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Irregular Migration from Türkiye to The United States

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Abstract

The United States' southern border has been witnessing a record increase in illegal entrance of Turkish citizens. According to the data provided by the United States border patrol, during the 2023 fiscal year, 15.542 Turkish citizens entered the country illegally through the United States-Mexican border. This number was under 100 per year over the last decade. Although it has not gotten much attention in media and academic circles, the rate of the increase in the number of Turkish citizens entering the United States illegally is alarming. While the main reasons of the high numbers of people migrating from Erdogan's Türkiye include general insatiation regarding economic and political problems, substandard working conditions and underdeveloped fundamental human rights protection system United States' prestigious image in the world, strong economy and promising future can be counted among the main reasons that migrants prefer it as destination country. The surprising rise of Turkish citizens choosing Mexico as a transit country to enter the States is attributed to the transnational criminal organizations' connections to Türkiye. The dire circumstances Turkish people experience and their endeavor to find a way to "get out of Türkiye" plays into the hands of cartels. The article points out this multilateral phenomenon and sets forth the push and pull factors, elaborating the involvement of transnational criminal organizations in Mexico.

Keywords: Irregular Migration; Emigration; Human Smuggling

Introduction

When it comes to international migration, Türkiye constitutes a special case for researchers. According to the latest data provided by the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), there are more than 5 million foreign nationals present in Türkiye, 3.7 million of whom are seeking international protection (IOM, 2022). Alongside its host country position, Türkiye is also a sending country and transit country. Türkiye has been a sending country particularly since the beginning of the second half of the 20th century. Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium and other developed European countries, and the United States are among the primary destinations of migrants from Türkiye. With the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly in Syria, Türkiye's role as a host country has become

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more crucial while the same reasons have made it one of the most popular transit countries in the world. When it comes to emigration from Türkiye, although most of emigrants head to Europe, available data show that the number of migrants from Türkiye to the United States is on rise as well (Isacson, 2022). While many well-educated, qualified Turkish citizens have been looking for employment opportunities abroad to escape from the country, low-skilled people and the qualified ones who could not make their way abroad legally tend to resort illegal channels to enter the country they wish to migrate to. This paper examines the rise in Turkish citizens migrating to the United States. The research question of the paper is “*Why is irregular migration of Turkish citizens to the United States on rise?*”

According to the data provided by the United States Customs and Border Protection, number of Turkish people who were encountered entering the United States irregularly over Mexico in 2022 fiscal year has reached over fifteen thousand, more than ten times higher than the year before (Isacson, 2022). One of the primary reasons behind this rise can be the increasing connections of Mexico-based transnational criminal organizations with Türkiye. Hence the despair of Turkish people plays into the hands of transnational criminal organizations.

When it comes to the reasons behind Turkish people’s choosing the United States as destination country, the fact that United States is among the top developed countries, the positive image of the United States in the globe regarding respect to human rights, rule of law, equality and freedom, and better working and living conditions can be counted. Not less importantly, the fact that the existing Turkish people in the United States reduce transaction costs of migration for their relatives and acquaintances leads network migration and charms more people from Türkiye to the United States.

Research Design

This study focuses on the increasing number of Turkish citizens entering the United States irregularly. This study does not aim to put forth all the reasons, motivations behind the rising migration trend from Türkiye to the United States. It aims to put forth the general motivations and causes of them instead.

The study involves both qualitative and quantitative research methodology. In this regard, alongside the literature review of relevant previous academic studies and a systematic analysis of news articles, numeric data from the United States Customs and Border Protection reports and other relevant sources has been utilized.

Additionally, the research has been reinforced using empirical evidence. In this framework, 22 migrants who entered the United States irregularly were interviewed to compare the published information with the information gotten from the first people. The interviews were semi-structured and each of them lasted for about 30 minutes. The questions asked aimed to find out further information about the migration decisions of the migrants, their motivations, the reasons they migrated from Türkiye, the factors making them choose the United States as the destination country, and other relevant information. The interviewees were recruited randomly via casual encounters in different places and occasions, be it in a restaurant, in the street or through other social interactions. All interviews were held in New York City, one of the cities Turkish migrants choose to live in after migrating to the United States. Although it was not intentional, all the interviewees happened to be males. Similarly, although it was not intended while choosing the interviewees, all the interviewees entered the United States via



paid services provided by transnational criminal organizations/human smugglers, which can be seen as an indicator of the dominance of these illegal groups in cross-border migration, and their ever-growing 'business'. The ages of the interviewees were between 22 and 47. All interviewees were Turkish citizens and ethnically, 18 interviewees were Kurds while the remaining 4 were Turks.

In what follows, after drawing a general picture of the general situation at the United States-Mexican border, the new migration trend from Türkiye to the United States will be articulated in stages based on the information obtained from the literature review and the interviews, and the study ends with the conclusion section.

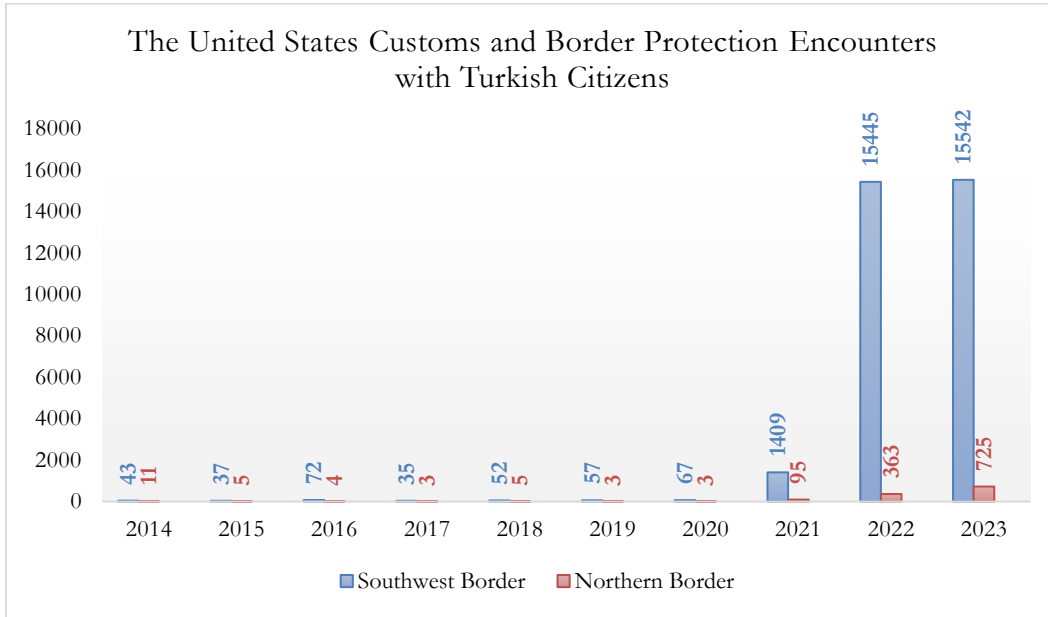
The Rise of Irregular Migration from Türkiye to the United States

The United States-Mexican border has been one of the most dynamic borders in the world. Despite the relative decrease in the last years, Mexico still constitutes the country sending the highest number of migrants to the United States (Isacson, 2022). Even though Mexico's own citizens takes the first place in the list of nations migrating to the United States, they are not the only ones. Many Central and South American countries' citizens use Mexico as a transit country to reach the United States and increasingly, people from all over the world are joining the ones entering the United States over Mexico. Transnational criminal organizations have a significant role in smuggling both Mexicans and other nationalities in the United States. The migrants pay high amount of money to the *coyotes* for facilitating their entrance to the United States (Rohrlich, 2019). In the recent years, Turkish citizens also have extensively been using this way to enter the United States illegally.

It must be noted that the Northern border of the United States has recently witnessed more irregular entrances of Turkish nationals, too. However, these activities remained relatively low compared to the Southwest border.

Based on the data provided by the United States Customs and Border Protection, the chart below has been created to provide a better explanation as to the rise of irregular entries of Turkish citizens to the United States. The chart demonstrates the number of Turkish citizens encountered by the United States Customs and Border Protection at the Southwest border and Northern border per year for the last 10 fiscal years.

Figure 1. Encounters with Turks at the Southwest border and Northern border (2014-2023 fiscal years) (Source: US Customs and Border Protection)



As has been examined by many academics (e.g: Er, 2023; Erdi Öztürk and Taş, 2022), emigration from Türkiye, particularly emigration of young and educated people has increased significantly in recent years. Developed European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have received more asylum applications, visa applications and irregular migration from Türkiye than before. For these reasons, the rate of rejection for visa applications of Turkish nationals in German embassies has manifolded in the last 2 years (Diken, 2022). In this regard, a slight increase in irregular migration from Türkiye to the United States would not be a surprise. As can be seen in figure 1, starting from 2021 fiscal year, there is a gradual yet not extreme increase in encounters with Turkish nationals entering the United States irregularly from the Northern border. The number of Turkish citizens caught by the United States Customs and Border Protection at the Northern border for the 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 fiscal years was 3, 95, 363 and 725, respectively. However, the picture at the Southwest border of the United States is far more striking. The number of Turkish nationals encounters at the United States-Mexico border for the 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 fiscal years was 67, 1409, 15.445, and 15.542, respectively. Why the numbers from the Southwest border (United States-Mexico) are so much higher than the ones from the Northern border (United States-Canada)? As will be discussed below, one of the explanations can be the increasing connections of Mexico-based transnational criminal organizations with Türkiye.

The number of Turkish nationals caught at the Northern border of the United States per year was maximum 11 during the last decade while the number of Turks encountered at the Southwest border per year was under 100 throughout the same period. A large bulk of Turkish



migrants have preferred El Paso and the surrounding area to enter the United States (Isacson, 2022). It should also be pointed out that, despite the record increase in Turkish migrants arriving in the United States irregularly, the proportion of them among total number of migrants crossing to the United States is still quite small. This fact causes lack of attention to the drastic increase in Turkish migrants as even the number after the rise constitutes a small one in the big picture. Under the following titles, details on the new migration trend from Türkiye to the United States will be elaborated.

Push Factors

Different emigration incidents since the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye including the mass migration trends of Turkish citizens to European countries, particularly to West Germany in the second half of the 20th century are among the reasons that Türkiye is traditionally known as an emigration country (Kirişçi, 2007). Migration flows from Türkiye to developed European countries such as Germany, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Austria still continue in different forms, be it family reunion, study, work, refuge or irregular migration. Emigration from Türkiye to these countries has increased significantly in recent years. Data from the German border protection authorities demonstrates that the number of Turkish citizens being caught entering Germany without valid residence or travel documents increased from 2,077 in 2019 to 9,094 in the 2022, marking a 338 per cent rise (Kryeziu, 2023).

The restrictive governance in conjunction with security concerns stemming from various sources, including severe pressure and intolerance against the people supporting opposition parties in Türkiye are among the top reasons pushing people to seek ways to migrate in another country. The limitations imposed by the government in freedom of speech, fairness, employment based on competence in public institutions etc. can motivate people to look for a different place to live in. The answer of an interviewee (the majority of the interviewees answered this question with similar words) to the question “*What made you consider migrating abroad?*” was as following:

“I have noticed that the leading party in Türkiye is completely closed to any type of criticism from the people, the ones who think differently than the government face pressure, restrictions including imprisonment in some cases, there is no freedom of speech, the governmental system is corrupted, and it is getting worse and worse. There is no sense in living under those conditions.”

Turkish economy has been going through hard times in the last years, particularly after 2018. The friction between Türkiye and the United States following the failed coup d’etat in Türkiye in 2016 exacerbated its economy. The recession shows itself with sharp decrease in the value of Turkish Lira, high inflation rate, increasing borrowing costs and correspondingly increasing loan defaults. Only in 2021, Turkish Lira lost 44% of its value (Turak, 2022). Dire economic, working and living conditions in Türkiye were frequently mentioned while counting the reasons behind interviewees’ decisions to migrate. One of the answers to the question “*How would you evaluate the current economic circumstances in Türkiye?*” was:

“We used to wake up almost every day with another news simply telling us that affording a normal life in Türkiye was more difficult. Prices of households, food and other things people need in everyday life has been going higher and higher while the income people get has not risen at the same speed. The minimum wage in Türkiye has been doubled with the last decision but even that does not help because the expenditures increase

exponentially in a very short time. So, we could not afford to meet even the basic necessities of an average family although we worked really hard and under really severe conditions, without proper protection.”

The frictions in the society in Türkiye is one of the salient reasons behind certain groups' will to migrate from the country. A significant proportion of the interviewees employed for this study consisted of Kurdish people. This can be partially because some of the cities where human smugglers have extended connections host a large Kurdish population, and partially because of the mentioned frictions. One of the interviewees answered the question “*What made you consider migrating abroad?*” as follows:

“I decided to migrate from Türkiye earlier this year, when I was fired from my construction job because the foreman heard me talking to my mom on phone in Kurdish. I tried to explain that the only language my mom talks is Kurdish and there is not any law forbidding speaking Kurdish now, but they did not listen to me and they fired me that day. That is when I felt need to seek future in another country.”

Pull Factors

Although the main idea behind many people's migration decisions is “*to get out of Türkiye*”, they do not want to go to just any other country. As mentioned before, most of the migrants from Türkiye prefer migrating to the developed industrial countries where they hope to have a better life. The United States is among the most desired countries for Turkish people mainly because of several reasons, including the following facts:

The United States is known in the world as a country with the people coming from different backgrounds and geographies, ethnicities, religions etc., which leads respect for diversity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2006). Therefore, just like millions of people in other regions, many Turkish citizens want to live in the United States knowing that they can somehow place themselves in this multicultural community.

The reputation and stability of dollar combined with an economy that is marked by steady growth and low inflation are among primary pull factors in the United States.

Historically, the U.S. has been viewed as the "land of opportunity". It has a low unemployment rate, abundance of sectors to choose for a career and attractive working conditions that allure people (Hanson, 2006). from all over the world, including Türkiye.

A well-developed legal system, properly functioning principle of rule of law and reliable judicial system are other attractive sides of the United States for migrants.

The leading medical developments and respected educational system in the United States (Kapur & McHale, 2005) offer a promising future especially to the people from countries like Türkiye.

Technological advancement is one of the most influential determinants in our age when people choose a place to live. Rapid advances in technology in the United States makes it a desirable destination for migrants from all over the world including Türkiye.

An important pull factor is that some people have either a relative, friend or acquaintance/s in the United States who would reduce the transaction costs of



migration for those particular people (Donato, Gabaccia, Holdaway, Manalansan, & Pessar, 2006), and this seems to be a crucial motivation for people who want to migrate to the United States from Türkiye.

The answer of one of the interviewees to the question regarding why he has chosen United States as destination was:

“I studied bachelor’s degree in Türkiye, but I have been unemployed for years. United States has plenty of good job offers for a young person like me. United States is known as the country of freedom. Nobody judges me for my opinions, the political party I support, my look, religion, or language. I made some research on the United States, and I thought I must live here at all costs. Unlike in Türkiye, you do not need to worry and get stressful about the future, the vagueness of your career, the economic situation here but you can enjoy the life as it is supposed to be.”

Why the United States-Mexico Border?

Globally, irregular migration or illegal migration dates back to the post-World War 1 years when border control started to get top priority for states. Although irregular migration was observed from 1930s on in Europe, the United States and some other parts of the world, it became a global and large-scale phenomenon only after 1970s. Therefore, it is accepted in international relations as a relatively new phenomenon (Duvel, 2011). However, being a new phenomenon does not mean that it is insignificant. Existing studies show that there are about 40 million irregular migrants worldwide, which equates to approximately 14% of the total number of migrants (UN Spencer and Triandafyllidou, 2022). Only in the United States, there are approximately 11 million irregular migrants (Rosenblum and Ruiz Soto, 2015).

Despite the fact that Mexico is known as the country sending the most irregular migrants to the United States, its transit country role is getting more and more crucial and being the transit country for the migration from Central America to the United States has been a significant policy priority in Mexico (Alba, 2013). In fact, with the expansion of transnational criminal organizations’ “business”, today Mexico is not only the main transit country for the migration from Central America to the United States but also for the migration from countries located in other continents that are thousands of kilometers away, including the case of this paper, Türkiye. This fact can be one of the main reasons behind the unprecedented increase in the US Customs and Border Protection’s encounters with Turkish citizens. In fact, in some years (e.g.: 2022) since the involvement of the human smugglers in the irregular migration from Türkiye to the United States, this type of migration from Türkiye to the States surpassed irregular migration from Türkiye to Germany, a country that is traditionally known as the one receiving the most immigration from Türkiye. Mexico is known as the country providing the easiest way to enter the United States for Turkish citizens with the involvement of transnational criminal organizations. Additionally, as discussed above, the number of Customs and Border Protection’s encounters with Turkish nationals at the United States’ Southwest border has been much higher than the Northern border in recent years. This unproportioned distribution of encounters between the Southern and Northern borders can be seen as another indicator showing the role of criminal organizations in the increase of irregular migration from Türkiye to the United States.

An interviewee answered the question “*How did your journey from Türkiye to the United States progress?*” as follows:

“Some of my relatives migrated to the United States using this way and I decided to do the same. I contacted to one of the guys who arrange the journey from Türkiye to the United States and paid him 5.000\$ as the first installment. They arranged the tickets etc. I flew to Istanbul and from there to Mexico City. They sent my photo to the guys at border control. So, they let me pass without a problem. Then they took us to a city called Juárez. I stayed in a hotel they arranged there for 2 days. After that, they took us to the border crossing point where they had partners among the passport controllers. They sent our photos to those controllers beforehand. So, he recognized us and let us cross the border. After passing the border, I sent a video to my family saying that I was in the United States territory, and they paid the other 5.000\$ to the guy who arranged the flights etc. After sending the video, I went to the United States police and surrendered. They sent me to a camp in Texas after keeping me for one week somewhere around the place I surrendered. I spent 75 days at the camp and then they let me go.”

Lacking ideal working conditions in Türkiye and limited visa opportunities offered by the developed industrial democracies leaves the illegal channels to enter those countries as the only way for the ones who are determined to migrate. The illegal way to migrate to the United States over Mexico has been spread across Türkiye by word of mouth which is likely to motivate more people to take the same journey. Many of the migrants I have conducted interviews with had bachelor’s degree. Most of them stated that they have tried to get visa and migrate to the United States (and other countries, in some cases) legally however their applications have been declined and they lost their hope in getting a visa. Hence, lack of international cooperation in creating safe and regular migration paths will likely keep creating ideal conditions for human smugglers to enhance their business.

I quote answer of an interviewee to the question *“What made you choose this way of migration?”*:

“I have bachelor’s degree. After realizing that I would not find a possibility to get a job in my field in Türkiye, I have decided to get a student visa and study master’s degree in the United States however my visa application was declined. So, migrating here over Mexico was the only opportunity I had.”

Legal or not, many people are ready to take any opportunity to migrate from Türkiye to the United States. An interviewee answered the question *“What was the role of human smugglers in your migration to the United States?”* was:

“When I heard about this opportunity, I was excited, and I decided to take it. It is the United States. I would never be able to migrate here in another way. I do not speak the language; I do not have high education... They (human smugglers) made it possible.”

As it was made clear throughout the discussion above, restrictive migration policies and lack of legal pathways for migrants creates the ideal conditions for transnational criminal organizations to thrive and grow their ‘businesses’ at the borders of various developed countries, including the United States. These organizations are the ones that control the borders of the developed states by smuggling as many people in as they want. Hence, not only do they benefit from the despair of the people in dire circumstances by charging them tens of thousands of dollars, but also, they pose a serious threat to the sovereignty of states in migration policy which is the main argument of the states that are reluctant to create a global migration regime in cooperation with other states. To change this state of affairs, more liberal migration policies and creation of legal pathways for migration are needed alongside international cooperation for migration governance and fight against illegal cross-border activities such as human smuggling and human trafficking.



Conclusion

Emigration from Türkiye has been on the rise in recent years. Worsening economic and political conditions in the country alongside the frictions among society can be counted among the main reasons for increased emigration. Alongside developed European democracies, the United States has been affected by this migratory movements as a destination country, too. Improved economic and political conditions, job opportunities and diversity are among the pull factors for the United States while presence of some migrants' relatives/acquaintances in the country also plays an important role by reducing transaction costs for the newcomers. Irregular migration has been used recently as a common way for Turkish citizens to reach to the United States. Data show that both at Northern border and at Southwest border, there has been increase in encounters with Turkish people entering the United States irregularly. Although, the increase at the Northern border seems insignificant, an increase from two-digit numbers to over fifteen thousand at Southwest border, i.e., United States-Mexico border in just three years is alarming. One of the main reasons of the cluster of irregular Turkish migrants at the United States-Mexico border can be the extensive activities of human smugglers and their connections with Türkiye. Hence, worsening situation in Türkiye, alluring life conditions in the United States and the "opportunity" created by human smugglers have been shaping thousands of Turks' migration decisions. In order to have a more effective migration governance curb the illegal activities of the transnational criminal organizations, more liberal migration policies and further cooperation in international migration are needed. Future research directions can include the obstacles on the way of a better international migration governance and the increasing irregular migration from Central and South American countries to the United States.

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