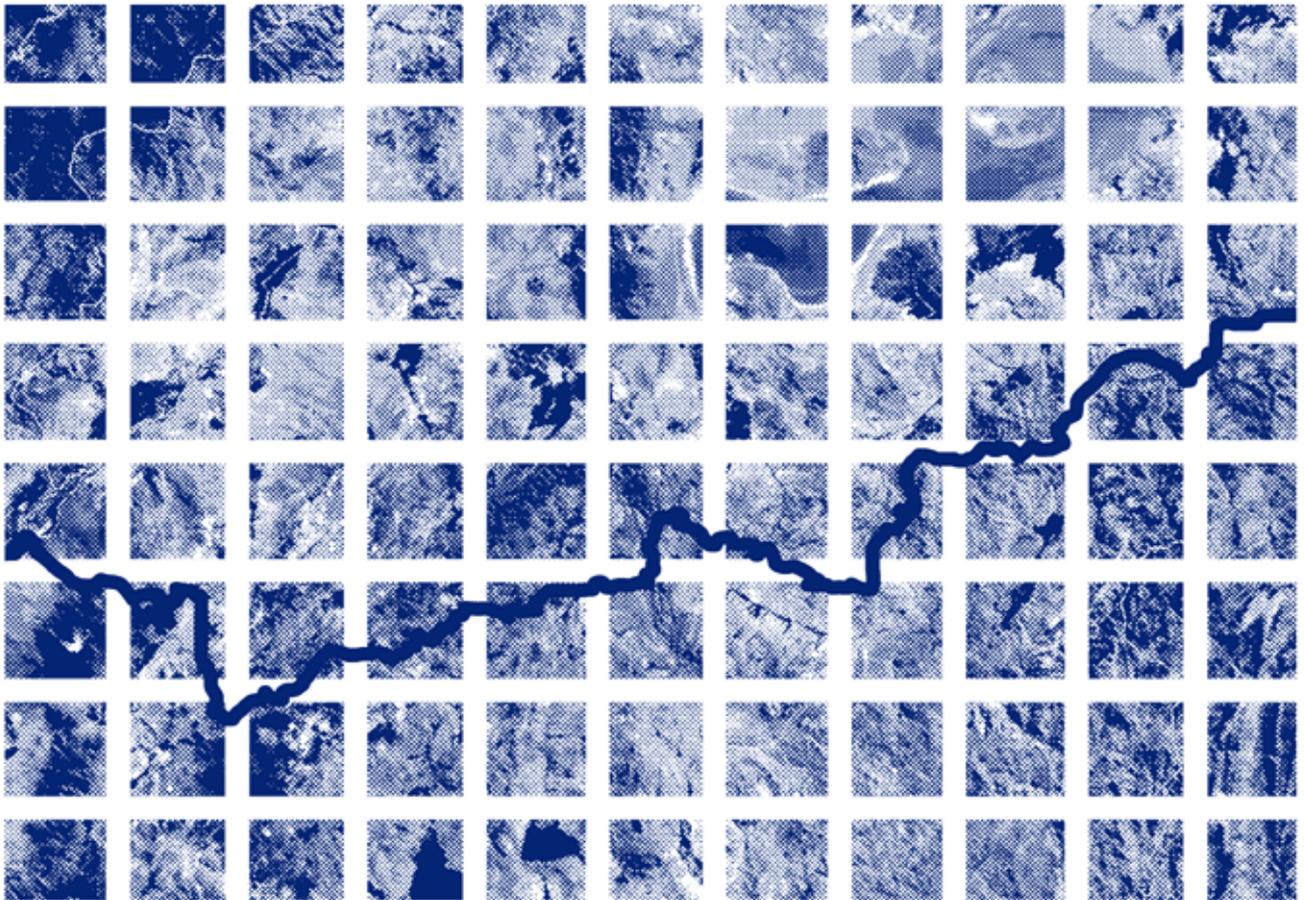# IMPACTS OF EU-TURKEY COOPERATION ON MIGRATION ALONG THE IRAN-TURKEY BORDER

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About the Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative

The Istanbul Policy Center–Sabancı University–Stiftung Mercator Initiative aims to strengthen the academic, political, and social ties between Turkey and Germany as well as Turkey and Europe. The Initiative is based on the premise that the acquisition of knowledge and the exchange of people and ideas are preconditions for meeting the challenges of an increasingly globalized world in the 21st century. The Initiative focuses on two areas of cooperation, EU/German-Turkish relations and climate change, which are of essential importance for the future of Turkey and Germany within a larger European and global context.

Shifting the Focus to Turkey's Eastern Borders

While public and political debates about EU-Turkey migration cooperation have centered on Turkey's western borders (i.e., its border with Greece), increasing levels of EU-Turkey migration cooperation along Turkey's eastern border with Iran and the increasing precarity of migration journeys there have been largely ignored. Migration along the Greek border has absorbed the bulk of the media spotlight since the post-Arab Spring migration wave, which culminated in the March 2016 EU-Turkey Statement. The European Commission has credited the Statement for reducing "irregular arrivals" from Turkey to Greece by 91%[1] and for implementing numerous support projects for Syrian refugees in Turkey.[2] However, the statement has also been criticized for pushing migration to more irregular routes rather than mitigating it, thereby increasing migrants' reliance on human smugglers[3] and instances of push-backs along Turkey's borders with Greece[4] in order to contribute to the decrease of "irregular arrivals" in the EU. Despite five years of tensions, European and Turkish leaders decided to keep the Statement alive during their most recent meeting in March 2021.

Most research on migration in Turkey focuses on Syrian refugees, the largest migration population (approximately 3.6 million registered migrants) in Turkey. However, those who have been intercepted by state authorities along the Greek borders while trying to move onward from Turkey to the EU during the last few years have been predominantly Afghan nationals, followed by people from Iran, Pakistan, and Iraq,[5] who have mainly entered Turkey from Iran. While migration across eastern Turkey is much more clandestine and difficult to officially track, data from the Turkish Ministry of Interior point to the detention or deportation of around half a million "irregular migrants" per year (before the COVID-19 pandemic).[6] These are mainly non-Syrian nationals entering Turkey from its eastern borders, who due to their "irregular" status are often subjected to tough border measures en mass despite their individual differences. Although Turkey's border with Iran does not lie along the EU's physical entry point, the EU's externalization governance extends to faraway places where migrants travel toward the EU (e.g., Niger, Libya, and the Sahel).[7] This thus raises question of whether and how EU-Turkey cooperation impacts border and migration management along the Iran-Turkey border and migrants crossing this border. Mapping the broader implications of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration across diverse borders is of great importance, especially as the 2016 statement is being renegotiated and a new chapter in EU-Turkey relations is about to open.

Methodological Remark

This policy brief draws upon mixed methods of qualitative research, using 32 semi-structured interviews, three weeks of participant observations in Van (March 2021), and policy analysis. The interviews involved 37 participants ranging from migrants to NGOs and aid providers, local residents in Van, smugglers, the Gendarmerie General Command, and EU and Turkish policy makers. Unfortunately, the Turkish Ministry of Interior, Directorate-General for Migration Management (DGMM), and the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMMs) did not respond to requests for interviews.

The Context in Eastern Turkey

When it comes to political debates about Eastern Turkey between Ankara and Brussels, the focus is usually placed on security questions related to Turkey's fight against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, PKK). While the fighting has calmed down over the last five years, a large military presence and several anti-terror operations continue across the region. The European Commission has criticized the broad interpretation of anti-terror measures by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), leading to growing restrictions against Kurdish politicians from the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), officials, and human rights activists.[8] Although the Van province has not been directly affected by fighting, it remains one of the most socio-economically underdeveloped provinces in Turkey[9] due to the conflict, anti-terror measures, the 2011 earthquake,[10] and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. The low employment rate is also attributed to the systematic economic deprivation of the region. For ex-

A map of Turkey and the Van Province (credit: Jack Sapoch)
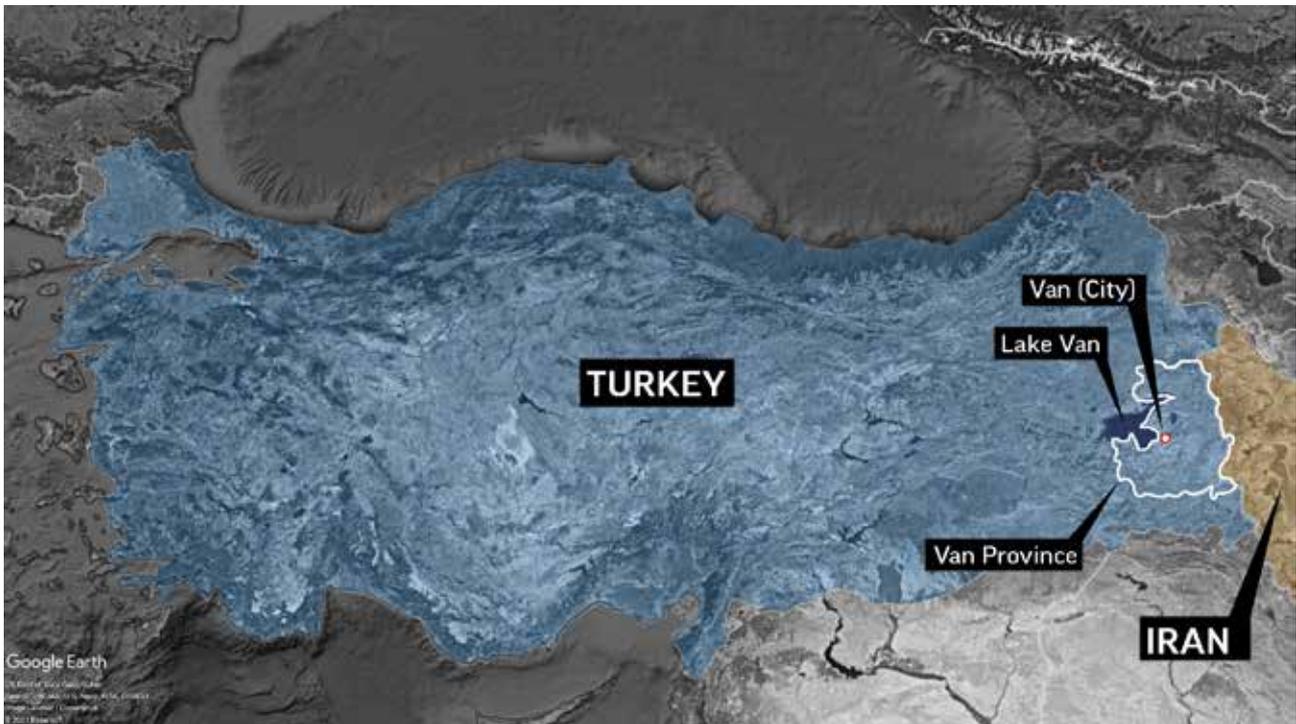
ample, when AKP-appointed trustees have made large investments in the city (including those financed by the EU), companies from big cities (e.g., Ankara) and their workers are sent to the area to complete such projects, which excludes local companies and local labor from the profits.[11]

Interviews with local residents, smugglers, and politicians in Van suggest that these socio-economic restrictions create economic precarity and drive smuggling activities. Several residents told me that they smuggle sugar, rice, petrol, tobacco, and other products across the nearby border with Iran in order to try to endure the difficult living conditions. Additionally, there has also been increased demand for human smuggling due to the lack of legal and safe means of travel for migrants fleeing their home countries across the Iran-Turkey border. Smuggling of people involves higher profits (550-6,000 USD per person depending on the length of the trip and services involved) than smuggling goods. Smugglers often cooperate with border authorities, which involves fewer risks. There are several instances in which smugglers have been apprehended by the state authorities in Van Province, including incidents in which their transports have resulted in migrants' deaths, but were released within a few weeks.

Most migrants move with smugglers to be able to navigate journeys across unknown, difficult mountainous terrain (above 3,800 meters), extreme weather (-40°C degrees in the winter), military zones, and anti-terror operations that interfere with anti-smuggling measures. There have been numerous instances in Eastern Turkey (on both the Iran and Iraq border) of both the Turkish gendarmerie and the Iranian army killing groups of civilian smugglers, mistaking them for the PKK (e.g., the Roboski massacre in 2011). Yet, migrants continue to rely on smugglers as crossing the border without their guidance often results in getting lost in the mountains, freezing to death, or dying after attacks by wild animals. Local residents claim that they find dozens of bodies in the mountains each spring when the snow melts. Those who survive crossing in the winter are often treated for severe frostbite and psychological problems after losing their loved ones during the journey, according to one doctor working in a hospital in Eastern Turkey.

The EU's Role in Transforming Eastern Turkey's Border with Iran

While the local context described above impacts migrants' journeys across the Iran-Turkey border, broader EU-Turkey cooperation on border and migration measures also increasingly influences the border landscape and migration around Van. During bilateral meetings Turkish officials commonly suggest that Brussels should provide more support to tackle "irregular migration" in Eastern Turkey, which, according to officials, results in transit migration to the EU. Turkey's eastern border is also important for the European Commission due to its comprehensive border security system approach, which aims to manage migration along its future frontiers.[12]

The two parties have not only acknowledged the need to develop better bilateral migration and border approaches at the Iran-Turkey border but have also been working to develop numerous military and technology projects. Turkey has begun the construction of a wall and a barbed-wire fence along its border with Iran, together with the deployment of surveillance systems, towers, and drones. According to the Turkish Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu, this project is possible due to the EU's financial support of 110 million EUR.[13] Another EU-funded project is working to demine Turkey's Eastern borders, which includes training and supplying the latest equipment as well as support for capacity-building initiatives to train police and customs agents.[14] This increased border surveillance capacity at Turkey's Eastern borders is funded using the EU's instrument for pre-accession assistance (IPA) for Turkey, IPA I and IPA II (2014–2020). These programs have been supplying the National Coordination and Joint Risk Analysis Center with surveillance vehicles, communication and surveillance masts, thermal cameras, and hardware and software equipment. The IPA also finances the training of border patrols in risk analysis and risk management. The forces managing the Iran-Turkey border, such as the Turkish National Police and Gendarmerie General Command, thus benefit from this program.[15]

While Brussels' goal is to combat illegal migration and smuggling from Turkey to Europe,[16] the utmost priority of the Turkish Ministry of Interior is the fight against terrorism.[17] Thus, Ankara's support for the above-mentioned projects is focused on the deployment of military technology to Eastern Turkey in order to counter both terrorism and migration. As a result, migration management has been re-delegated farther away from the EU's borders to an environment where exclusionary and militarized measures have been present and normalized for decades due to Turkey's conflict with the PKK. This approach risks treating all migrants at Turkey's eastern borders as a security issue intertwined with terrorism, cross-border crimes, and smuggling activities in the region rather than as (potential) seekers of legal protection. While most migrants moving to Turkey lack legal pathways and are thus framed as "illegal/irregular" migrants, the above-mentioned border and migration measures underpin Turkey's policies on irregular migration.[18] Consequently, migrants are often treated with exceptionally tough border deterrents that ignore their tremendous differences and needs. Such measures provide a security framework that legitimizes the increasing instances of push-backs from Turkey to Iran.

Push-backs

If the gendarmerie or police officers apprehend migrants at the border, they are expected to hand them over to the DGMM[19] or, more specifically, the PDMM. Here, migrants should be able to initiate and undertake registration and to further process their status under international protection (IP) if they are non-Syrian and non-European nationals or for temporary protection (TP) in the case of Syrian nationals, according to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.[20] However, this official procedure is not always followed. As an interview with one member of the gendarmerie suggests, soldiers are instructed by national police to push some migrants back to Iran in order to alleviate the logistical and financial costs of removal centers. Push-backs, unlike deportations, are carried out outside of legal procedures and involve a set of measures that physically force people back over a border without considering their individual circumstances. As a result, migrants are denied legal assistance, including the possibility to seek IP.

Growing evidence of push-backs has been documented along the EU's external and internal borders, from the borders between Greece and Turkey,[21] to the Croatian-Bosnian border,[22] and the Hungarian-Serbian border.[23] There has been also growing evidence of push-backs of Syrian nationals from Turkey to Syria.[24] Interviews with migrants suggest that push-backs have become increasingly used along the Iran-Turkey border since 2016. Some migrants claim to have been repeatedly pushed back from Turkey to Iran, hiding in the mountains for over a month until successfully reaching Van. NGOs estimate that thousands of people are pushed back from Turkey to Iran every year. Push-backs at the Iran-Turkey border follow a broader pattern of EU cooperation with geopolitically strategic transit states, where migration takes place and push-backs have been deployed to stop it.

Turkey has strongly criticized Greek border guards, together with Frontex and NATO forces, for pushing migrants back from Greece to Turkey, resulting in harm to migrants and even death by drowning due to the danger of sea crossings. For instance, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has blamed Europe for abandoning refugees at sea and turning the Mediterranean into a cemetery.[25] However, today push-backs are deployed in the same manner along Turkey's eastern borders. Push-backs from Turkey to Iran have also resulted in injuries and death as migrants face mountainous landscapes and extreme weather conditions that are often just as deadly as the sea. Further, migrants are faced with the harm imposed by the Iranian army, which controls the other side of the border. Migrants highlighted that the Iranian army often physically attacks and kills border-crossers in their territory. For instance, one man claimed to have witnessed Iranian soldiers shooting and killing fourteen people who were crossing the border with him. Many Iranian nationals face imprisonment or execution upon being pushed back into Iran. Afghan nationals also fear being pushed back to Iran due to the chain of push-backs to Afghanistan. These types of illegal border deterrents force migrants to confront life-threatening situations.

Van cemetery (photo by author)

When visiting the local cemetery in Van, which the activists that I interviewed consider as the largest refugee cemetery in the world, one can find the graves of those who have died stranded between the Iran-Turkey border. Many of those buried here died after successfully crossing the border and moving west during smuggler-organized transport in over-crowded minibuses or trucks. In order to avoid roads with an increasing number of army checkpoints, smugglers have been transporting people in small fishing boats across the 3,600 km^2 Lake Van, from Van to Bitlis, since 2019. However, this has led to new tragedies, including the death of 61 people who drowned in one incident in June 2020.

Van: Navigating (Il)legal Procedures and Onward Journeys

Fortunately, most migrants survive their border crossing journeys. Some hope to apply for IP with the PDMM upon their arrival in Van Province and wait to be resettled in a third country, which is the formal legal procedure for non-Syrian and non-European migrants who most commonly cross the Iran-Turkey border. However, many others try to avoid state authorities and wish to continue to Europe on their own due to the fear of being denied IP procedures, detained in removal centers, or deported back to their home states. These processes and anxieties have characterized migration procedures in Van since 2018.

In 2018, responsibility for registration and determining refugees' status in Turkey from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to the provincial management of the DGMM under the Turkish Ministry of Interior.[26] This change has had a significant impact on the non-Syrian population crossing the Iran-Turkey border and their chance to access IP. In 2019, Turkey granted IP (refugee status, conditional refugee status, or subsidiary protection) to 5,449 applicants under the DGMM mandate, in contrast to 72,961 granted IP in 2018 under the UNHCR mandate.[27] In 2019, an essential amendment to the Law on Foreigners and International Protection was made, and the period within which migrants can appeal their deportation shortened from 15 to 7 days, the scope of execution

of entry bans and deportation orders expanded, and the management of temporary accommodation centers was transferred from the governorates to the DGMM.[28]

This centralization and restriction of migration management in Turkey has been supported by the EU's financial assistance provided to the Turkish Ministry of Interior's DGMM. This financial assistance is specifically allocated to the (re-)construction and refurbishment of removal centers around Turkey. The objective of this construction is to fulfill the broader implementation of the 2016 EU-Turkey Statement[29] according to EU standards.[30] The construction of removal centers in Turkey was contracted and financed under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) and the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance (IPA). Within this assistance package, the EU contributed 60 million EUR to construct six removal centers around Turkey, including in Erzurum (Eastern Turkey), each with a capacity of 750 "irregular migrants."[31] As part of another project, a 13.1-million EUR removal center was built in Van (Kurubaş) with the EU's financial support,[32] which the Turkish Ministry of Interior considers to be a "reception and accommodation center."[33]

Both EU and Turkish authorities have made positive comments on the construction and conditions of removal and reception centers, which are contrasted with migrants' poor living conditions in some EU states (i.e., the Greek islands). However, interviews with migrants, NGOs, and the Van Bar Association suggest that those who end up in removal and reception centers in Eastern Turkey are quickly denied IP and deported. Those who are detained also lack legal aid, are not allowed to use their phones, and struggle to contact lawyers, including individuals who experience diverse forms of abuse in removal centers, including rape by security guards. Their needs are not fairly assessed, leading to en mass deportations. Since 2018/19, there has been a 92.5% decline in the number of positive IP results.[34]

Moreover, voluntary return programs have increased, especially to Afghanistan, since most people crossing the Iran-Turkey border are Afghan nationals. This includes Turkey's Assistance for the

Voluntary Return and Reintegration of Returnees to Afghanistan, run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and financed by the European Return Fund and the Austrian Federal Ministry of the Interior. Recently, the DGMM's contact points have been also appointed to Afghanistan and Pakistan.[35] Most interviewees worry about the blurred line between voluntary and forced returns as UNHCR can monitor only around a quarter of all voluntary return procedures. Finally, a few migrants recounted stories of others who were taken from removal centers, transported to the border, and pushed back to Iran.

Push-backs and deportations of non-Syrian nationals in Eastern Turkey reflect the broader migration approach in Europe. Although migrants embark upon arduous treks across the Iran-Turkey border with a well-defined goal—to move from illegality to legality[36]—their chances of formalizing their status upon arrival in Turkey are almost none. Turkey's ability and willingness to deport and push back unwanted migrants in Europe is driven by its negotiations with the EU.[37] The 2016 Statement failed to create more legal cross-border channels and, thus, put pressure on Turkish authorities to create more repressive policies along their borders with non-EU countries. While push-backs and deportations are deployed to deter migrants' movement to the EU, they drive further clandestine migration. Migrants are often afraid of deportations and push-backs in Turkey. For this reason, they try to travel onward to the EU with the hope of accessing legal protection, which undermines the logic behind enforcing tougher measures in Eastern Turkey.

Suggestions & Recommendations

Drawing upon the data presented in this policy brief, I propose the following suggestions. First and foremost, political debates and cooperation between Ankara and Brussels must acknowledge the complexities of border management and the diverse nationalities of migrants. This also applies to non-Syrian migration along the Iran-Turkey border, which is significantly impacted by EU-Turkey cooperation. Ankara and Brussels should seek long-term solutions rather than short-term fixes, offering more resettlement programs and family reunification between Turkey and the EU. This would decrease the number of unsafe, clandestine journeys. Creating more resettlement opportunities for migrants would also alleviate the pressure on Turkey to remove all migrants via rapid deportations, which pay no attention to migrants' individual cases, "voluntary" (i.e., forced) returns, and push-backs in (Eastern) Turkey. Currently, officials fear that migrants would over-stay in the country if they would not be resettled.

Exercising sovereignty over its borders is essential for Turkey, especially due to its geopolitical location neighboring warn-torn and authoritarian states, which is one reason that the country hosts the largest refugee population in the world. In Eastern Turkey border security questions, including on migration, are coupled with the discourse on anti-terror measures. However, as linking these discussions often leads to the implementation of exceptional measures and push-backs, Ankara should seek to decouple the discourse on migration from that of security, including terrorism and cross-border crimes. This leads to the third suggestion: developing a new border approach on the ground that requires rethinking security risks as intertwined with migration. Following that, it is fundamental to stop push-backs in Eastern Turkey due to their violation of non-refoulement, including returning people to Iran when they are in danger of persecution, and their violation of migrants' right to access IP procedures.

As a fourth suggestion, addressing migration challenges should also involve fair access to IP for non-Syrian nationals. To this end, Turkey adopted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2013, and Turkish state authorities have done extensive work to adjust the country's whole system to this law. While this law both provides Syrian nationals temporary protection in Turkey (although there are numerous challenges on the ground) and European citizens to claim asylum in Turkey, migrants who are neither Syrian nor European have an uncertain legal position as IP applicants. As a consequence of this, the classification of non-Syrian migrants crossing the Iran-Turkey border forces authorities to label this group as "illegal/irregular." This singular categorization of the mixed migrant population as "illegal" thus ignores the

assessment of migrants' individual needs. Within this framework, Turkey has been facing the tremendous challenge of processing many IP applications, providing migrants with few opportunities for resettlement. IP procedures should be further strengthened through specific EU-funded programs that would shift the focus from improving the material conditions of centers to supporting legal aid for those being detained in the centers and ensuring that their rights are not violated. More access and monitoring opportunities should be given to third parties in removal centers (i.e., bar associations, UNHCR, and other bodies). IP applicants should also be able to use their phones to be able to contact lawyers in removal and reception centers. Further, the IP application process cannot be functional without the willingness of third countries, including EU member states, to provide more opportunities for resettlement.

Finally, this policy brief also suggests that militarized, high-tech border controls do not stop human smuggling. The roots of smuggling stem from much more complex realities, including evading anti-terror measures, socio-economic deprivation in Eastern Turkey, and fulfilling the demand for clandestine migration due to the lack of legal cross-border routes. Improving the economic, social, and political conditions of local residents in Eastern Turkey thus goes hand in hand with fighting smuggling, which should be incorporated into the EU-Turkey approach to combating cross-border crime at the Iran-Turkey border.

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Acknowledgments

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