

THE MIGRATION OF DOCTORS FROM TURKEY TO GERMANY: WHAT THE NUMBERS TELL US

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Met with heightened public interest and put under intense scrutiny following Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement “If they want to go, let them [*Giderlerse gitsinler*],”¹ the heated debate about doctors’ migration from Turkey to Germany is unlikely to die down anytime soon. Most recently, Fahrettin Koca, Turkey’s Minister of Health, has suggested that doctors emigrating from Turkey are leaving solely for financial reasons, rubbing his fingers together in an apparent gesture to insinuate counting money during a ministerial meeting. He later corrected his statement by suggesting that he did not mean to include those leaving for “developed” countries such as Germany and the UK in order to benefit from their development but was rather referring to those immigrating to countries such as Qatar, Dubai, and Kuwait for money.² This correction, however, did not put a stop to the backlash from doctors and the Turkish Medical Association as Koca’s statements perpetuate the disregard of the root causes of doctors’ dissatisfaction with working and living in Turkey.

Within this tense context, this analysis will provide relevant statistics to draw a clearer picture about the immigration of doctors from Turkey to Germany, one of the chief destinations for physician migration. It will later turn to the German context in order to unpack the dynamics of doctor migration at play there.

Turkish Doctors in Germany

While Turkey’s Ministry of Health does not publish any statistics regarding the migration of doctors from Turkey, the Turkish Medical Association makes available the number of good standing certificates requested from their institution. This certificate, widely known as *iyi hal belgesi*, is a document that is required to move abroad as a doctor. Hence, the demand for this certificate gives us an idea about doctors looking to move abroad. Figure 1 illustrates how this demand has changed from 2012 to 2023.³

Figure 1: Number of good standing certificates requested from the Turkish Medical Association

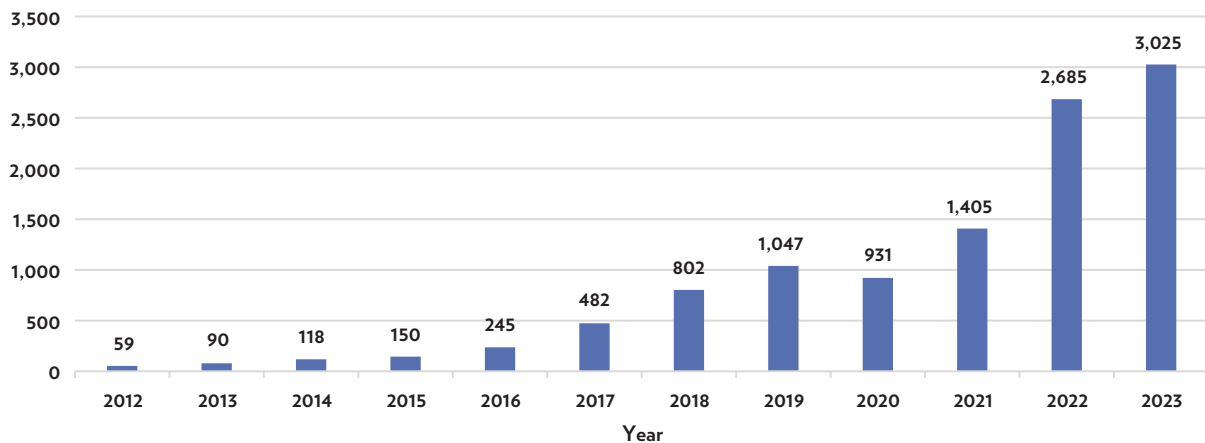


Figure 2: Number of Turkish doctors in Germany

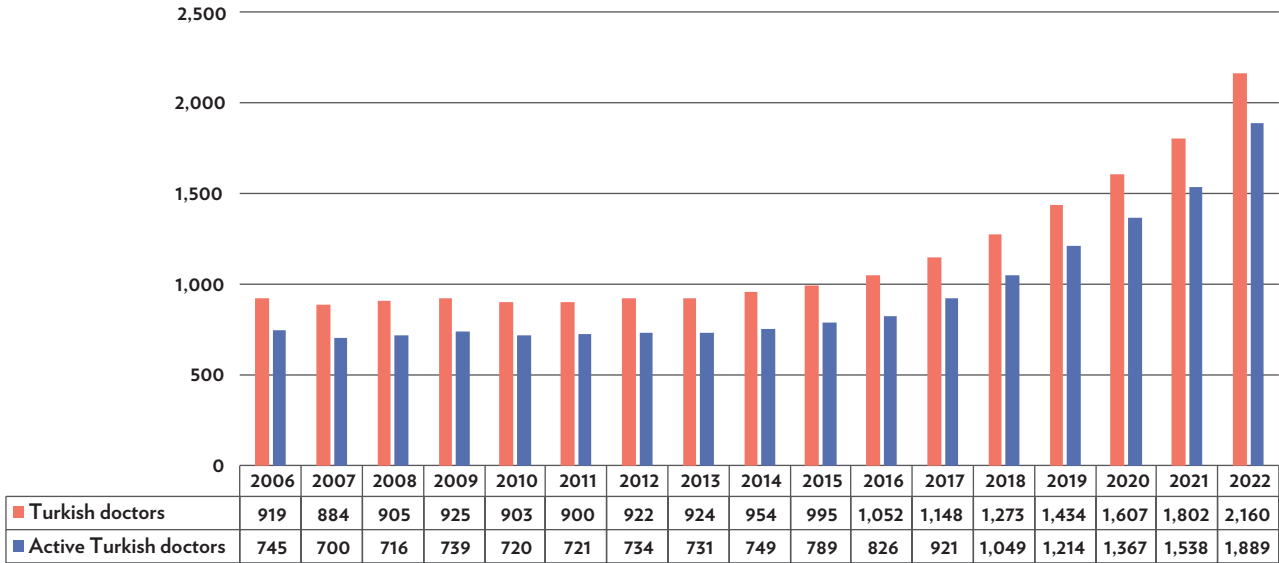


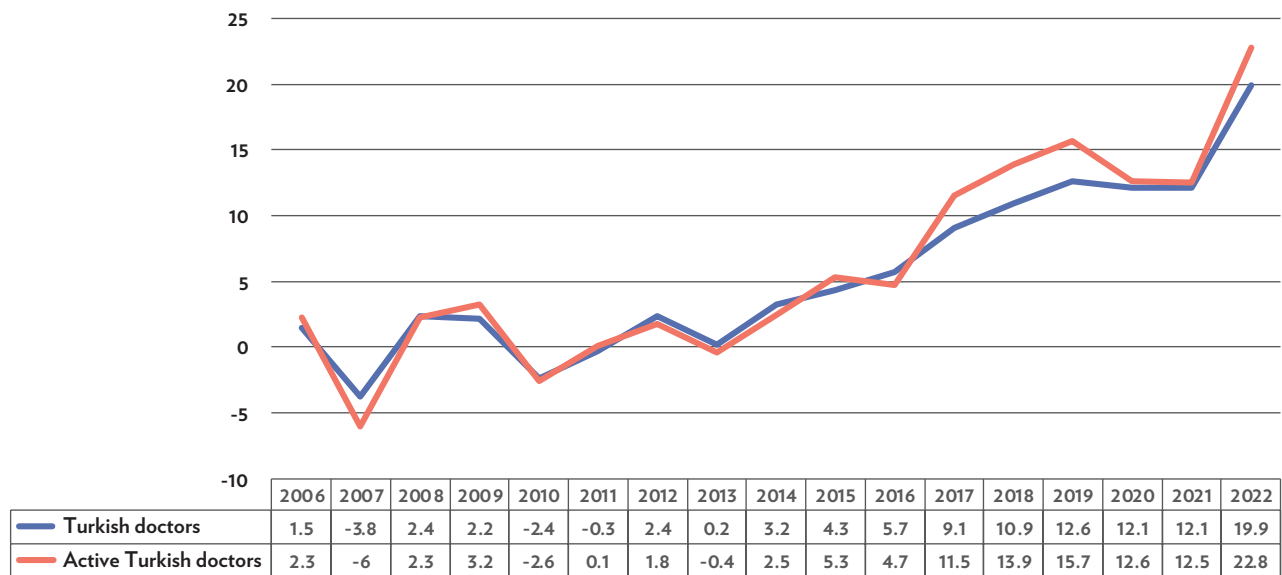
Figure 1 shows the clear upward trajectory of the demand for the good standing certificate, with the drop in 2020 as one exception, possibly due to mobility constraints brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Demand for good standing certificates has risen by 12.7% from 2022 to 2023, and by a record 91.1% from 2021 to 2022. While these statistics are significant in understanding the extent to which physician migration can be expected to grow, it does not provide the full picture. On the one hand, certificates of good standing are not requested exclusively from the Turkish Medical Association. The Ministry of Health General Directorate of EU and Foreign Affairs can also deliver these certificates without the association being involved in the process.⁴ Furthermore, this number denotes the demand to work abroad and not the number of doctors who have left or will necessarily leave the country. Hence, a more accurate picture can be drawn by deriving statistics annually published by the German Medical Association (*Bundesärztekammer*) on the number of doctors

working in Germany based on their nationality to arrive at a better understanding of the change in the migration of doctors from Turkey to Germany.⁵

The number of medical doctors leaving Turkey for Germany has been increasing consistently and rapidly in the last decade. Figure 2 illustrates the total number of these doctors from 2006 to 2022 as well as the number of those that were actively working at the time of data collection.⁶

As the graph above displays, since 2011, the number of Turkish doctors actively working in Germany has been steadily increasing, with 2013 being the cut-off point for the acceleration of the increase. This should draw our attention to the political and economic developments that have led to this migration in the last decade. The most recent data shows that as of December 2022, there are 1,889 doctors actively working in Germany that hold Turkish citizenship. In addition to this, we can also trace the trend in the annual percentage change in the number of Turkish doctors in Germany, as displayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Annual growth rate of the number of Turkish doctors in Germany (%)



The annual change in the number of Turkish doctors in Germany peaked in 2022, a 22.8% change from 2021 to 2022 when active physicians are considered. This shows that the last two years have been significant for physician migration. Unless and until policies pertaining to the Turkish healthcare system, including doctors’ working conditions, are reevaluated and ameliorated, it is anticipated that the speed in which doctors migrate to Germany will increase in the upcoming years.

Statistics regarding the increased immigration of doctors to Germany should be considered in association with other indicators, especially in relation to the management of the healthcare system and, relatedly, doctors’ job satisfaction. For instance, as of 2021, Turkey has one of the lowest numbers, 2.2, of practicing doctors per 1,000 inhabitants, according to OECD data, and one of the highest consultations per doctor, 5,033, among OECD countries, surpassed only by Korea. These numbers illustrate how overburdened the Turkish healthcare system is, one of the reasons why doctors are looking to leave the country.⁷

Another research study conducted by Istanbul Ekonomi Araştırma indicates that 69% of doctors believe that their life standards have diminished since they started working as a doctor, while 95% believe that their standard of living is worse than previous generations of doctors.⁸ Additionally, there is a clear shift from doctors being seen as a source of authority to challenging this authority, which is reflected in the governments’ limited efforts to ameliorate doctors’ working and living conditions.

While this is only a minor selection of the data that displays the ways in which doctors experience and perceive the healthcare system in Turkey, this provides a compelling case that motivates doctors to seek job opportunities abroad. Within these opportunities, Germany stands out as one of the chief destinations. Of the various reasons for this, one of them is Germany’s increasing and urgent need for immigrant doctors. We will now turn to statistics from Germany to unpack the physician dynamics there.

The Other Side: “Make It in Germany?”

While doctors in Turkey are increasingly looking for opportunities to work abroad, with Germany being one of the chief destinations, Germany has been on the hunt to import doctors from various countries as it “loses more doctors every year to foreign countries than it gains through immigration.”⁹ While doctors from various countries are seeking employment in Germany, many German doctors are either retiring or emigrating due to low wages and to attain a better work-life balance in other countries. When this is coupled with an aging population with heightened medical needs, Germany finds itself in a difficult spot, hence making calls to attract more doctors. The website Make It in Germany, the official portal for high-skilled migration, says, “A new generation of medical personnel is urgently required in Germany. The demand will continue to grow in the years to come – especially since many physicians in hospitals will be retiring.”¹⁰ Hence, it can be said that “the functioning of the German health system increasingly depends on the immigration of foreign doctors.”¹¹ In this section, I will provide an

overview of the statistics pertaining to immigrant doctors in Germany and where Turkish doctors stand in relation to this bigger picture.

The overall number of immigrant doctors has been steadily increasing in Germany, which has reached almost 60,000 by the end of 2022. There are 421,303 doctors actively working in Germany, hence immigrant doctors make up 14.2% of all doctors in the country. Figure 4 shows the number of immigrant doctors in Germany per year from 1999 to 2022.

This figure shows that the percentage of Turkish doctors out of all immigrant doctors has not always been on the rise. On the contrary, from 2006 to 2016, this percentage has seen a steady decline, with a low of 1.98% in 2016. However, from this year onward, the percentage of Turkish doctors from among immigrant doctors has started to increase and has been consistently doing so. Despite this increase, it still has not reached the earlier high that we saw between 2006 and 2010 due to the influx of doctors from many different countries around the world. However, based on the existing data, it is possible to anticipate further increase in the percentage of Turkish doctors in the upcoming years.

Figure 4: Immigrant doctors in Germany

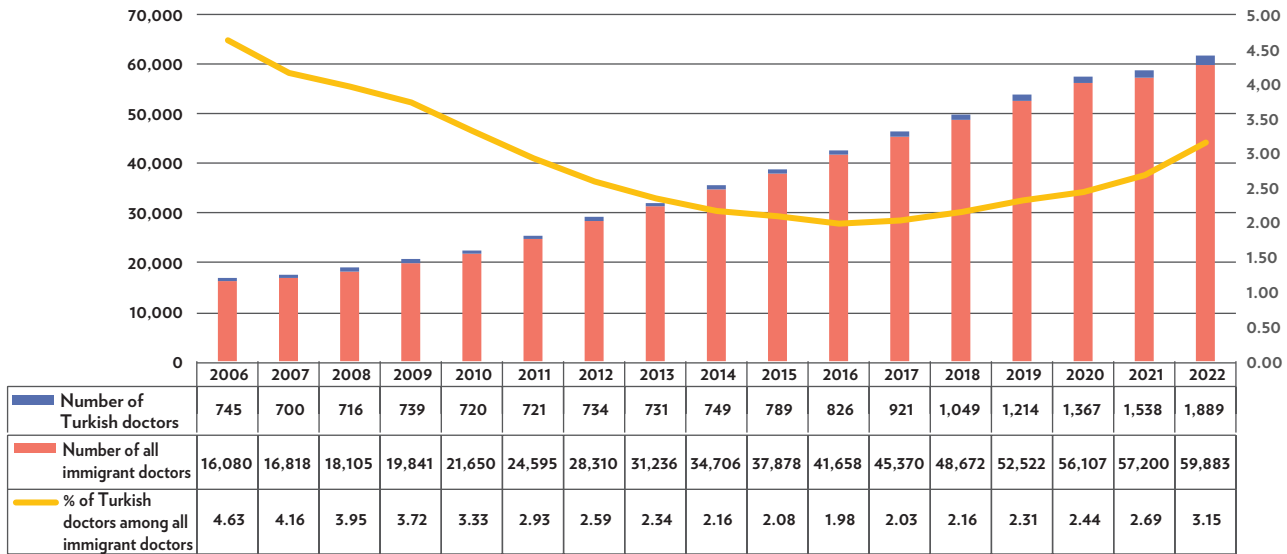
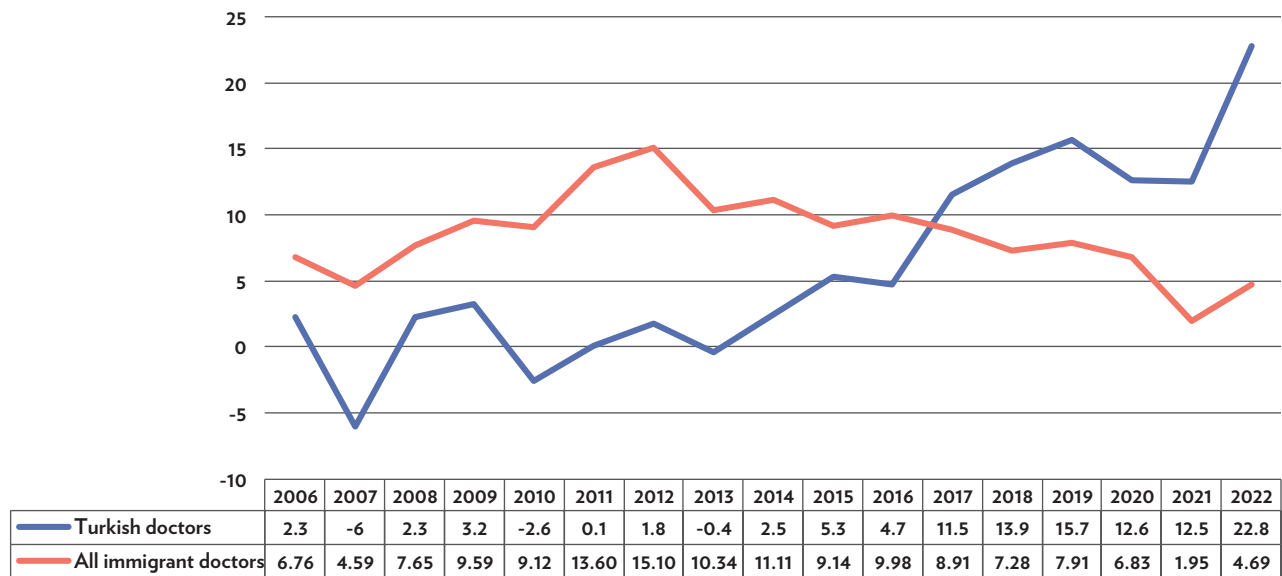


Figure 5: Annual growth rate of the number of immigrant doctors in Germany (%)



Another point of comparison between Turkish doctors and all immigrant doctors in Germany can be made by analyzing their annual growth rates. Figure 5 provides this comparison.

Figure 5 shows that until 2016, the annual rate of change in the number of Turkish doctors has been below that of all immigrant doctors. In other words, the growth rate of immigrant doctors superseded that of Turkish doctors. However, from 2017, this dynamic is reversed, and the number of Turkish doctors in Germany started to grow more rapidly than all immigrant doctors. This is a significant point in that while Turkey does not hold the top spot in the number of doctors that emigrate from each country to Germany, it does have a unique pattern that foreshadows further and rapid increase, especially when compared to other countries overall.

Conclusion

The numbers from both Turkey and Germany exhibit the growing trend of Turkish doctors practicing in Germany. Even though the share of Turkish doctors does not take the lead among the number of immigrant doctors in Germany by country, the share of Turkish doctors can be expected to increase even more in the upcoming years. This should initiate policymakers both in Turkey and in Germany to take action accordingly and plan policies ahead of time. While Turkey should reevaluate the working conditions of doctors, Germany should make both the transition, relocation, and integration of immigrant doctors, including those emigrating from Turkey, more attractive and smoother.

Notes

- 1 | In Turkish, this phrase has strong connotations similar to the phrase “good riddance” in English; “Erdoğan: Doktorlar Gidiyorlarsa Gitsinler,” T24, YouTube video, posted March 8, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ImlbVfuVnis&t=3s>.
- 2 | “Fahrettin Koca’dan ‘para sayma işareti’ açıklaması: Kırdığım bir meslektaşım varsa onlardan özür dilerim,” T24, December 17, 2023, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/fahrettin-koca-dan-para-sayma-isareti-aciklamasi-kirdigim-bir-meslektasim-varsa-onlardan-ozur-dilerim,1143442>.
- 3 | Türk Tabipler Birliği (@ttborgtr), “TTB’ye ‘İyi Hal Belgesi’ başvuru sayısı,” X, December 29, 2023, <https://x.com/ttborgtr/status/1740746140457279822?t=AFTiEhQHosota2EZF5UaeQ&s=08>.
- 4 | “İyi Hal (Good Standing) Belgesi,” T.C. Sağlık Bakanlığı Avrupa Birliği and Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü, November 6, 2023, <https://disab.saglik.gov.tr/TR-77584/iyi-hal-good-standing-belgesi.html>.
- 5 | “Ergebnisse der Ärztestatistik zum 31.12.2022,” Bundesärztekammer, <https://www.bundesaerztekammer.de/baek/ueberuns/aerztestatistik/>. The statistics for every year from 1996 to 2022 can be accessed from this webpage.
- 6 | It must be noted that these numbers do not include doctors who have German citizenship, nor do they include doctors who have moved to Germany and are yet to obtain their work permit (*Approbation*). At the time of publication, 2023 statistics were yet to be announced.
- 7 | OECD/European Union, *Health at a Glance: Europe 2022: State of Health in the EU Cycle* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1787/d0057e82-en>, 178–179.
- 8 | “Türkiye Raporu: Türkiye’de Doktorların Yaşam Kalitesi,” İstanbul Ekonomi Araştırma, May 2022, <https://turkiyeraporu.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Doktorlar-Raporu-Mayis-2022.pdf>.
- 9 | T. Kopetsch, “The Migration of Doctors to and from Germany,” *Journal of Public Health* 17 no. 1 (2009): 33–39, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10389-008-0208-7>.
- 10 | German Federal Government, “Physicians,” Make It in Germany, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.make-it-in-germany.com/en/working-in-germany/professions-in-demand/physicians>.
- 11 | OECD/European Union, *Health at a Glance*.

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.

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The interpretations and conclusions made in this analysis belong solely to the author and do not reflect IPC’s official position

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