

# LIMEN

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A girl from the minority Yazidi sect, fleeing the violence of the ISIS in the Iraqi town of Sinjar, rests at the Iraqi-Syrian border in Fishkhabour, Dohuk province August 13, 2014. REUTERS/Youssef Boudlal/File Photo – stock.adobe.com

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# How Strong is Turkey's Refugee Card? Lessons learned from the events of February–March 2020

Nikolett Pézsváltó

## Abstract

The study analyses Turkey's 27 February 2020 decision to open its border with Greece for irregular migrants, as well as subsequent events, in order to answer the question of how strong Turkey's refugee card vis-à-vis the EU is. Turkey played the "migrant card" in February–March 2020, but despite European fears, it did not prove to be a breakthrough. Although the February–March 2020 crisis is over, a recurrence of the events cannot be ruled out. The paper argues that even if the departure of millions of irregular migrants from and via Turkey is not an imminent threat, the EU still has a vast interest in coming to an agreement with Ankara, and in avoiding a series of events similar to those of March 2020. It concludes that both a norm-based and an interest-based approach suggest that the EU needs to keep supporting Turkey in tackling the migration and refugee issue.

**Keywords:** Turkey, European Union, migration, border security, Syrian refugees

## 1. Introduction

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At the end of February 2020, Turkey decided to no longer prevent irregular migrants from entering the European Union. This move can be interpreted as both "blackmail" and a cry for help. The study examines the Turkish border opening of February 2020. First, it introduces the context of the border opening and the factors behind the Turkish decision. Then it analyses the events that took place on the Turkish-Greek border in February–March 2020, and the responses to them from the European Union and Greece. Finally, the paper concludes with an evaluation and outlines further prospects. Based on the experience of the events of February–March 2020, the study attempts to answer the questions of how strong Turkey's refugee card vis-à-vis the EU in fact is, and what policy the EU should pursue toward Turkey in this context.

## 2. Turkey's role in tackling the European migration and refugee crisis

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Turkey hosts the most refugees in the world. According to UN figures, there are more than 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of the Syrians live in the cities, while only about 63,000 of them live in refugee camps.<sup>2</sup> Since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, more than half a million Syrian children have been born in Turkey. About 45% of Syrian refugees living in Turkey are under 18 years old. The number of Syrians is supplemented by an additional approximately 400,000 asylum seekers of other nationalities. According to UN figures, in February 2020 there were 170,000 Afghan, 142,000 Iraqi and 39,000 Iranian asylum seekers in the country.<sup>3</sup>

The situation of Syrians and non-Syrians is different. Syrians are granted so-called temporary protection status, under which they have free access to health care and education, and the principle of non-refoulement is applied to them as well.<sup>4</sup> Non-Syrian asylum-seekers live under more difficult conditions, as they are not covered by the temporary protection regime. Due to their vulnerable position, they are more motivated to leave Turkey toward the European Union. It is one of the reasons why only 23% of the asylum seekers arriving in Greece in 2019 were Syrians.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey is a key transit country, due to its geographical location. A significant proportion of migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa has been trying to reach the EU through Turkey. In 2015, at the peak of the European refugee crisis, 885,386 asylum-seekers arrived in the EU along the Western Balkan route, that is via Turkey.

The member states of the EU have recognized the need for an agreement with Ankara, resulting in the signing of the EU-Turkey Statement in March 2016.<sup>6</sup> Following this agreement, Ankara stepped up its efforts against illegal migration. According to official Turkish figures, in 2019 alone, 8,996 human traffickers and more than 454,000 irregular migrants were apprehended by Turkish authorities (including 201,437 Afghans, 71,645 Pakistanis, 55,236 Syrians, 12,210

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR 2020a.

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR 2020b.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR 2020c. According to unofficial estimates, there are additional hundreds of thousands unregistered migrants in Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> 2014/6883 GEÇİCİ KORUMA YÖNETMELİĞİ 2014.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR 2019.

<sup>6</sup> EU-TURKEY STATEMENT 2016.

Palestinians, 12,097 Iraqis, 8,753 Iranians and 2,171 Georgian nationals).<sup>7</sup> The number of irregular migrants arriving in the EU via Turkey has dropped dramatically since the agreement was reached. While 885,386 asylum-seekers arrived on this route in 2015, it dropped to 182,249 in 2016, and to “only” 42,319 in 2017.<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, however, that the decline in numbers after March 2016 cannot be attributed solely to Turkey’s actions, since other factors and measures have also played a significant role, such as the closure of the Balkan route.

Turkey complied with the EU-Turkey Statement up until 27 February 2020, when it decided to no longer detain irregular migrants trying to cross the Turkey-Greece border into the European Union. Among the reasons, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan named the EU’s failure to keep its promises formulated in the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. Ankara criticizes the slow pace of the disbursement of the promised financial support (the EU mobilized a total of €6 billion by December 2019, but only €3.4 billion has been disbursed), and the lack of free hand in the distribution of the fund (the payments are project-based, and a significant part of the projects is implemented by NGOs and UN agencies, that is the money is not handed directly to the Turkish government). The Member States of the EU have resettled only 26,135 people out of the more than 4 million refugees in Turkey.<sup>9</sup> Besides, Ankara has not got substantially closer to either visa liberalization, the revision of the customs union or to accession to the European Union (even if two new negotiation chapters were opened as a result of the 2016 statement), nor has it received the expected support from its European allies in terms of shaping events in Syria. Although, it must also be seen that the European Union did not make an explicit promise in the 2016 declaration to do any of these. The declaration indicated in the case of both the visa liberalization and the accession process that progress would only be made on these issues if Turkey meet the pre-defined criteria. Meanwhile the ongoing work on the upgrading of the customs union was only “welcomed” in the text.

Although there are several voices claiming that Turkey has been blackmailing<sup>10</sup> the EU by not preventing the departure of irregular migrants, if we look at the costs and benefits more closely, Ankara has not really got much for enabling the EU to outsource its refugee problem – and the associated responsibilities – to Turkey. According to Erdoğan, his country alone has spent \$40 billion so far on hosting refugees. While many consider this figure to be exaggerated, it is certain that the

<sup>7</sup> REPUBLIC OF TURKEY MINISTRY OF INTERIOR 2020.

<sup>8</sup> FRONTEX 2020. In 2018 55,878, in 2019 82,564 asylum-seekers arrived on this route.

<sup>9</sup> IOM 2020a.

<sup>10</sup> See for example DENDIAS 2020, DW 2020.

costs have reached billions of dollars.<sup>11</sup> Compared to this, the €6 billion in financial aid is not that much. Even less so if we consider that it is still impossible to predict when a reassuring settlement of the Syrian war, allowing displaced Syrians to return home, will be achieved. In fact, according to the *Syrians Barometer 2019* survey, 51.8% of Syrian respondents living in Turkey under temporary protection said that they did not plan to return to Syria under any circumstances, and only 5.5% of respondents answered that they would return to Syria if the war ended, even without the formation of an administration they wanted.<sup>12</sup> This is an additional reason why greater solidarity is expected from the Turkish side. While the actions of Ankara could be labeled as “blackmail”, according to another interpretation they could also be interpreted as a cry for help, since at that point Turks may have felt they had nothing to lose.

### 3. Factors behind the timing of the February 2020 border opening

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#### 3. 1. Idlib

The opening of the Turkish-Greek border came right after the death of 36 Turkish soldiers in Syria, in a single Russian-Syrian airstrike on the afternoon of 27 February. It was the largest loss of life suffered by the Turkish Armed Forces for a long time. In the northwest Syrian province of Idlib, tensions had escalated dramatically over the previous three weeks. As a result of the intensification of the fighting, according to UN data, between 1 December 2019 and 18 February 2020 alone, 900,000 internally displaced Syrians set off for the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>13</sup> The Turkish authorities did not allow the newcomers to enter Turkey. Ankara warned Europe that it alone could not cope with another refugee wave of this size.<sup>14</sup>

Beside the refugee issue, strategic considerations also played a role in the Turkish decision. The loss of Idlib, the last territories in the hands of the Syrian opposition forces, would have meant that Ankara would lose its ability to directly shape the dynamics of events in Syria, which is of particular importance due to the “Kurdish question”. With regard to the large Kurdish minority in Turkey (about 15-20

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<sup>11</sup> SÖNMEZ 2019.

<sup>12</sup> ERDOĞAN 2020, p 176.

<sup>13</sup> UN 2020.

<sup>14</sup> BBC 2019.



million people), and the more than three-decade long fight between the Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), the "Kurdish question"/terrorist question is considered by Ankara as a strategic, existential security threat. And to curb that threat, it is willing to ally with essentially anyone. Turkish leaders have made it clear that according to the Turkish position, the PKK and the PYD are terrorist organizations just like the "Islamic State", and should be handled in a similar manner.<sup>15</sup> This is another important reason for Ankara's attempt to obtain more support from its European allies to its operations in Syria, a request which Erdoğan highlighted several times both before and after the opening of the Turkish border toward Greece.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. 2. Dissatisfied Turkish citizens

Domestic political considerations also played a role in the Turkish decision, as Turkish citizens are increasingly dissatisfied with the refugee situation in Turkey. This argument is supported by representative poll data. According to the results of the *Syrians Barometer 2019*,<sup>17</sup> 75% of Turkish respondents disagreed, and only 11.4% of them agreed with the statement that "We can live together with Syrians in serenity".<sup>18</sup> While in 2017 57.8% of respondents described Syrians as "victims who escaped persecution/war", in 2019 only 35% of them considered that the most appropriate expression to describe Syrians, and instead the most common answers were "They are dangerous people who will cause us a lot of troubles in the future" (42%), "They are people who were did not protect their homeland" (41.4%) and "They are burdens on us" (39.5%).<sup>19</sup> In another survey from the Kadir Has University (KHAS)<sup>20</sup> 56% of Turkish respondents said that they were discontent with the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and only 12.2% were content. 47.3% of Turkish respondents supported Turkey's Open-Border Policy for refugees introduced at the end of February 2020, which allows the refugees to go to any country they choose, and only 23.7% of the respondents assessed this policy negatively.

It is important to see, that the Turkish government's less compromising refugee policy is in line with the expectations of Turkish society. The presence of Syrian

<sup>15</sup> HÜRRİYET DAILY NEWS 2014.

<sup>16</sup> AL JAZEERA 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Note that the interviews as part of the survey were conducted in April-May 2019, that is before the Turkish border opening.

<sup>18</sup> ERDOĞAN 2020, p 101.

<sup>19</sup> ERDOĞAN 2020, p 55.

<sup>20</sup> AYDIN ET AL 2020. Interviews were conducted in April 2020.

refugees in Turkey has not been securitized yet, which has contributed to the preserving of social peace, but the chance of it has been increasing. There are arguments that the refugee issue played a significant role in the defeat of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) in the 2019 municipal elections and contributed to the loss of Istanbul and Ankara to the opposition.<sup>21</sup> Turkish citizens have been more and more dissatisfied with the presence of the Syrians, and this has placed more and more pressure on the Turkish decision-makers to take a hard stance. Altogether, the refugee issue can be easily mobilized to increase Erdoğan's popularity, which is becoming more and more important considering the country's growing economic problems.

#### **4. The events of the month after Turkey opened its border toward Greece**

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On the evening of 27 February 2020, Reuters reported that a senior Turkish official who asked for his name to be withheld announced that Turkey would no longer stop irregular migrants who wished to leave Turkey for Europe.<sup>22</sup> Similar threats to exert pressure were expressed by Ankara on several occasions in previous years, but had never been implemented until then. Following the publication of the article on Reuters's website, the Turkish press reported that a group of 300 people set off for the Turkish-Greek border that night, and the numbers continued to increase during the day.<sup>23</sup>

President Erdoğan stated on 29 February that it had been voiced for months that it was becoming increasingly difficult for Turkey to keep its borders closed, but no one had believed them. That was why the "gates" had been opened, and they would not be closed until the European Union began to keep its promises.<sup>24</sup>

On 1 March 2020, the official assessment of the situation by Greece and Turkey differed significantly. Turkish Interior Minister Süleyman Soyly reported on Twitter that 76,358 migrants had left Turkey for Edirne by that morning.<sup>25</sup> The Greek authorities, on the other hand, claimed that 9,600 illegal border crossing attempts had taken place, but all of them had been prevented.<sup>26</sup> According to a report by

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<sup>21</sup> SAZAK 2019.

<sup>22</sup> REUTERS 2020.

<sup>23</sup> CNN TÜRK 2020.

<sup>24</sup> HÜRRIYET 2020.

<sup>25</sup> SOYLU 2020.

<sup>26</sup> PAPADIMAS – KONSTANTINIDIS 2020.

the International Organization for Migration, at least 13,000 people had gathered along the Turkish-Greek border by that time. Two days later, Soylyu tweeted that 130,469 people had entered Greece by the morning of 3 March. These Turkish statements probably served the purpose of encouraging more irregular migrants to go towards the borders. A report of the European Commission estimated that eventually 25,000 migrants and refugees set up an informal camp at the formal border crossing point at Pazarkule.<sup>27</sup>

The number of sea arrivals to the Greek islands was higher than the number of those who successfully crossed the land border. According to the UNHCR, between 28 February and 7 March, 1912 migrants arrived on the Greek islands. The climax was March 1-2, when, respectively, 736 and 571 people crossed. However, on the overcrowded islands, even this number exacerbated tensions, which were high even before the Turkish border opening. At the time of the Turkey-Greece border crisis, more than 36,000 refugees were crowded on the five most affected islands (Lesbos, Chios, Samos, Leros and Kos), although reception centres there were originally designed for only 5,400 people.<sup>28</sup> This event again underlined the need for the EU to find a solution to the situation on the Greek islands.

	January	February	March	April
2019	801	830	1255	1164
2020	856	848	347	39

People arriving on the land route to Greece (UNHCR)

	January	February	March	April
2019	1851	1486	1904	1856
2020	3136	2161	2255	39

People arriving on the Aegean islands by sea (UNHCR)<sup>29</sup>

In response to the Turkish decision, Greece has stepped up control at the Turkish border. According to Greek data, until 8 March, a total of 40,060 illegal border crossing attempts were prevented and 293 migrants were arrested.<sup>30</sup> Tear gas, water cannons and stun grenades were also used by the Greek police. Furthermore, the army began reinforcing the border with barbed wire and conducted a military exercise with real ammunition near the border. At sea, the Greek coast guard

<sup>27</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION 2020.

<sup>28</sup> EGERESI – KACZIBA 2020.

<sup>29</sup> UNHCR 2020d.

<sup>30</sup> EGERESI – KACZIBA 2020.

attempted to deter the irregular arrivals with warning shots. In the midst of violence at the Greek-Turkish land border, at least two irregular migrants were killed.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, on 2 March a child drowned while crossing the Aegean.<sup>32</sup> Beside tough action against irregular migrants, Athens also announced the suspension of asylum applications acceptances for one month.

The European Union reacted faster and more decisively than in 2015, with an interest-based approach prevailing over a value-based one, and its response focused on security rather than a human rights approach.<sup>33</sup> The President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen called Greece the “shield” of Europe.<sup>34</sup> The European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) has strengthened the protection of the Greek border, deployed additional assets and border guards. Additionally, the EU provided financial assistance of €700 million to Greece to cope with the emerging border crisis.<sup>35</sup> The EU wanted to make it clear that it would not give in to Turkish pressure. This was also demonstrated on Erdoğan’s trip to Brussels on 9 March. The Turkish President was received by von der Leyen and President of the European Council, Charles Michel. However, the fact that Erdoğan headed straight for the airport instead of participating in the planned joint press conference after the negotiation suggests that the meeting did not meet the Turkish President’s expectations.<sup>36</sup>

The situation has gradually deescalated over time. First, Turkey and Russia agreed on a ceasefire in Idlib on 5 March. Second, due to the danger of crossing the Aegean Sea, the Turkish authorities reintroduced border controls on 7 March on the sea route to Greece. And third, on 27 March 2020, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey closed its land border. People were transferred from the border region as a preventive measure against the pandemic. However, the Turkish Interior Minister indicated that this move did not mean a change in Turkey’s policy: once COVID-19 precautions are lifted, migrants will be again free to approach the Greek border if they wish to leave Turkey.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL 2020.

<sup>32</sup> MCKENZIE 2020.

<sup>33</sup> EGERESI – KACZIBA 2020.

<sup>34</sup> STAMOULI 2020.

<sup>35</sup> VON DER LEYEN 2020.

<sup>36</sup> EURACTIVE 2020.

<sup>37</sup> HÜRRIYET DAILY NEWS 2020.

## 5. Evaluation and prospects – How strong is Turkey’s refugee card?

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Turkey played the “migrant card” at the end of February 2020. However, despite European fears, it did not prove to be a breakthrough. Nonetheless, it cannot be known how much the situation at the Greek border would have worsened if Turkey had not decided to take preventive measures against the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of March. Ankara could not force more active Western support (either for the hosting of refugees or for a military operation in Syria). Greek border guards have successfully handled the situation at the border, leaving Ankara to lose perhaps its most important trump card over the EU in the future negotiations, which will ultimately weaken Turkey’s bargaining position.<sup>38</sup>

Although the February-March 2020 crisis is over, a recurrence of the events cannot be ruled out. The situation in Idlib is fragile, and it cannot be predicted when the conditions will enable the mass return of Syrian refugees who escaped the war. Ankara’s economic difficulties have been intensified by the pandemic,<sup>39</sup> and the revision of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement is still awaited. At the same time, geopolitical tensions between Turkey and Greece have been increasing due to the disputes on the delimitation of their maritime borders and energy policy issues.

From a European point of view, one of the main questions is to what extent the member states of the European Union should be worried about a similar scenario, and how significant the consequences of another Turkish border opening would be for the EU. Building on the experience of the events of March 2020, we can attempt to answer the question of how strong the Turkish refugee card really is.

Turkish and European political rhetoric has often raised the prospect of millions of irregular migrants living in Turkey being set in motion, but the events of March 2020 have shown that the departure of such a crowd is not an imminent threat. Only several thousand migrants set off in March, and Greece prevented most of the illegal entries. There was no significant rise in the number of either land or sea arrivals: the above tables show that fewer people arrived in Greece in February and in March than in January 2020 – that is, before the Turkish border opening.

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<sup>38</sup> EGERESI 2020.

<sup>39</sup> One obvious sign of the need for change in the Turkish economy is that Erdoğan replaced both the finance minister (who is also his son-in-law) and the head of the central bank at the beginning of November 2020.

The main reason for this relatively small number is that Syrian refugees have started a new life in Turkey in recent years, and they are not willing to give it up for an uncertain future. The *Syrians Barometer 2019* asked the Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey whether they would want to move to a country other than Turkey and Syria, and 58.6% of respondents answered that they would never consider going.<sup>40</sup> This data also suggests that the EU's support under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey is paying off, in the sense that Syrians are less willing to leave, partly as a result of the improved living conditions the EU contributed to. Another important factor is that the EU is better prepared, more experienced, more united and communicates more clearly than in 2015. Those we interviewed during our field research in Istanbul in March 2020 also highlighted that the majority of Syrian refugees were well aware that opening the Turkish side of the border would not be enough if the EU kept its own borders closed. Tough action from the Greek security forces have shown that successfully crossing the border is highly unlikely, regardless of the Turkish decision on the opening of its border. Of those who tried to enter Greece in March illegally, most were non-Syrian citizens who felt they had nothing to lose.

However, if the situation of the refugees in Turkey worsens, either because of political or economic reasons, their attitude may change. Theoretically, it also cannot be ruled out that Ankara may decide to repeal the temporary protection regime, when it deems politically necessary. This drastic step would force Syrians to leave Turkey, which would fundamentally change the current state of affairs.

Even if the departure of millions of irregular migrants from and via Turkey is not an imminent threat, the EU still has a very clear interest in coming into an agreement with Turkey, and in avoiding future events similar to those of March 2020. The constant pressure of a few thousand to tens of thousands of migrants at its external border with Greece would put a heavy burden on the EU. It makes a difference whether illegal border crossing attempts are sporadic or continuous, mass attempts. In the latter case there would be a need to constantly keep more security capacity on standby, and because of the sheer number of attempts more migrants would likely enter the EU irregularly. Increased border control requires increased spending as well. In March, the EU provided 700 million euros to Greece to strengthen its border.

However, there are costs to weight other than the financial ones. It would be unfair to shift all responsibility to Ankara for the March 2020 events. The perception in Turkey that there is not much will in the EU to take more responsibility and

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<sup>40</sup> ERDOĞAN 2020, p 184.

make more efforts to tackle the refugee situation cannot be considered completely false, still less the Turkish perception of unkept European promises, hypocrisy and double standards. Not just Ankara, but also the EU leaders treated asylum-seekers inhumanely. Migrants were treated as a dangerous threat which the EU must shield itself from.<sup>41</sup> The EU was destroying its normative image every day with its actions and inaction at its border, where a de facto humanitarian crisis evolved, and at least three people even died while trying to enter.

In conclusion, both a norm-based and an interest-based approach suggest that the EU needs to keep supporting Turkey in tackling the migration and refugee issue. This applies even if EU-Turkey cooperation on migration certainly exists in a broader context. The EU's gradually developing common migration and asylum policy is one side of the story, and the different issue areas of the complex EU-Turkey relations is the other, with all their difficulties. Still, cooperation on migration management should serve as a base for both issues, for both sides. This approach is often labeled transactional, and is criticized for abandoning the normative power of the EU. However, there is a false dilemma between norms and transactionalism in this case. The international community, including the EU, has a shared responsibility in supporting refugees, even if the EU is at the same time interested in keeping the vast majority of irregular migrants outside its borders.

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<sup>41</sup> Tocci 2020.

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