

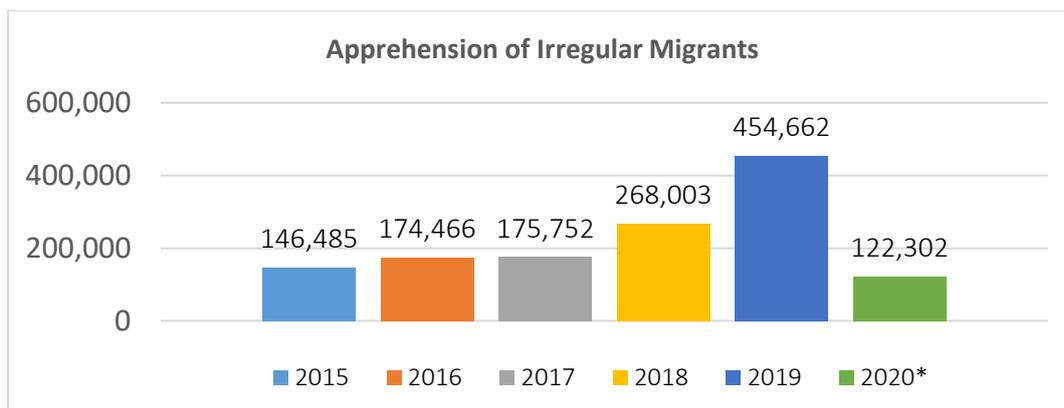
IRREGULAR MIGRATION

by ICMPD Turkey

1. Trends in 2020

Turkey has long been a transit route for irregular migrants aiming to cross to Europe, due to its geographical location. This has changed in recent years, notably with the onset of the conflict in Syria and the subsequent influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey but also due to a rapid increase in the flow of irregular migrants from other countries in the wider neighbourhood, with Turkey having become a country of destination. According to the available statistics from the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), as of December 2020, there are more than 4.5 million foreign nationals present in Turkey, of which 3.64 million are Syrian nationals, who have been granted temporary protection in Turkey.¹ In 2020, the number of people seeking international protection stood at 31,334.²

In 2020, there was a discernible decrease in the detection of illegal border-crossings in Turkey, due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of irregular migrants apprehended by Turkish authorities stood at 122,302 as of end of December 2020. This indicates a decrease of almost 74% in comparison to 2019.³ In 2019, the number of apprehended irregular migrants was 454,662, having rapidly gone up from 58,647 in 2014 to 268,003 in 2018. Given the bleak outlook in the main countries of origin, exacerbated by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, immigration from these countries to Turkey is likely to continue in 2021 and could easily return or surpass pre-pandemic levels once current restrictions to mobility are removed.



Source: DGMM, Turkey

¹ DTM Migrant Presence Monitoring – Situation Report (November 2020); https://displacement.iom.int/system/tdf/reports/Turkey_Sitrep_11_nov_20.pdf?file=1&type=node&id=10297 , p.1.

² T.C.İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü Website: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/uluslararası-koruma-istatistikler>

³ T.C.İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü Website: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikler>

A break-down by nationality reveals that while there was a decrease in the detection of all nationalities in 2020, the overall decrease mainly stems from Afghan nationals, who constitute the largest group of new arrivals, whose number of detections fell by 75%. Afghans, Syrians and Pakistanis continued to top the list of irregular migrants apprehended in Turkey in 2020. These were followed by nationals of Iran, Iraq, Palestine and Georgia. As of end of December 2020, a total of 50,161 Afghan, 17,562 Syrian, 13,487 Pakistani, 3,562 Iranian, 3,836 Iraqi, 2,059 Palestinian and 1,070 Georgian nationals were apprehended in Turkey.⁴

Irregular Migrants Apprehended in Turkey by Nationality

| |  IRAQ |  AFGHANISTAN |  PAKISTAN |  SYRIA |  MOLDOVA |  PALESTINE |  MYANMAR |  GEORGIA |  IRAN |  OTHERS |
|------------|--|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|
| 2014 | 1.728 | 12.248 | 2.350 | 24.984 | 101 | 508 | 6.425 | 1.519 | 626 | 8.158 |
| 2015 | 7.247 | 35.921 | 3.792 | 73.422 | 261 | 615 | 5.464 | 2.857 | 1.978 | 14.928 |
| 2016 | 30.947 | 31.360 | 19.317 | 69.755 | 256 | 365 | 1.169 | 2.679 | 1.817 | 16.801 |
| 2017 | 18.488 | 45.259 | 30.337 | 50.217 | 308 | 832 | 374 | 2.954 | 2.707 | 24.276 |
| 2018 | 17.629 | 100.841 | 50.438 | 34.053 | 269 | 10.545 | 378 | 3.153 | 4.066 | 46.631 |
| 2019 | 12.097 | 201.437 | 71.645 | 55.236 | 204 | 12.210 | 296 | 2.171 | 8.753 | 90.613 |
| 2020 | 3.836 | 50.161 | 13.487 | 17.562 | 126 | 2.059 | 104 | 1.070 | 3.562 | 30.335 |
| 13.01.2021 | 98 | 1.042 | 257 | 406 | 2 | 32 | 0 | 13 | 51 | 732 |

Source: DGMM, Turkey

In 2020, the Eastern Mediterranean route continued to be the main route taken by migrants and refugees who try to reach Europe. Due to its strategic geographical location, the province of Edirne remained a popular transit point for refugees heading to the EU. Also, the province of Izmir, hence the Aegean Sea, continued to be the main point of exit for those who tried to reach Greece by sea.⁵

According to the Turkish Coast Guard (TCG), in 2020 a total of 20,380 irregular migrants were apprehended at sea, with 37 fatalities registered. In 2019, this number was far higher with 61,028 and 34 registered fatalities at sea, while in 2018 the number stood at 26,678.⁶ The Turkish Armed Forces' (TAF), on the other hand, reported a total of 216,760 illegal crossings detected (persons apprehended) at land borders in 2019.

In tandem with these dynamics, in 2020 there was also a sharp decline in irregular crossings from Turkey to Europe. According to UNHCR, in the course of 2019, Greece registered 59,726

⁴ T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü Website: <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikleri>

⁵ IOM Turkey Mediterranean and Land Border Crisis Response Plan 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Turkey%20Mediterranean%20and%20Land%20Border%20Crisis%20Response%20Plan%202020.pdf>, p.1.

⁶ T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Sahil Güvenlik Komutanlığı Website: <https://www.sg.gov.tr/duzensiz-goc-istatistikleri>

sea arrivals and 14,887 land arrivals. In 2020, this number decreased to 9,687 sea arrivals and 5,982 land arrivals in 2020.⁷

According to recent figures on resettlement, a total of 3,867 refugees departed from Turkey to 15 different countries for resettlement as of end of November 2020. 78% of the resettled persons were Syrian nationals.⁸ Furthermore, the Turkish Ministry of Interior (MoI) has declared that 419,040 Syrians returned to their home country by December 2020.⁹

2. Major Policy Developments

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic put on hold Turkey's efforts at strengthening relations with main countries of origin. Only a few migration dialogues with countries of origins could be held. There was however major progress on the establishment of a National Assisted Voluntary Return (N-AVR) system to promote higher number of returns (including more voluntary returns in place of forced returns) of irregular migrant to their countries of origin. On 2 September 2020, a N-AVR Cooperation Protocol was signed among the national stakeholders; namely the DGMM, the Turkish Red Crescent (TÜRK KIZILAY), the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The protocol lays down the general framework for cooperation between key national partners regarding the establishment of N-AVR system in Turkey. With the expected adoption of a dedicated regulation in early 2021, the national regulatory framework for AVR would be complete.

When fully operational, facilitation of dignified return of irregular migrant through the N-AVR would be a major milestone for migration management in Turkey. The current return rates (including both forced and voluntary returns) remain minimal in comparison to the actual number of apprehended irregular migrants. Turkey carried out 56,000 returns in 2018 and 103,093 in 2019; while in 2020, the unofficial numbers stood around 15,000 as returns were halted due to restrictions to mobility imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is crucial that Turkey steps up return operations in the post-Covid period by strengthening its return policies and capacities.

3. Conclusions and Outlook for 2021

The global Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected migration mobility in 2020. For the first time in years, Turkey registered a decline in apprehension of irregular migrants on land and sea, which has also led to a decrease in the land and sea arrivals in Greece. With the full or partial continuation of lockdowns and strict border measures introduced as a result of the

⁷ UNHCR Operational Data Portal Website: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5179>

⁸ UNHCR Turkey Operational Update November 2020; <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/12/UNHCR-Turkey-Operational-Update-November-FINAL.pdf>.

⁹ Birgun Website: <https://www.birgun.net/haber/icisleri-bakanligi-kayitli-suriyeli-sayisi-3-milyon-638-bin-288-325431>.

Covid-19 pandemic into 2021, the number of irregular migrants in Turkey is expected to continue to decrease until there is relative normalization of circumstances stemming from the pandemic. The uncertainty surrounding the evolution of the pandemic, including on when a vaccine will be globally available not only in Turkey but also in its main countries of origin, makes it impossible to predict a date when the influx of irregular migrants, thus migration mobility, will increase again to Turkey.

Nevertheless, it can be expected that as soon as the Covid-19 pandemic is over, there will be a major increase in migrant mobility globally. Given the bleak outlook in the main countries of origin, worsened by the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, forced migration from these countries to Turkey is likely to continue in 2021 and could easily return or surpass pre-pandemic levels once current restrictions to mobility are removed. The main countries of origin for Turkey that were already suffering from geopolitical and economic instability, will continue to be deeply affected by the impact of the pandemic in 2021, this may increase the migratory outflows from those countries post-Covid 19.

Although it is promising that preparations for face-to-face talks have started between the Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban as of September 2020 in Qatar, the outcome of the Afghan peace process remains full of many uncertainties. Recent increase in violence, and further deterioration of the economy and increasing unemployment in the country and its immediate neighbors, worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, increase the likelihood that secondary movements of Afghans, through Iran and Pakistan, to Turkey and the European Union will continue.

It may be also possible that people that have not been considering of emigrating pre-Covid 19, may consider to seek possibilities to live a better life outside their national borders. A post-pandemic scenario in which the number of irregular migrants in Turkey would rapidly surpass the 2019-level, would put a major strain on Turkey, whose capacity to host refugees and manage migration is already stretched to its limits.

In addition, the high number of irregular migrants hosted by Turkey may lead to difficulties as to migration management during and post-Covid 19 in 2021, their special needs and policies such as resettlement. Considering the destructive impact of the pandemic on the national economies worldwide, it can be expected that migration management will not be of top priority, as the economic recovery will constitute a greater urgency. In case the international border closures imposed due to the pandemic continue throughout 2021, this could once again decrease the number of resettlements and cause that migrants and refugees who are willing to leave the country would be stuck in Turkey.

4. Policy Recommendations

- In light of the pre-Covid 19 trend of rapidly increasing irregular migration flows to Turkey, to better manage migration and to avoid possible backlash in a post-Covid 19 scenario, in 2021 Turkey would benefit from developing pro-active policies to combat irregular migration. Addressing the root causes of migratory flows to the country, through actively following developments in main countries of origin, keeping up-to-date information and preparing migration forecasts, is of major importance.
- It is also crucial to further improve bilateral and regional dialogues and cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination for a whole-of-route approach. Turkey is currently conducting ad-hoc dialogues with Afghanistan and Pakistan, for enhanced cooperation to prevent irregular migration and to facilitate returns. It is aimed at further expanding these dialogues and migration cooperation with other countries such as Algeria, Bangladesh, Morocco, Iraq, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.
- In 2020, Turkey has taken further steps to establish a National Assisted Voluntary Return (NAVR) Mechanism. Making return policies more effective remains a priority for Turkey. Turkey needs to further build the capacities of national institutions with a role in NAVR to make voluntary return effective and more attractive for irregular migrants present in Turkey.

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