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The Turkish–Greek Border Crisis and COVID-19

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This essay examines the emergence and the escalation of a border crisis between Turkey and Greece. On February 27th, Turkey opened its Greek border to asylum seekers and migrants which led to the gathering of thousands of people on the border. The border crisis escalated as Greek forces repelled people who forced their way into Greece. Even though the border crisis deescalated with the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey's political maneuvering with the European Union (EU) regarding the movement of asylum seekers is not off the table.
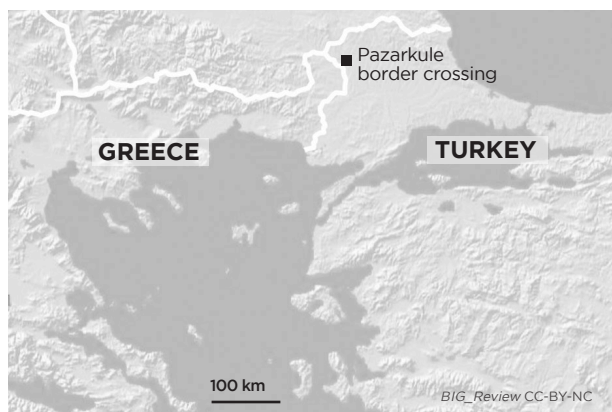
Introduction

During the Syrian civil war, Turkey faced massive influx of asylum seekers. It introduced temporary protection regulation in 2014 for Syrians who entered the country either in groups or individually (since signing the 1951 Refugee Convention with a geographical limitation, Turkey grants refugee status only to asylum seekers who come from Europe). The temporary protection regulation encompasses a range of rights that includes access to health, education, social assistance, the labour market and the like. Since 2014, it has been the country that hosts the largest number of asylum seekers in

GREECE

TURKEY

Pazarkule border crossing

100 km

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the world (UNHCR 2020a). Having accommodated millions of Syrians without commensurate international support, it has repeatedly called on the international community to share its burden.

In 2016, Turkey and the European Union (EU) signed a burden-sharing deal. Under this deal, Turkey pledged to take necessary measures to prevent irregular migration from its territory to Europe and to accept the return of new irregular migrants from the Greek islands. In return, the EU pledged to allocate 6 billion euros to Turkey to support the needs of asylum seekers and resettle at least one refugee from Turkey through formal channels for each irregular migrant returned from Europe to Turkey. Between 2015 and 2020, Turkey strictly controlled the entry of undocumented people into Europe. During this period, 186,766 asylum seekers and migrants were intercepted by the Turkish coastguard in the Aegean Sea (Human Rights Watch 2020). Interception figures increased considerably in 2019 as compared to 2018 (UNHCR 2020a).

However, as of February 27th, 2020, after heavy military losses in Idlib, Syria, Turkey opened its Greek border to European-bound asylum seekers and migrants, paving the way for a border crisis, escalated

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by disproportionate force applied by Greek authorities. The gathering of thousands of people on the border was seen as a threat not only by Greece, but also by the EU that sought to avoid a repeat of 2015 refugee crisis. This article sheds light into the emergence a border crisis between Turkey and Greece by paying particular attention to how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the border situation. Rather than laying out a causal relationship, this study is based on a before-and-after case study design. Specifically, it sheds light into the dynamics of the border crisis between Turkey and Greece before and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Turkey's Political Maneuver and the Crisis on the Turkish–Greek Border

On February 27, Turkey suffered a huge loss in Idlib with the killing of 33 Turkish soldiers in an airstrike by Syrian regime forces. On the same day, the Turkish government announced that it would no longer prevent asylum seekers and migrants from entering Europe. Turkey justified its position by arguing that the EU had not fulfilled its promises under the 2016 deal and that another wave of asylum seekers was under way due to the escalation of hostilities in Idlib. Turkey's move is also interpreted as a political instrument to pressure the EU to support a ceasefire in Syria (Harris 2020).

Soon after Turkey's border opening announcement, asylum seekers and migrants gathered on the Turkish side of the Turkish–Greek border to reach Europe via Greece. With the arrival of thousands of asylum seekers and migrants, a makeshift camp was established. Some people spent all their money for this journey, even giving up their accommodation (Amnesty International 2020a). Turkey's hospitality towards Syrian asylum seekers notwithstanding, many Syrians live in dire circumstances. Only 1.5% of them have work permits. Their situation is aggravated by economic recession and high unemployment rates (Demirguc-Kunt et al. 2019). The majority of Turkish people believe that Syrians have negative impacts on Turkey's socio-cultural structure and the provision of public services. Furthermore, while Turkey generally adopted an accommodative stance towards Syrians, following the failure in local elections in 2019, the Turkish government switched to a stricter asylum policy (Kinikoglu 2020).

Better living standards in Europe appear to have motivated Syrians to leave Turkey. On the other hand, Russian Reconciliation Center for Syria, which is part of the Russian Armed Forces, noted that Turkey pushed 130,000 people from Syria to Greece (DuvaR English 2020). Some asylum seekers stated that the Turkish police transported them to the Pazarkule border crossing and gave them directions as to how to cross the border (Human Rights Watch 2020). It is also reported that some people were pressured into crossing the border by Turkish police. Turkish authorities also

sent additional guards to the border to prevent Greek authorities from forcibly returning them back to Turkey (Stevis-Gridneff and Kingsley 2020). Furthermore, Turkish sources indicated that humanitarian aid was distributed to the makeshift camp and those who were harmed while crossing the border received medical treatment in Turkey (Daily Sabah 2020).

Greece's prime minister, Kiriakos Mitsotakis, evaluating the situation at the border as an immanent threat to the country's national security, firmly stated that the entry of undocumented people into Greece would not be allowed (Evans and Coskun 2020). Greece reacted to the border crisis by suspending asylum applications for a month. It also announced that unauthorized border crossers would be deported without their cases being examined (Amnesty International 2020b). In addition, Greek authorities deployed police, army and special forces to the border (Human Rights Watch 2020). At the request of Greece, Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, sent an additional 100 border guards to the area (Frontex 2020).

The border witnessed an escalation of crisis as Greek police and soldiers used tear gas, water cannons, plastic bullets and live ammunition to push back unauthorized border crossers (Amnesty International 2020a). Asylum seekers and migrants trying to cross the border crossing (which was already protected with barbed wire fences) faced smoke grenades. Some of them attempted to return to Turkey, after being stuck in the no-man's land between the two countries (Evans and Coskun 2020). Some even reported that they were abused by non-Greek forces (who did not speak Greek or wear a Greek uniform) on the Greek side of the border, before being handed over to Greek authorities (Human Rights Watch 2020).

Rather than framing the situation at the border as a migrant or refugee crisis, Greece's Prime Minister, Mitsotakis, framed it as "a conscious attempt by Turkey to use migrants and refugees as geopolitical pawns to promote its own interest" (quoted in Euronews 2020). He justified Greece's actions by referring to the country's right to defend its borders (Euronews 2020). On March 3rd, Ursula von der Leyen, the head of European Commission, visited the Greek side of the border along with European Council chief Charles Michel and European Parliament speaker David Sassoli and expressed the EU's support for Greece: "[o]ur first priority is to ensure order is maintained at the Greek external border, which is also a European border... I am fully committed to mobilising all the necessary operational support to the Greek authorities" (quoted in BBC News 2020). She announced an EU support package to Greece that included 700 million euros in aid for migration management; a Frontex force including vessels, thermal-vision vehicles, helicopters, a plane, 100 extra border guards and civil aid comprising medical equipment and teams, and shelters (BBC News 2020).

On the other hand, Greece's asylum policy was criticized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) (a European network of NGOs in European countries) on the grounds that there was no legal basis for the suspension of asylum applications either in the 1951 Refugee Convention or in EU refugee law (UNHCR 2020b; ECRE 2020). The Council of Europe called on both countries to deescalate the crisis and provide humanitarian assistance to those trapped at the border (Tosidis 2020). ECRE (2020) also criticized both countries, specifically condemning violence against asylum seekers and efforts to expel people.

COVID-19 and the Border Crisis

Turkey took precautionary measures before COVID-19 entered the country. At the beginning of February, it evacuated Turkish citizens from Wuhan province in China and stopped all flights from the country. At the end of the month, it stopped flights to and from Iran, Italy, Iraq and South Korea and closed land border crossings with Iraq and Iran. Turkey closed its borders with Greece and Bulgaria on March 18, after announcing its first COVID-19 case. Yet, despite these preventive measures, COVID-19 cases increased exponentially in Turkey (Worldometer 2020).

The pandemic witnessed an easing of tension along the Turkish–Greek border. With the closure of the border, Turkey had to temporarily retreat from its policy that was characterized as using asylum seekers and migrants for political objectives. On March 27, thousands of asylum seekers and migrants, waiting at the makeshift camp near Pazarkule border crossing, were moved to state guest houses and put in quarantine after which they were sent to reception centers in nine provinces (Fraser 2020). A few days later the makeshift camp was dismantled.

It can be argued that Turkey's retreat from its political maneuver due to the pandemic played into the hands of Greece that had been determined to prevent the influx of asylum seekers since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. Greece framed the retreat of unauthorized border crossers as a success of its own border management, with Prime Minister Mitsotakis boasting that Greece accomplished an important responsibility by efficiently protecting its land and sea borders (Fraser 2020).

Conclusion

This article shed light on the process by which the migratory crisis emerged and eased at the Turkish–Greek border. Turkey made a U-turn from its initial humanitarian approach to Syrian asylum seekers by sending them to Greece for political leverage in the context of military disruptions. The border witnessed humanitarian disaster with Turkey's push of asylum seekers and migrants to the border and Greece's push-back policy. While the border crisis deescalated under the pandemic, tensions again simmered in May when Turkish authorities noted that the border might be again opened to asylum seekers once lockdowns relaxed.

As a precautionary measure, Greek authorities increased the number of police on the border (Aljazeera 2020) and began extending the border fence. Currently, the Turkish–Greek land border is overshadowed by tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean triggered by both countries' gas drilling ambitions. Both countries' overlapping claims in the Eastern Mediterranean not only brought them closer to war, but strained further Turkey–EU relations. As Turkey is a key transit country for asylum seekers and migrants, Turkish–EU cooperation will continue to be essential in mitigating future refugee and migrant crises. Notwithstanding that both parties have failures in the process, Turkey should focus its attention on solving existing crises, rather than creating new ones.

Figure 1. Makeshift camp near Turkey's Pazarkule border crossing. Photo: Aybike Acikel, PhD candidate at Yildiz Technical University.

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