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The Syrian-Turkish border: The closed open door

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Over 400 Syrians have been killed trying to cross the border into Turkey in recent years. A writer with personal experience traversing the border charts its transformation from an open door to a deadly sealed fortress.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian uprising and the ensuing

militarization and bombardment by the Bashar al-Assad regime, large numbers of Syrians have been forced to flee across their country's borders into neighboring territories. Turkey in particular has been a preferred destination, due to its relative stability and position as a stepping stone to Europe via the Aegean Sea from its western shoreline, especially the city of Izmir. With the number of Syrians who have crossed the border irregularly at least once now estimated to be in the millions, the terms "smuggling" and "trafficking" have gained prominence in the Syrian collective consciousness and common parlance. Migration, indeed, has become one of the most significant experiences faced by countless Syrians condemned to a new life in an exile that persists to this day.

Smuggling and irregular border crossings are of course nothing unusual; they are a fact of borders between any countries; particularly those such as Syria, the borders of which were drawn in the early twentieth century by superpowers in accordance with their own interests, with utter disregard for the region's demographics. Many Syrians once moved freely in and out of neighboring countries, particularly in areas where families and clans were distributed on both sides of the border, to the extent that in 1952 the Turkish government began placing landmines along the 911km border strip to reduce this movement across the border. The decision to remove these mines was only issued in 2009, through legislation passed by the Turkish parliament and ratified by then-President Abdullah Gül, though the mine clearance process was never completed, due to the eruption of the Syrian revolution and the subsequent strain in relations between Ankara and Damascus.

After the revolution began, particularly between 2012 and 2014, irregular entry into Turkey became straightforward and feasible for all. One could come and go multiple times in the same day, with the assistance of the Turkish gendarmerie, whose members would even help carry luggage or children with apparent cheer. At that time, there were no designated border crossings; instead, Syrians were free to choose whichever area was closest and was served by Turkish transportation networks. The traffickers on the Syrian side were simply porters of luggage, and middlemen arranging vehicles on both sides. Such difficulties as existed were minimal in comparison to the situation in later years.

Among the most memorable episodes of this period was the opening of the Bab al-Salama crossing to residents of the border town of Azaz, north of Aleppo, after Assad regime airstrikes killed over 40 people on 16 August, 2012.

“On that day, everyone who wanted to was allowed to enter Turkey through the Bab al-Salama crossing, with no need for a passport, inspections, or any other such procedures,” says Ali, a town local. “There were no checks on the types of cars that entered, and even farmers’ tractors and motorcycles were allowed in, as well as pedestrians.”

Valid Syrian passport holders were also able to enter through the border crossings then controlled by the opposition’s Free Syrian Army (FSA). Later, in July 2014, entry through these crossings became available for those with expired Syrian passports. By the end of 2014, there were five border crossings seized from regime hands, still operating as normal: Bab al-Hawa north of Idlib; Bab al-Salama north of Aleppo; Jarablus and Ain al-Arab in the northeastern Aleppo countryside; and Tell Abyad in

northern Raqqa Province.

Initial controls and closures

At the start of 2015, the border situation took a turn for the worse. In March of that year, the Turkish government decided to close the crossings to travelers, while keeping them operational for commercial transit, as well as ambulances and special medical cases. Permits were also granted to a limited number of Syrians by Turkish officials responsible for the border zones. The periodically-renewed list of such permit-holders included military officials within the armed opposition; members of Local Councils and other de facto governance bodies; employees of humanitarian organizations working inside Syria; and traders who regularly imported goods into Syria; along with certain other exceptional cases. It was said at the time that the closure was linked to the Turkish parliamentary elections held in June of that year, though at the time of writing, more than three years later, the crossings remain closed.

It became evident that the Turks had not foreseen the vast number of refugees who would cross the border, or the protraction of the war that displaced them, which still today appears far from ending in the foreseeable future.

Domestically, the Turkish government faced mounting criticism for its policy towards refugees and the Syrian crisis in general, further fueled by the social issues that began arising for Syrians who found themselves in a foreign country with customs and culture different to their own. Furthermore, the proliferation of smuggled merchandise,

which multiplied exponentially with the open border policy, prompted the Turkish government to reconsider the issue from an economic perspective as well. Pressure on Ankara from Western states aimed at stemming the flow of refugees to Europe also contributed to the changes in border policy.

As well as closing the official crossing points, Turkey also cracked down on Syrians entering from elsewhere along the border, increasing the number of border guards and sending back those caught trying to cross. The number of informal crossing points dropped markedly, many of them ceasing to be used altogether. There was also a decline in the use of the waterborne device known as the halla, which had previously transported large numbers of Syrians across the Orontes River, which coincides with the border near the town of Darkush in northern Idlib Province.

This halla is a vessel accommodating between five and fifteen people, ~~pulled back and forth~~ across the river using a rope spanning both its banks. I have personally used this means of crossing the border twice, at the villages of Hajji Pasha and Batya. So easy was travel by halla that we would reach the Turkish town of Reyhanlı two hours before our passport-holding relatives who took the regular route through the Bab al-Hawa crossing.

In conjunction with these policy changes, the role of smugglers also evolved, as trafficking became impossible without an experienced smuggler to secure passage in exchange for a fee. These fees steadily increased over time, in tandem with the difficulty of the journey and the checks along the border. The smugglers developed various tactics to enable Syrians' entry, such as bribing members of

the gendarmerie and cooperating with Turkish traffickers on the other side, who would monitor the Turkish guard posts and signal when to cross. Others would gather large numbers of refugees and divide them into groups, sending each in a different direction, so that the gendarmerie would be preoccupied with just one group, detaining them, while the others passed through.

Those detained would be rounded up at the nearest Turkish gendarmerie post, before being returned to Syria via the closest crossing. Around this time—that is, starting 2015—there began to occur incidents of assaults on Syrians by the gendarmerie, ranging from verbal humiliation to beatings, as part of the effort to reduce the numbers attempting to cross into Turkey, especially young men fleeing on their own; indeed, no incidents of the kind involving families were recorded.

The crossing point at the village of Ikadah, northeast of Azaz, was an exception to this general trend. From November 2015 until its closure in February 2016, there was no need to pay professional smugglers to pass through it, for it was controlled and overseen by the rebel group Ahrar al-Sham, who charged 3,000 Syrian pounds (then equivalent to around US\$6) for passage, compared to the 100 Turkish liras (then US\$40) charged by Turkish traffickers. From Ikadah, refugees would move on foot across barbed wire and a small ditch after sunset to reach vehicles waiting on the Turkish side to transport them to the city of Kilis. Compared to other crossing points, this was considered a hassle-free process.

I witnessed crossings at Ikadah first-hand, when working to secure transportation for relatives who crossed into Turkey

along with dozens of other Syrians fleeing the regime's assault on southern Aleppo Province. Eventually, however, the crossing was closed in February 2016, after tens of thousands from Aleppo's northern countryside had gathered near it, fleeing an attack by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) militia, with Russian air cover, on the town of Tell Rifaat and its surrounding villages.

The final sealing of the border

In early 2016, the Turkish authorities introduced yet another significant shift in their handling of displacement across the border, for two key reasons. The first was that Assad regime operations took on a new intensity with the arrival of Russian air support, substantially upping the bombardment of the liberated areas. Similarly, the air campaign by the US-led Coalition against the Islamic State drew closer to major urban centers such as Raqqa and Manbij. The combination of these factors caused a sudden and massive influx of refugees toward the Turkish border within the span of a few months, surpassing all previous waves of displacement since the beginning of the refugee crisis.

The second development behind the shift in Turkish policy was the agreement signed between Turkey and the European Union in March 2016. This placed limits on the influx of refugees into Europe via the Aegean Sea, in exchange for financial compensation to Turkey to help it shoulder the burden of receiving refugees, as well as a promise to waive the visa requirement for Turkish citizens

entering the EU Schengen Area.

Since then, Turkey has built a 764-kilometer-long concrete wall along its Syrian border to facilitate control and observation. According to initial reports in the Turkish Daily Sabah newspaper, the wall was planned at four meters high, topped with a further meter of barbed wire. Behind it, eight-meter-high observation towers were to be built and equipped with advanced technology, such as high-precision monitoring systems, thermal imaging cameras, and radars to detect ground activity.

The wall—which the same paper [announced](#) was completed in June 2018—extends along the length of the border, except for those parts where the Orontes River represents the border, and certain other regions. According to eyewitnesses in northern Aleppo and Idlib Provinces, the wall there has been built entirely inside Syrian territory, at distances varying between 20 and 1,200 meters away from the old barbed wire strip.

For example, in the border village of Aqrabat, in northern Idlib Province, the wall has significantly encroached upon Syrian territory, extending onto private land owned by locals, according to Maher, a village resident. At the time of the wall's construction, Aqrabat locals protested in front of Turkish army vehicles, petitioning them to halt it, but the senior officer in charge affirmed they were carrying out orders and did not have the authority to change the wall's location. He advised the residents to raise the issue with the governor of Hatay. When they did so, the governor's office asserted that the wall was within Turkish territory, a claim the residents say is contradicted by their title deeds.

Deadly danger

From 2016 on, assaults against Syrians detained by the Turkish gendarmerie and military have multiplied, especially in Idlib Province. A video circulated on 30 July, 2017, depicts members of the gendarmerie beating and insulting young Syrians in a manner reminiscent of Assad regime forces. The video sparked great anger, until the Turkish authorities claimed to have suspended the gendarmes in the video.

Worse, there have even been documented cases of killings of Syrians by the Turkish gendarmerie, a phenomenon that has thus far gone unmentioned by the Turkish government and media. Much to the contrary, Turkish officials continue to speak of an “open door” policy towards Syrian refugees, despite the fact that men, women, and even children have been shot dead in these incidents. It appears the deliberate disregarding of these crimes also extends to the Syrian political opposition, and the armed rebel factions inside Syria, as well as civilian Syrian activists inside Turkey. To date, there have been no known objections raised, or even inquiries made, regarding what the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [says](#) is over 400 Syrians killed by Turkish gendarmerie bullets as of early November 2018. It is notable that none of these killings were documented in northern Aleppo Province; the majority taking place in the Idlib regions of Khirbat al-Jawz, Darkush, and Harim.

In the wake of these developments, entering Turkey is now immensely complicated for Syrian refugees. To attempt to

cross over the wall costs in excess of US\$1,000, has only a slim chance of success, and is generally unsuitable for children or the elderly. In Aleppo Province, crossing the wall requires climbing it with a ladder, jumping to the other side, and then running for a certain distance. In Idlib Province, by contrast, the task involves walking for several hours in very rough mountainous terrain inside Syria before even beginning to cross with a trafficker.

On the other hand, smuggling through the regular border crossings has flourished, at a cost of over US\$3,500 per person, according to several Syrians who have used this means of entering Turkey. The process is subject to strict security guidelines to ensure that the trafficker, who is typically a Turkish citizen, is not found out.

It should be noted that the Turkish government does permit Syrians to visit home on the Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha holidays and return to Turkey thereafter, provided they possess a so-called “temporary protection” (kimlik) card. More than 125,000 Syrians took advantage of this arrangement in 2018, according to the official social media accounts of the border crossings. For the first time, 2018 saw three crossings made available for this purpose, namely Bab al-Hawa in Idlib Province, and Bab al-Salama and Jarablus in Aleppo Province. Eid visits to Turkey are not permitted for Syrians residing in Syria, as the Turks fear these visitors will not return.

Syrians’ recollections of these borders, which separate the “civilized” world from the most dangerous country on earth, will remain among the most important parts of their collective memory since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, when they lived through days the likes of which

they could never previously have imagined. Borders in general will remain a highly contentious issue, as they've always been, ever since their delineation first separated families, relatives, and whole communities around the world, with no consideration for the ties being severed, or for the wishes, liberties, and right to movement of the humans affected.

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