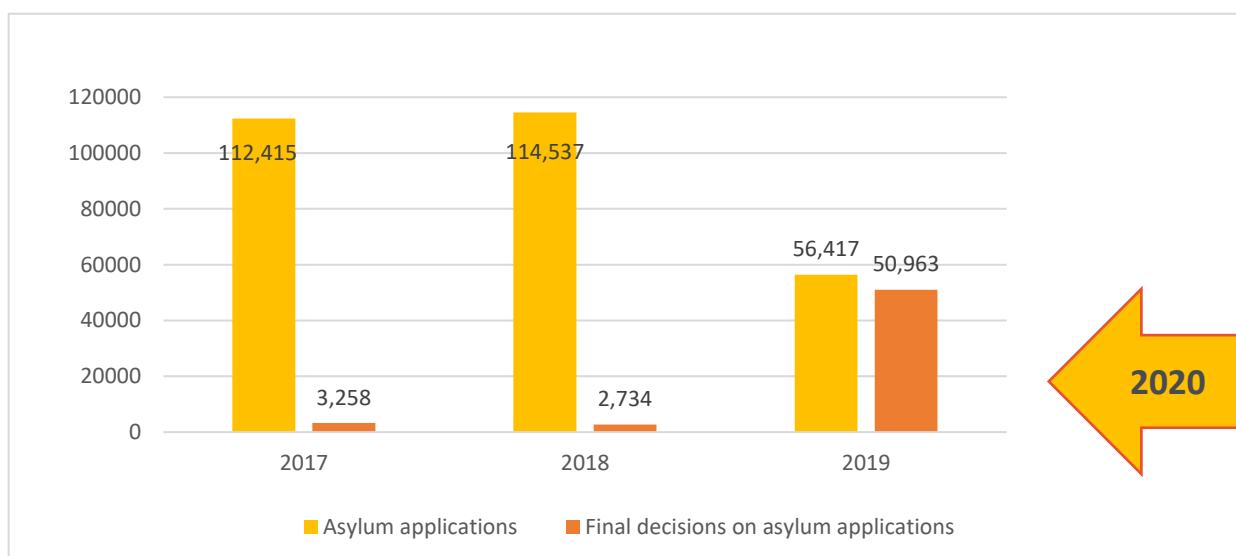


Source: Eurostat, 2020.

4. Major Policy Developments

While there continues to be a major backlog in the registration and processing of asylum applications due to Covid-19 related restrictions in the majority of 2020, since August 2020 Turkey stepped up efforts to conclude final decisions. The Provincial Directorates of Migration Management, and International Protection Bureaus in Ankara and Istanbul have been fully functional in the fourth quarter of 2020. This increased the registration and refugee status determination rates. Moreover, UNHCR supported resettlement interviews resumed by August 2020 via online interviews.

Yearly asylum applications and decisions in Turkey (non-Syrians)



In late February and early March 2020, Turkey maintained not receiving adequate and promised financial aid from the European Union expected from the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement and did not prevent the irregular migrants who wanted to go Greece and Bulgaria.⁹ In response, Greece and Bulgaria shut the borders and caused refugees trying to pass remain in limbo.¹⁰ During the February-March 2020 border crisis, both Turkey and Greece claimed violations of fundamental human rights and refugee rights on the other side of the border.¹¹ ¹² The continuation of the EU-Turkey Statement is of crucial importance for both parties. EU authorities, including European Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen, pledged to

⁹ The Guardian, 28 February 2020, 'Greece and Bulgaria crack down on Turkish borders as refugees arrive', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/28/tensions-rise-between-turkey-and-russia-after-killing-of-troops-in-syria>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Amnesty International, 05 March 2020, 'Explained: The Situation at Greek Borders', <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/greece-turkey-refugees-explainer/>

¹² DW, 02 May 2020, 'Refugees Pushed From Both Sides of the Turkey EU Border', <https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-pushed-from-both-sides-of-the-turkey-eu-border/av-52645081>

continue working with Turkey to prevent renewed tensions at the shared borders.¹³ The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum announced in September 2020 also affirms the EU's commitment to assist countries hosting large refugee populations, including Turkey, and to enhance collaboration on migration management between Turkey and the EU.¹⁴ In 2021, Turkey is expected to press on for additional support by the EU on asylum management.

While Turkey has been undertaking major efforts for social integration of Syrian refugees, there is a tendency to support voluntary returns to the safe zone in Syria. Although politically very sensitive, provision of citizenship to eligible Syrians have also been on the agenda on and off. In December 2019 President Erdoğan proclaimed that some 110,000 refugees were naturalized into Turkish citizenship, and that the government planned on provision of citizenship to many more Syrians as a method of migration management.¹⁵ The Turkish government authorities and President Erdogan also declared that the entire Syrian refugee population in Turkey would not be naturalized¹⁶, and that about a million of Syrians are expected to return and reintegrate to northern Syria once a safe zone is established.¹⁷ According to the Turkish Ministry of Interior (MoI) a total of 419,040 Syrians returned to their home country by December 2020.¹⁸

5. Conclusions

In 2021, Turkey and Syria will continue to be migration hotspots due to the sheer number of refugees in Turkey and IDPs in Syria, albeit continued conflict in Syria and deterioration of the socio-economic conditions across the region due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Migrations trends to watch will include further attempts by Turkey to consolidate a safe zone in northern Syria, which could facilitate (limited) returns. Relations between the EU and Turkey, and prospects of a revised EU-Turkey Statement (on asylum and migration) will have a direct bearing on the stability of the situation on the Turkish-Greek border. Both sides have an interest in enhanced assistance for refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey. At the same time, Turkey will have to start seriously assess the future of the SuTPs in Turkey and to reflect upon possible durable solutions in 2021, as the country has reached its absorption capacity for refugees and given the protracted residence of Syrians in Turkey.

¹³ Financial Times, 10 March 2020, 'EU leaders pledge to work with Turkey to revive migration deal', <https://www.ft.com/content/8d871bdc-61ff-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

¹⁴ European Commission, 30 September 2020, 'New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Questions and Answers', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1707

¹⁵ Yeni Cag, "Erdoğan'ın Suriyelilere Vatandaşlık Açıklaması", <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/erdoganin-suriyelilere-vatandaslik-aciklamasi-260307h.htm>, December 2019 (in Turkish)

¹⁶ T24, "Suleyman Soylu: Bugune Kadar 76 bin 444 Suriyeliye Vatandaslik Verdik", <https://t24.com.tr/haber/suleyman-soylu-bu-gune-kadar-76-bin-443-suriyeliye-vatandaslik-verdik,791996>, January 2019 (In Turkish)

¹⁷ The Guardian, "Erdogan Proposes Safe Zone for Refugees in Syria", <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/24/erdogan-proposes-plan-for-refugee-safe-zone-in-syria>, September 2019

¹⁸ Birgun Website: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/icisleri-bakanligi-kayitli-suriyeli-sayisi-3-milyon-638-bin-288-325431>.

6. Things to Look Out for in 2021

- 2021 could witness a further increase in the numbers of forcibly displaced in the region, over continued prevalence of conflicts and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Given the already very high numbers of Syrians under temporary protection and international protection applicants of other nationalities Turkey is hosting, Turkey might be forced to focus its efforts more on durable solutions, and apply those solutions in a complementary manner, including integration, assisted voluntary return and resettlement when possible. Support by the EU and the international community will be ever-more important.
- Turkey can be expected to step up its push for increased EU assistance for refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey and for the EU to speed up and further increase resettlements from Turkey. With a new administration in the US promising more favorable policies for asylum seekers and refugees, resettlement quotas for the US are expected to increase. Turkey will also try to benefit from this improvement in quotas.

References

Amnesty International, 05 March 2020 Explained: The Situation at Greek Borders, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/03/greece-turkey-refugees-explainer/>

Amnesty International, 14 November 2020, 'Syria: Lack of adequate COVID-19 response puts thousands of lives at risk', <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-lack-adequate-covid-19-response-puts-thousands-lives-risk>

BBC, 28 February 2020, 'Syria war: Alarm after 33 Turkish soldiers killed in attack in Idlib', <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51667717>

DW, 17 March 2020, EU Turkey Migrant Deal Still Intact Germany's Merkel Says, <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-turkey-migrant-deal-still-intact-germanys-merkel-says/a-52805142>

DW, 02 May 2020, 'Refugees Pushed From Both Sides of the Turkey EU Border', <https://www.dw.com/en/refugees-pushed-from-both-sides-of-the-turkey-eu-border/av-52645081>

European Commission, 30 September 2020, 'New Pact on Migration and Asylum: Questions and Answers', https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/qanda_20_1707

Financial Times, 10 March 2020, #EU leaders pledge to work with Turkey to revive migration deal', <https://www.ft.com/content/8d871bdc-61ff-11ea-b3f3-fe4680ea68b5>

International Displacement Monitoring Centre, Syria Profile, please see <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/syria>

International Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2020 Mid-Year Figures, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/mid-year-figures>

The Guardian, 28 February 2020, 'Greece and Bulgaria crack down on Turkish borders as refugees arrive', <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/28/tensions-rise-between-turkey-and-russia-after-killing-of-troops-in-syria>

The Guardian, September 2019, "Erdogan Proposes Safe Zone for Refugees in Syria, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/24/erdogan-proposes-plan-for-refugee-safe-zone-in-syria>

T24, January 2019, (In Turkish) “Suleyman Soylu: Bugune Kadar 76 bin 444 Suriyeliye Vatandaslik Verdik”, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/suleyman-soylu-bu-gune-kadar-76-bin-443-suriyeliye-vatandaslik-verdik,791996>

Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management,, data available as of early 2020, statistics on other nationalities, <https://www.goc.gov.tr/uluslararasi-koruma-istatistikler#>

Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management, data available as of 11 November 2020, statistics on Syrian refugees <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>

UNHCR, 18 June 2020, Figures at a Glance, <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

UNHCR, Syria Emergency, please see <https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>

UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response, <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>
Yeni Cag, December 2019, (in Turkish) “Erdogan’in Suriyelilere Vatandaslik Aciklamasi’”, <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/erdoganin-suriyelilere-vatandaslik-aciklamasi-260307h.htm>,

Contact Information

For more information, please contact:

Ms Sila Sönmez

WB&TR Regional Coordination Office

International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) / Ankara Office

Eskişehir Yolu Armada İş Merkezi, No:6,

A Blok, Kat:16, Kapı No: 25

Yenimahalle/Ankara

TURKEY

Tel: +90 312 219 03 00

Fax: +90 312 219 03 01

Email: Sila.Sonmez@icmpd.org

ICMPD 2021. All rights reserved. Short sections, not to exceed two paragraphs, may be quoted in the original language without explicit permission provided that the source is acknowledged. Opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) alone.