



POLICY BRIEF

Mediator in the Making? Turkey's Role and Potential in Afghanistan's Peace Process

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This policy brief reflects on Turkey's bilateral relations with Afghanistan amid the uncertainty about the nature of the US withdrawal and its impact on national and regional security dynamics. It outlines Ankara's interests and policy trajectories in its eastern neighbourhood and addresses the question why Turkey, hailed by many as a natural mediator in the Afghan Peace Process, has yet to come forward with a clear strategy. Moreover, focusing on shared concerns regarding displacement and migration, the brief explores the potential for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the European Union in and on Afghanistan.

As a historical ally of Afghanistan and seventh-largest troop contributor to NATO's mission there, Turkey has been engaged in Afghanistan in a measurable and multi-faceted way.¹ Turkey has deep cultural and linguistic links with Afghanistan, as a significant percentage of Afghanistan's population is ethnically Turkic. Afghanistan was the second nation to recognize the Republic of Turkey after the Soviet Union, in 1921, both who still celebrate 1 March as Turkish-Afghan Friendship Day. In the 1930s, Ankara supported Afghanistan's modernisation efforts by sending development experts and training the Afghan military. Turkey actively opposed the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and supported the Northern Alliance during the Civil War in the 1990s, particularly the Junbish party of ethnic-Uzbek leader Abdul Rashid Dostum, who fled to Turkey after the Taliban takeover. In November 2001, Turkey became the first Muslim country to join the U.S.-led military campaign in Afghanistan and currently runs NATO's Train Advise Assist Command – Capital in Kabul. In contrast to other NATO nations, Ankara appears willing to continue playing a role in Afghanistan. However, it has yet to come forward with a clear policy beyond President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 2015 affirmation that "Afghanistan's problems are our problems, and their success is our success."²

Turkey's multi-faceted policy engagement in Afghanistan

Ankara has based its foreign policy towards Afghanistan on four objectives: 1) maintaining the political stability and unity of the country, 2) strengthening existing political structures and institutions, 3) supporting the stability of its security environment, and 4) restoring peace and prosperity by eliminating terrorism and extremism.³ Turkey makes a significant financial contribution to Afghanistan on a bilateral level and through the UN and NATO. Since 2001, Ankara has invested an estimated \$1.1 billion in security, health, education, and infrastructure.⁴ Until May 2019, Turkey had contributed close to

\$86 million to the Afghan National and Security Defense Forces through the UNDP-managed Law and Order Trust Fund.⁵ Like other donors, Turkey is gradually reducing its assistance. Its \$75 million pledge at the 2020 Geneva Conference for the next two years makes up for only half of its \$150 million commitment for 2018-20.⁶ Turkish officials envisage though that this level of financial support can be maintained and perhaps even increased in the eventuality of a political settlement.

Ankara's key policy priority in Afghanistan beyond 2021 is stability, tied to specific concerns about the regional spread of extremist groups. The country has suffered spectacular terrorist attacks at the hands of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" (IS) in the last half-decade, with the threat of extremism compounded by the influx of millions of refugees and migrant workers from Syria and around the world, and a period of relatively open borders with more than one country mired in conflict. Turkey's deep engagement and trade relations with Central Asian states will rely on containing regional terrorism concerns to allow free movement and investment; its stake in NATO's Afghanistan mission can be seen as an indirect insurance policy on that investment and is not dissimilar from global terrorism concerns motivating other NATO members to remain in the country.

According to some senior Turkish policymakers and regardless of NATO's position on its future engagement, Ankara might maintain its financial commitments beyond 2020. Also, there have been reports that Ankara might consider extending its military presence regardless of a NATO withdrawal. There is some question as to whether a continued military presence without NATO partners would be feasible. However, Turkey has vested interests in Afghanistan's political landscape, and Ankara's recent experiences in unilateral interventions and cooperation with local forces in Libya and Syria may well influence a model of future security assistance in Afghanistan.⁷

¹ The project "From Uncertainty to Strategy: What are the odds for future win-win scenarios in Afghanistan's Neighborhood?" is an independent effort of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) to develop and discuss likely scenarios for Afghanistan's neighbors, policy adjustments, and the need for a comprehensive strategy among European foreign policymakers. This brief is part of a series authored by Andrew Watkins and Dr. Timor Sharan to discuss the implications of the US withdrawal and the ongoing Afghan Peace Negotiations on existing policy tools, strategic interests, and challenges for key stakeholders in- and outside of Afghanistan. The complete list of policy briefs may be accessed here: <https://afghanistan.fes.de/publications>

² Vinay Kaura, (2017), "Turkey Sees Expanding Role in Afghanistan", *Middle East Institute*, September 26, 2017.

³ See Republic of Turkey, [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website](#)

⁴ "Turkey to Provide Afghanistan \$75M in aid for Projects", *Daily Sabah*, 25 November 2020.

⁵ "Afghan National Army (ANA) Trust Fund, [NATO Factsheet](#), May 2019

⁶ "Turkey to Provide Afghanistan \$75M in aid for Projects", *Daily Sabah*, 25 November 2020: "Turkey pledges \$150M to Afghanistan", *Anadolu Agency*, 5. October 2016

⁷ "Syrian Mercenaries Sustain Turkey's Foreign Policy", *Deutsche Welle*, 30 September 2020.

Turkey's position in the current peace process: An ideal broker in name only?

Turkey's policymakers appear cautiously optimistic about the U.S.-initiated peace process, but also seems to harbour some doubts. Some officials have voiced serious concerns about the Taliban's willingness to make any substantive compromises, and whether the international community and the Afghan government have enough leverage to pressure the Taliban into compliance. Turkey has been in direct contact with the Taliban, but its primary course of action in the peace process has been to issue statements and signals empowering the Afghan government. Whether it is because of the many other economic and political issues requiring Ankara's attention or the prominence of other mediators like Turkey's ally Qatar, Turkey does not appear to seek a role in the Afghan peace process comparable to the one it holds in the Astana Process on Syria. However, it is worth noting that despite the erosion of bilateral relations between Turkey and the United States in the past decade, the U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad visited Ankara several times in late 2020 and coordination took place frequently.

Its congenial relations with Islamabad, Doha, and Kabul, along with a stable working relationship with Moscow despite its NATO membership, provide Turkey with an advantageous and influential position. And unlike Afghanistan's direct neighbours, bilateral relations with the Afghan government are not overshadowed by territorial or other disputes. Indeed, Turkey claims to be one of the very few countries engaged in Afghanistan that does not have a hidden agenda or a 'great game' at stake. One of the reasons this resonates with many despite the presence of Turkish soldiers on the ground for nearly two decades is Turkey's active membership in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). As a member of both OIC and NATO, Turkey could function as a bridge- and confidence builder, especially between Afghanistan's neighbours and international partners. Afghans have positively received Turkish troops, both in public and in training environments, in part due to the shared cultural ground of two majority-Muslim populations and common terminologies in Turkish and local languages. Unlike many other NATO countries, only once in the past 19 years was a Turkish official killed in a targeted Taliban attack in Afghanistan.⁸ In February 2020, Hizb-i-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar publicly supported the idea that Turkey should host the intra-Afghan peace talks instead of fellow NATO-ally Germany and publicly sided with Erdogan in his rift with the French President Emanuel Macron over Libya.⁹

Turkey has been a mediator in tensions between Afghanistan and its neighbours also in the past, including border disputes between Iran and Afghanistan in the 1960s. In the past two decades Turkey has continued to invest in its diplomatic relations with Pakistan, the Afghan government and, albeit quietly, the Taliban. Ankara has successfully hosted several annual summits between Islamabad and Kabul in a trilateral effort to ease tensions and has established direct contact with the Taliban leadership, which was briefly discussed in early 2010 to open an office in Ankara.¹⁰ During his last trip to

Ankara in November 2020, Chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation, Abdullah Abdullah, stressed the vital role Ankara can play in improving relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Many Afghan political leaders view Pakistan, a host and historical supporter of the Taliban, as the key to any lasting peace settlement and hope for Turkey to use its leverage over Islamabad accordingly. At the same time, Ankara has deepened its engagement with ethnic community leaders from northern Afghanistan over the last decade, notably, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has regularly resided in Turkey (first in 2008/09 and then 2015-2017). However, Turkey's outreach has traditionally extended beyond ethnic solidarity; other prominent opposition figures such as Hekmatyar have visited over the past years.

Thus far, Turkey has yet to rise to some Afghan leaders' expectations, hoping it might play a more active role. Indeed, Ankara, unlike the EU, several European states, and several of Afghanistan's neighbours, has neither appointed a special envoy to engage on the peace process nor has its outreach to individual Afghan political figures translated into more concrete courses of action with the Afghan government or the international support network congregating in Doha. This may in part simply be due to a lack of bandwidth, given Ankara's many pressing regional challenges, a faltering economic environment and domestic political turbulence. But even at times of more favourable conditions, Turkish foreign policy has never upheld Afghanistan as a top priority or implemented ambitious aims.

The Heart of Asia Istanbul process: A need for a new regional mechanism?

The last decades of conflict have seen a succession of regional initiatives conjured up by international powers, including 6+2 (Afghanistan's neighbours plus the United States and Russia) and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the U.S.). Several dialogues and forums have taken place in the last two years after the U.S.' initiation of talks with the Taliban jumpstarted the current peace process. While generating international interest and support statements for the Afghan peace, none of these initiatives has produced tangible action. An integrated regional mechanism to support the Afghan peace is still missing, which is particularly worrying given the state of U.S.' relations with key regional players including Iran, India, Russia – and not least Turkey itself.¹¹

The Heart of Asia Istanbul Process, launched in 2011, is the broadest-based initiative thus far, which has brought together 17 regional countries, plus 15 supporting countries and international organisations, among them the EU. It was initiated by Kabul and Ankara to promote regional security, economic and political cooperation centred on Afghanistan through dialogue and confidence-building measures.¹² Despite pledges to revive and upgrade the Heart of Asia platform to shore up regional coordination and confidence-building, critics point out that the process, a decade since the forum's inception, has been "declaration, but no implementation." Could a joint EU-Turkish initiative help revive the platform or develop a new regional mechanism for the Afghan talks?

⁸ ["Turkish Soldier Killed in Attack on Embassy Vehicle in Kabul"](#), *Associated Press*, 26 February 2015.

⁹ ["Hekmatyar Blasts Macron's Remark Against Turkey"](#), *Anadolu Agency*, 11 September 20120.

¹⁰ Ayaz Gul, (2019), ["Turkey to Host Trilateral Summit on Afghan Peace"](#), *Voice of America*, 4 January 2019.

¹¹ Diego Cupolo, (2021), ["Under Biden, US-Turkey Relations Face Delicate Balancing Act"](#), *Al-Monitor*, 20 January 2021.

¹² See the [Heart of Asia Website](#) for more details.

Is there room for EU-Turkey cooperation?

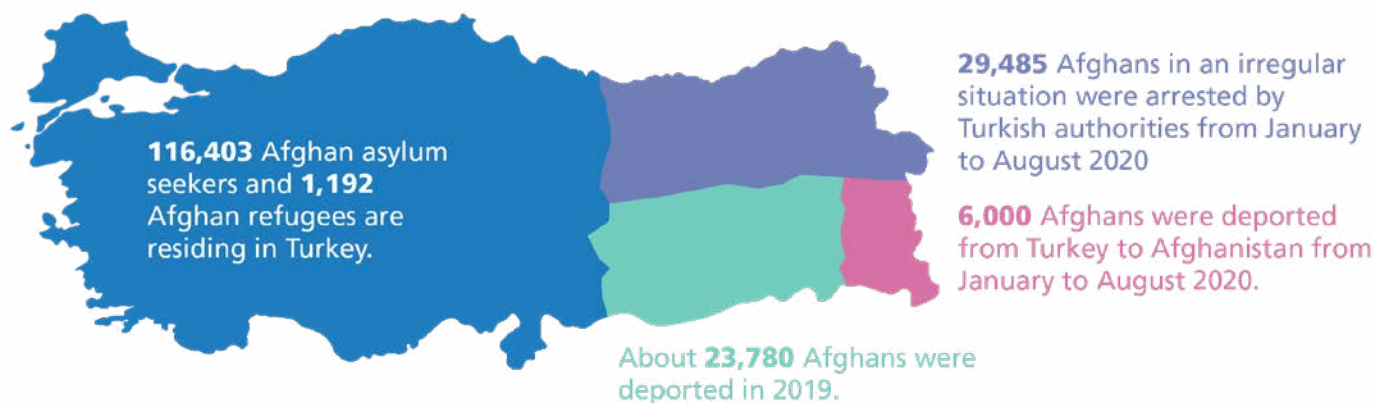
When it comes to economic development and political sustainability in Afghanistan beyond 2021, Turkey and EU seem primed to cooperate on the following areas: combating terrorism and transnational crime, health, migration and particularly education. Ankara-backed assistance for the health sector is substantial, as is private-sector investment. Turkey's efforts in education are implemented across Afghanistan. The Turkish government and affiliated non-profits manage schools on 17 campuses, more than 30-40 schools, are training more than 5,000 students, with plans to expand current efforts well into the future. These efforts also extend to women's education: Ankara is in discussion with Kabul to open an Afghan-Turk Women's University in Kabul.¹³

A common challenge shaping the EU and Turkey's Afghanistan policy is migration. Today, Afghans make up the second-largest group of migrants residing in Turkey and the largest number of

new arrivals to the Greek islands in 2019 and 2020. In the past years and particularly since 2015, the EU's reluctance towards Afghan asylum seekers has grown, and acceptance rates have decreased. Brussels has notoriously liaised with transit countries to keep refugees and migrants from several countries in Turkey; it has become an anchor with the potential to drag down EU-Turkey relations. This has impacted Afghans in Turkey as well. The stance appears set to continue, given the recently agreed on Joint Declaration on Migration Cooperation between Brussels and Kabul.¹⁴

Looking back at these policies, in March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed that the latter would readmit all irregular arrivals reaching Greek coasts. In exchange, EU member states committed to admitting one Syrian citizen for every Syrian returned to Turkey, promised to speed up the process of visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and increased financial aid for refugee reception in Turkey by €6 billion.¹⁵ Afghans, who face severe challenges to register as refugees in the first place, have been largely left

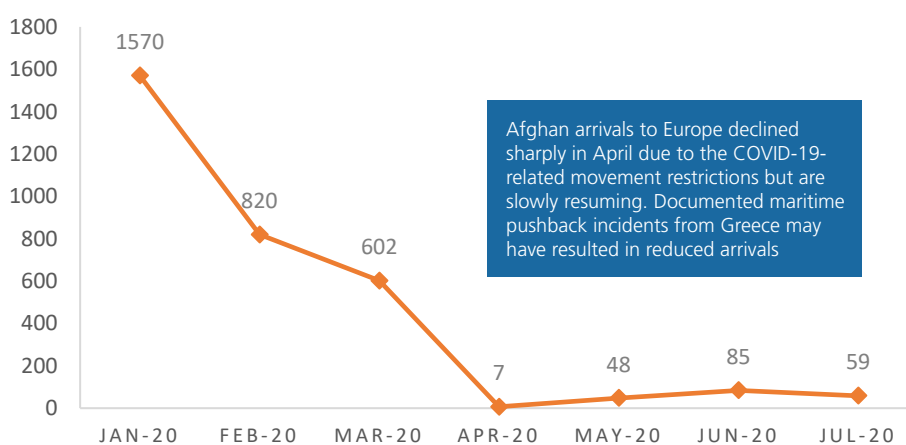
Afghan Refugees in Turkey



Source: [UNHCR](#)

Afghans arriving in Europe

Source: [Eurostat Database](#)



¹³ See [Speech of H.E. Ambassador Oğuzhan Ertuğrul delivered at the 29 October Republic Day Reception, Turkish Embassy in Kabul](#), 30. September 2019

¹⁴ "EU: Renewed deportation agreement with Afghanistan close to approval", *Statewatch*, 14 January 2021

¹⁵ "The EU-Turkey Deal: Explained", *Help Refugees*, 5 April 2018

out by subsequent projects for job creation, vocational training and resettlement.¹⁶ Thousands remain undocumented and in limbo, at permanent risk of arrest, detention, and deportation. Asked whether the EU and Turkey would consider expanding the 2016 agreements towards Afghan asylum seekers, officials either pointed to the intra-EU stalemate over a joint policy or the risk that policies encouraging a permanent settlement of Afghans in Turkey could trigger a nationalist backlash amid Turkey's economic challenges. Anticipating that the lack of stability, safety or development in Afghanistan will continue to force Afghans to leave their homes and country, both the EU and Turkey should revisit their coordination on migration to account for the new context in Afghanistan – home to the world's deadliest conflict.

Despite the shared interests in Afghanistan, there appears to be little high-level coordination between the EU and Turkey on Afghan migration, or efforts in the peace process and the future of development. While this lack of joint action cannot be understood in isolation from several contentious issues on the bilateral agenda, the potential U.S. withdrawal, which will prompt a NATO withdrawal and limit European and Turkish capacity in Afghanistan alike, should encourage both to look for alternative platforms and coordination mechanisms.

¹⁶ Izza Leghtas and Jessica Thea, (2018), "[You Cannot Exist in This Place: Lack of Registration Denies Afghan Refugees Protection in Turkey](#)", *Refugees International*, December 13, 2018

Recommendations

- Turkey and the EU should continue their commitment to institution-building, especially in key development sectors such as health and education sector and support sustainable economic growth to reduce displacement, if possible, in closer coordination with Iran and Pakistan.
- The EU, its member states and Turkey should use existing channels outside of NATO to coordinate their civilian and military efforts, given their aligned interests in Afghanistan. Momentum could be built to lobby the U.S. to sign onto a stricter conditions-based military and political disengagement from Afghanistan, coordinating more closely before drawing down any further.
- The EU and Turkey should upgrade the Heart of Asia Istanbul Process from its current, mostly symbolic status to an effective action-oriented mechanism or set up a new regional platform that includes regional stakeholders in the Afghan peace process. Ideally, this would take place in concert with the new U.S. administration, but without the U.S. dominating the forum – allowing space for regional players that may have adversarial relations with Washington. As recently deteriorating relations between Turkey and India could impede such efforts, mediation by the EU could be helpful.
- Turkey should cooperate with the EU to develop a comprehensive migration policy for Afghans, one that appropriately addresses humanitarian needs and acknowledges the very real risks in what remains the world's deadliest conflict zone. Based on shared experiences and successes since 2015, policies could include resettling a larger number of Afghan refugees to Europe, suspending involuntary returns, and creating economic incentives for host communities in Turkey, but also Iran, and Pakistan, to support improved legal security for Afghan migrants and the protection of their universal rights.

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About the cover photo

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani (R) and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan exchange signed documents before a joint news conference in Kabul October 18, 2014. REUTERS/Ahmad Massoud/Pool

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