

THE BORDER LANDSCAPE IN EASTERN TURKEY AFTER THE TALIBAN'S TAKEOVER OF AFGHANISTAN

Karolína Augustová



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Introduction

In July 2021, Jansher¹ and his family decided to flee Afghanistan amid the growing threat posed by the Taliban, which has killed many people like Jansher himself: a Shi'a Muslim and an ethnic Hazara. When leaving Afghanistan Jansher and his family took with them a small boy whose parents had been murdered by Taliban soldiers and had no one but his neighbors. A smuggler, to whom the family paid 8,000 euro in total, moved them to a flat in Iran and housed them there for a month to wait for the “right time” to move on. Then, another smuggler took them to the mountains between Iran and Turkey, only pointing in the direction in which the whole family should walk. After trekking across mountains in extreme heat and struggling to stay in the right direction, the family arrived in front of a concrete wall, marking the entry to Turkey. “We were spotted by the Turkish Army. They were running toward us and then started beating all men. But they did not touch women and children. They took our phones and shouted at us to go back to Iran and never come back to Turkey,” recounted Jansher, adding that his family had been pushed back to Iran two times before. After several weeks stranded in the mountains with his whole family, Jansher’s luck finally turned. “We found the end of the wall that was not yet completed. We snaked under the wall construction in progress with the help of a rope made out of our clothes and eventually arrived in Van without being detected,” he said while watching his small daughter sleeping on his wife’s lap in a flat with no furniture and only two mattresses.

Jansher’s family was among sixty-five individuals who I interviewed between January and August 2021 when trying to understand the impact of EU-Turkey cooperation on border management in Eastern Turkey and the Afghans migrating there. The family’s journey from Afghanistan, moving across Iran to Turkey, was a perilous trek through mountains and militarized zones with mine fields, which thousands of people attempt to make each year. Travelling across these mountains, which lack sources of food and water in the summer, exposes people to extreme heat and physical exhaustion. Many crossing here in the winter freeze to death, are attacked by wild animals, or end up with am-

putated limbs due to severe frostbite. Importantly, these journeys take place in the shadow of Turkey’s fight against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and thus interfere with the state’s anti-smuggling and anti-migration measures. Despite the challenges associated with this route, the Iran-Turkey border has been serving as an entry point for Afghans escaping to or via Turkey since the Soviet-Afghan War in the 1980s. Today, the threats posed by the Taliban—entangled with the violence, economic and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan—have pushed more people to flee via this border.

Despite the recent efforts by the international community to evacuate thousands of Afghans from the Hamid Karzai Airport, many people are stranded in Afghanistan. Most have no other option than to move without authorization via clandestine channels with human smugglers in exchange for high fees or their labor in smuggling networks.² The key transit countries through which refugees travel, such as Turkey as well as European destinations, view this way of movement as “illegal migration.” Thus, the movement of potential refugees is classed as “cross-border crime,” and migrants are commonly subjected to tough border measures. Due to the recent political changes in Afghanistan, now is the time to reflect on the fight against “illegal migration” in Eastern Turkey as managed by EU-Turkey cooperation and question how this cooperation is currently evolving and impacting Afghans migrating through here. To do so, this analysis draws upon participant observations in Van, interviews, and policy and media analysis.

The “Old” Fight Against “Illegal Migration” at the Iran-Turkey Border

To fight “illegal migration” and “cross-border crime,” Turkey and the EU cooperate on border controls that not only take place along the EU’s physical borders with Turkey—i.e., with Greece and Bulgaria—but also along Turkey’s eastern border with Iran. The latter attracted little public attention until the recent change of the political system in Afghanistan.

Most visibly, Turkey is constructing a 294-kilometer-long concrete wall with barbed-wire fencing along its border with Iran before moving onto the construction of the wall along the Turkey-Iraq border.³ According to the Turkish Minister of Interior, Süleyman Soylu, this project is possible due to the EU's financial support of 110 million EUR,⁴ in addition to EU funds to demine the border before construction.⁵ Moreover, the EU's Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) for Turkey between 2014 and 2020 funded a significant portion of the state's surveillance capacity in Eastern Turkey.⁶ 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 financed the training of border patrols in risk analysis and risk management.⁷ These programs are thus ongoing since 2014 and have neither been renegotiated nor reevaluated in light of the current situation in Afghanistan. Those benefiting the most from the EU funds at the Iran-Turkey border are the Turkish National Police and Gendarmerie General Command (*Jandarma*).⁸

While Turkey has the right to fight against terrorism, the European Commission has criticized the government's anti-terror approach, which it argues commonly leads to restrictions on civilians and human rights violations (e.g., alleged instances of torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrests, and procedural rights violations in prisons and police and gendarmerie establishments) in Kurdish-populated regions.⁹ Yet, paradoxically, EU-Turkey cooperation intensified amid the post-Arab Spring migration wave in 2015, during the same time that the Kurdish peace process was abandoned. The pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) was increasingly marginalized, armed conflict intensified in Southeastern, overwhelmingly Kurdish cities—resulting in high numbers of civilian deaths and the forced displacement of Kurdish populations—and peaceful demonstrations in the country were criminalized.¹⁰ The EU-Turkey Statement implemented in March 2016 was built on the 2015 EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan,¹¹ the year in which the number of severe human rights violations in Eastern Turkey began increasing. Thus, the EU and Turkey have been cooperating under the shadow of anti-terror op-

erations in (Eastern) Turkey as terrorism-related charges continue to be misused.¹²

Pragmatic anti-migration solutions are, therefore, prioritized by the EU over Turkey's non-alignment with EU principles, which has further entrenched criminalization and authoritarianism in (Eastern) Turkey. These patterns are also observed in Libya or Mali.¹³ As a member of the European Parliament stressed during our interview: "Everything is better [for the EU] than having more arrivals of irregular migrants. Human rights are not prioritized in that sense." Indeed, interviews with Afghans, Kurdish residents, the Van Bar Association, and the *Jandarma* in Van demonstrate that anyone who crosses the border without authorization—whether for safety (Afghans) or taking part in the cross-border informal economy (Kurds)—can be classified, often on poor evidence, as potential members of the PKK and subjected to tough military measures, including instances of torture and extrajudicial killings. The local militarized border context—as old as the Turkey-PKK conflict itself, which began in the 1980s—cannot be sidelined in the discussion on migration journeys in Eastern Turkey. Migration management, as it increasingly overlaps with the EU's externalization policies, closely interconnects with Turkey's anti-terror measures in the East.

Consequently, Afghans crossing from Iran to Turkey are commonly treated with exceptionally tough border deterrents. These also include push-backs: when state authorities disable Afghans seeking international protection and force them back over a border to Iran, as described by Janshir above. During the interviews other Afghans pointed to instances of push-backs, physical beatings, and destruction of their possessions by the Turkish Army as well as violence against them and the killings of other travelers by the Iranian Army after being pushed back. Some were said to have been taken to removal centers from which they were later transported by the *Jandarma* to the border with Iran and pushed back.

Time-comparative interviews with Afghans crossing the Iran-Turkey border suggest that push-backs have occurred on a larger scale since 2016, which marks the peak of EU-Turkey cooperation on migration (i.e., the EU-Turkey Deal). Push-backs in

Eastern Turkey thus follow patterns of broader controls across the EU's physical and external borders (Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia).¹⁴ Importantly, Turkey hosts the largest refugee population in the world (4 million), including around 300,000 Afghans, as pointed out by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,¹⁵ and relies on resettlement of Afghan international protection applicants to third states. As explained by aid workers during an interview, Western countries, as well as the EU, offer few opportunities to resettle Afghans from Turkey. This has pushed Turkey to toughen up its migration policies due to the fear that Afghans would overstay—a common approach as more Afghans arrive along Turkey's eastern border.

Fears of a “New Refugee Crisis?” Changing Migration Landscape for Afghans

What has changed in migration management at the Iran-Turkey border recently, and how does this impact people fleeing the Taliban's new regime in the country?

New (positive) patterns can be observed, such as the ban on the deportation of refugees to Afghanistan from both EU countries and Turkey. However, the European Council's statement on the situation in Afghanistan¹⁶ indicates that the EU will also strengthen its migration management and border externalization in Afghanistan's neighborhood and transit countries. The statement stresses that “the EU will continue with those countries to prevent illegal migration from the region, reinforce border management capacity and prevent migrant smuggling.” This approach is based on the EU's fear of “uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration,” similar to the “2015 migration crisis,” that would stem from Afghan refugees.¹⁷ This means that aid for Afghans will be provided to neighboring states, which already bear the most responsibility for those fleeing (e.g., Pakistan, Iran, Turkey), while EU member states, with the support of Frontex, will continue to shield their borders to prevent unauthorized entries on EU soil.

President Erdoğan recently asserted that Turkey is not “Europe's refugee warehouse,” calling for more

responsibility from the EU side instead of merely negotiating externalization policies,¹⁸ such as outsourcing responsibly for refugees to non-EU states. The president's position is particularly critical as the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) may potentially lose the support of more voters if the government chooses to accept Afghan refugees.¹⁹ Criticism of the government's refugee policies is fuelled by the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), which has criticized Erdoğan for mishandling migration in Turkey (i.e., striking deals with the EU).²⁰ The government is also under pressure for the mishandling of wildfires that broke out across Turkey in summer 2021,²¹ a failing economy under the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic, and recent tensions between Syrian refugees and their host communities in Ankara.²²

To prevent further migration from Afghanistan and seeking peace in the region, President Erdoğan has reacted positively toward the Taliban, saying, “The Taliban should be more comfortable with having these talks with Turkey as they do not have any aspect contradicting Turkey's beliefs.”²³ Moreover, Turkey's embassy remains open in Afghanistan to keep an eye on the situation of Afghans fleeing toward Turkey's eastern border with Iran and to tackle “the immigration wave of Afghans to Turkey,” as stated by Erdoğan.²⁴ Diplomatic relations with the Taliban and Turkey's remaining presence in Afghanistan are closely correlated with migration management in Eastern Turkey.

When moving the discussion from diplomatic negotiations to military operations on the ground, it is important to highlight that Turkey has upgraded its controls along its border with Iran to prevent potential Afghan migration. In August, Turkey's Defence Minister Hulusi Akar announced that Turkey has sent more troops to its eastern border, in addition to completing the concrete wall along the border in Van.²⁵ Two reconnaissance and two commando companies from the Land Forces Command, three companies and a battalion from the Gendarmerie General Command, and 750 special operations police officers, consisting of 35 teams from the General Directorate of Security, were sent to the region with armored vehicles.²⁶ Turkey also launched a new Coast Guard Command Unit with thermal and night vision cameras as well as radar and sonar devices on

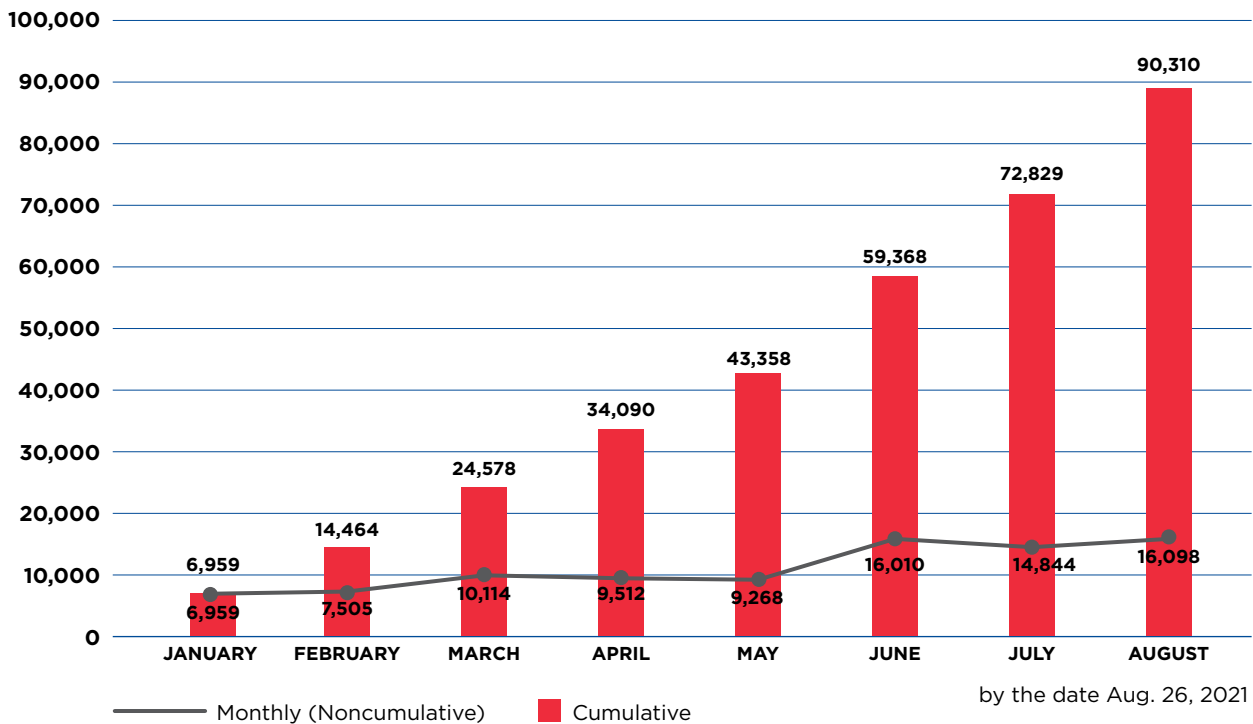
Lake Van to prevent migrant smuggling by boat.²⁷ Mehmet Emin Bilmez, governor of the eastern border province of Van, said that through these measures, “We want to show the whole world that our borders are unpassable.”²⁸ To strengthen this image of Turkey’s strong border controls and migration measures, local authorities invited groups of journalists to the border with Iran and to the detention center in Kurubaş, which one journalist described during our conversation as a “staged parade” in line with the government’s image.

The fear of migration and extraordinary border measures in Turkey are based on a possibility of another “migration crisis” breaking out in Turkey rather than the reality on the ground. Travelling through the Başkale District—known for its extensive smuggling operations and border transit hub for Afghans—and the Bitlis District—a transit area for people before moving toward Western Turkey—I could hardly see any signs of the “new migration crisis.” There were no Afghans travelling in large groups but merely the fear of “migration waves” based on a video shared by local journalists on social media in July.²⁹ The video depicted a “convoy

of tens of thousands of people” travelling across mountains from Iran to Turkey. However, since the video footage does not correlate with any concrete narratives, it is questionable evidence of a large Afghan flight near Turkey’s borders.

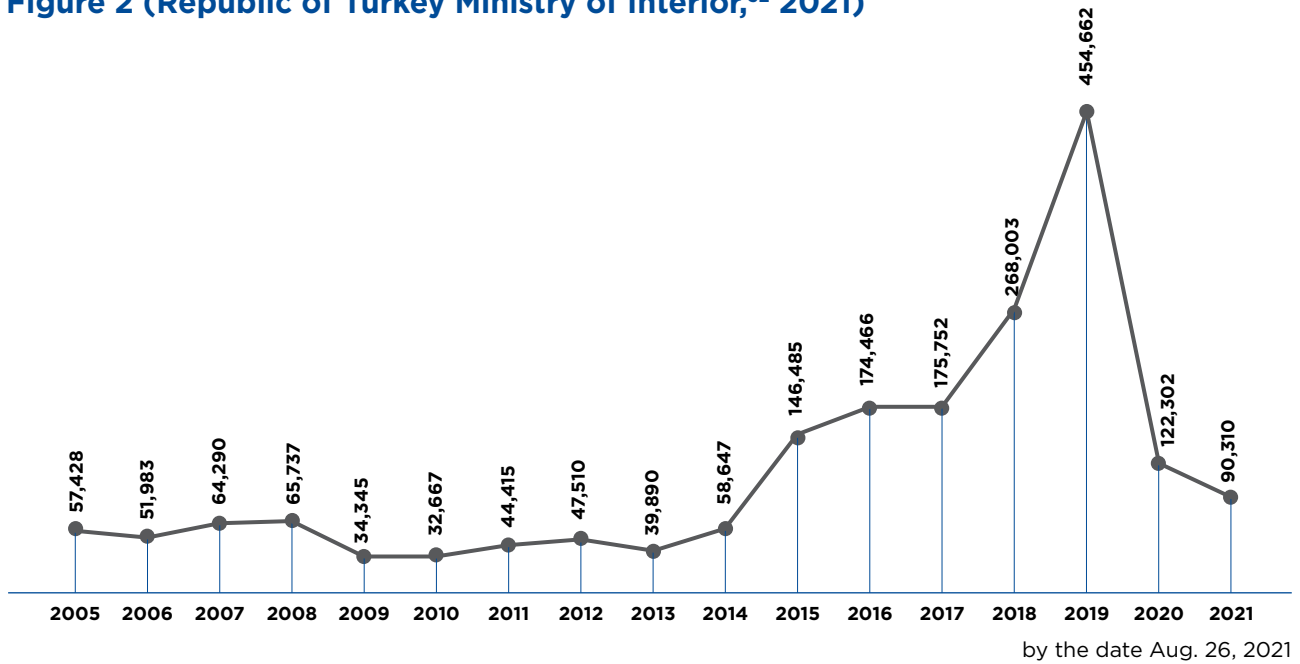
While local NGOs claimed during my interviews with them in July that around 1,000 people were arriving daily, my observation is that there are no “large convoys” of refugees along the border with Iran. This is also evident from the data available by the Turkish Ministry of Interior,³⁰ which shows the numbers of “irregular migrants” along routes in Eastern Turkey as the good weather conditions during summer months open the routes for people fleeing Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Syria, and other countries, resulting in more arrivals (Figure 1). This data indicates that the current situation of migration is even below that of the previous years of border crossing attempts. Turkey reported that by September 2021, 90,310 “irregular” migrants have been captured so far this year, 38,341 of which are Afghans. This is in contrast to a total of 454,662 irregular migrants who were captured in 2019 (Figure 2).

Figure 1 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior,³¹ 2021)



Source: This data belongs to Directorate General of Migration Management

Figure 2 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior,³² 2021)



Source: This data belongs to Directorate General of Migration Management

Nevertheless, the fear of a “new crisis” and newly reinforced border measures subject Afghans who do flee the Taliban’s rule to more surveillance at the border and key transit cities in Eastern Turkey, which also result in massive push-backs to Iran. A soldier from the *Jandarma* said during our interview that the National Police had told soldiers from the gendarmerie to push all migrants back to Iran to avoid the financial burden to accommodate them in removal centers. Recently, other security forces confessed to pro-government media outlet *Daily Sabah*³³ that migrants who were spotted at the border were returned to the Iranian side.

Interviews with Afghan refugees, the Van Bar Association, and anonymous aid workers further point to the increased severity of the push-backs of Afghans to Iran since Turkey paused deportations to Afghanistan due to humanitarian reasons. When a non-European and a non-Syrian person—e.g., an Afghan national—arrives in Turkey and wishes to apply for international protection, they are instructed to go to the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMM) to register, according to protections outlined in the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.³⁴ However, an aid worker in charge of registration of the newly arriving Afghans in Van spoke to me on condition

of anonymity saying, “There are not too many people who demand to be registered [in Van] as most people are immediately pushed back across the border [to Iran] ... The only way how Turkey deals with Afghans now are push-backs.”

Furthermore, “interception operations” have also intensified across key border areas and cities, leading to more push-backs of individuals who successfully arrived in Eastern Turkey and wish to register and apply for international protection with PDMM. “The police presence is higher. They search in people’s houses if they have a tip that someone hides Afghan refugees. Now, they push back to Iran anyone who is caught in Van city or further away from the border,” Ali, an Afghan in Van, told me during an interview. As Ali confirmed, the Teams of the Anti-Immigrant Smuggling and Border Gates Branch Directorate affiliated with the Van Police Department began operating in late August and “continue their efforts to intercept irregular migrants” in the Van region.³⁵

Afghans who have fled to Turkey and wish to register in Van said that they feel the constant fear of “being pushed back.” Esin, an eighteen-year-old girl who arrived in Van with her family in late August, told me that she was scared to leave their

house in Van. “I was outside of the house once with my little sister. We were stopped by the police, who told us to come with them. I knew they wanted to push us back to Iran as they do to others. I was so worried that they would take us to the border and we would get separated from our family. We ran away. Since then, I do not leave the house,” Esin said, pausing each time she saw lights from a police car reflected in the windows of her living room.

Final Remarks

The Afghans I talked to in Eastern Turkey carry with them stories of the Taliban killing their friends and relatives, forced disappearances, and forced marriages of girls who were taken from their families, as well as worries about their and their children's future in terms of education (especially girls) and access to work in Afghanistan. Yet, as indicated in this analysis, Afghans continue to navigate more struggles and violence en route to Turkey. Afghan families in Van also talked about their friends and relatives who recently wished to leave Afghanistan but could not do so due to the Taliban's control of internal borders as well as the Iranian Army pushing people back to Afghanistan.

Afghans' journeys are caught in between local security concerns in Eastern Turkey (i.e., the fight against terrorism) and international pressure from the EU—which intervenes with financial border externalization projects yet creates little resettlement opportunities in the EU beyond providing evacuation flights from Kabul. As Asif, a twenty-six-year-old Afghan in Van told me “Look at this border, how it is protected. It is not only because Turkey does not want us. It is because no countries want us, and they spend lots of money to keep us away.”

The current EU-Turkey negotiations and the direction of a future deal indicate the growing tensions between humanitarian and security concerns along Turkey's eastern border, observable through the increase of push-backs of Afghans back to Iran. While Turkey rejects hosting another refugee population (after hosting nearly 4 million Syrians) and the EU has no intentions to accept Afghans, the use of refugees as bargaining chips for financial and political purposes on both sides (Turkey and

the EU) is expected to continue. Refugees lacking safe and legal transit as a result of this international (non)cooperation will continue to pay with their lives as they are pushed to rely on smugglers to flee, such as the 60 Afghans who drowned in Lake Van in June 2020.

Finally, the local militarized context cannot be side-lined from EU-Turkey talks to avoid human rights violations and forced movement of international migrants as well as Kurds—both groups who navigate life and movement in border areas—from Eastern Turkey. While walking across the Seyrantepe cemetery in Van with a local gravedigger, the gravedigger pointed at numerous graves and said that they were for the bodies of Afghans who had died while being smuggled, crossing the border in the winter, or were shot by the Iranian Army. These bodies were buried next to those who had been killed during armed clashes between the military and the PKK. Both the EU and Turkey must move away from further securitization of migration, especially in Eastern Turkey, where military zones and extraordinary measures have been normalized since the 1980s. Such a securitized environment serves to conceal the human rights violations of the diverse people crossing the border without authorization.

Endnotes

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Karolína Augustová is a 2020/21 Mercator-IPC Fellow at Istanbul Policy Center (IPC), Sabancı University.

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İstanbul Politikalar Merkezi

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-İstanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu

IPC

ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER

SABANCI UNIVERSITY

STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE