



## SYRIA CRISIS: TURKEY PREVENTS NEW POTENTIAL MIGRATION WAVE

The civil war in Syria in seven years has forced more than 13 million Syrians to leave their homes due to security concerns. Among them, as of 27 September 2018, 5,628,350 people are seeking refuge abroad according to the figures registered by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including almost one million Syrians who chose to reach the European soil searching safer and better life opportunities. Around 6.6 million of Syrian refugees have internally relocated to safer regions in the country.

This migration flow has caused a major migration crisis, which covered the Middle East, North Africa, Turkey and Europe. During this humanitarian crisis, Turkey with its open door policy has accepted until September 27, 2018 3,567,658 Syrians, who account for around 61% of the total number of Syrian refugees registered by the UNHCR. In order to provide humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees, the Turkish government has spent more than \$25 billion since 2011, which puts the country on top of the list of the most generous countries in terms of the share of GDP allocated for humanitarian assistance.

With the escalation of the conflict in 2015, the number of migrants who reached Europe through illegal ways has significantly increased to 1.16 million. In order to control the irregular migration flow to Europe through the main Turkey-Greece route, the European Union and Turkey signed the Turkey-EU refugee deal on March 19, 2016. According to the agreement, Turkey strengthened its control over its Aegean Sea borders thereby reducing the number of arrivals through this route by 98% comparing January 2016 and January 2018. Nevertheless, without ending the conflict it was clear that the migration flow would continue through different routes. For example, the closure of the Turkey-Greece route has shifted many Syrian migrants who aim to reach Europe to the more dangerous Libya-Italy direction.

In order to find a peaceful diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis, the Geneva peace talks were organized with the aim to bring the parties to the negotiation table. However, between 2012 and 2017, seven Geneva

meetings organized under the United Nations (UN) auspices in order to stop the conflict failed because the parties were not able to reach a durable agreement. In these gatherings, as the UN tried to start the negotiations between the regime and the opposition, on December 2015, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2254, which lays down the basis for negotiations. However, following the Geneva III meeting in February 2016, the talks were suspended due to disagreements between the parties. The following Geneva meetings also ended without any significant results because of similar insurmountable differences.

While the Geneva meetings continued, Turkey and Russia got more involved in the process and arranged a nation-wide ceasefire between the regime and opposition forces in December 2016. To build on this event, the Astana talks were initiated in January 2017 bringing both opposing parties to the negotiation table to discuss a peaceful solution face to face for the first time. Moreover, Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed to monitor the ceasefire agreed in December 2016. In the following rounds of the Astana talks, the parties agreed on a number of issues such as the prisoner exchange and maintaining the ceasefire. During the sixth Astana meeting in September 2017, Turkey, Russia and Iran agreed on establishing de-escalation zones, which included Eastern Ghouta, the provinces of Idlib, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo and Hama, for six months with the possibility of an extension.

The diplomatic initiatives of Turkey, Russia and Iran managed to reduce the escalation of violence which also had a positive impact on the migration dynamics: starting from 2017 the number of return migrants has gradually increased, and it is indicated that so far around 200,000 Syrians has returned back to their country.

However, the recent preparations of the regime forces for a military assault against Idlib has strained the cooperative atmosphere between Turkey and Russia. Turkey has explicitly expressed its concern about

potential negative consequences of a ground assault in Idlib, which is the last stronghold of the opposition forces and, with the population of 3.5 million people, hosts many internally displaced Syrians.

In order to prevent a major humanitarian crisis from occurring, Turkey has sped up its diplomatic talks with Russia and Iran. Turkey has proposed to establish a 15-20 kilometer weapons-free zone around Idlib, which will be controlled by the Turkish and Russian forces. Turkey's 12 observation posts in the area will remain, and Turkey will reinforce these units. In addition to that, the extremist groups, which could potentially escalate the conflict, will be separated from the opposition forces, and, in return, Russia will make sure that there will be no military assault against Idlib by the regime forces.

On September 7, 2018, the leaders of the three countries met in Tehran to discuss the ways to stop the operation in Idlib but failed to reach an agreement thus increasing the possibility of a ground assault scenario and a new massive migration flow from Idlib to Turkey. Nevertheless, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Russian Federation President Vladimir Putin on September 17, 2018, in Sochi to continue the talks on the Idlib issue. As a result of the meeting, the Russian side accepted the Turkish proposal, and Defense Minister of the Russian Federation Sergey Shoigu stated that there would be no military assault on Idlib.

Due to its diplomatic efforts, Turkey has managed to find a peaceful solution of the Idlib issue and also prevented a potential new massive migration flow from Syria's Idlib to Turkey. Otherwise, Turkey would have dealt with another enormous wave of migrants, even though President Erdogan stated that in case of a military assault the Turkish side would continue accepting refugees from Syria due to the country's open door policy. However, Ankara needed to try stopping it by using diplomatic channels, and through numerous meetings and negotiations with the leaders of Russia and Iran, the Turkish leadership managed to halt the military operation against Idlib and prevented another major humanitarian crisis.

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## Politics, Foreign Affairs, and Security

- During the annual State-of-the-Nation Address delivered at the Akorda presidential residence, President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev focused on the most topical issues of the country's socioeconomic development and ways of raising the wellbeing of the population. This year's address was the 23rd address to the nation delivered by Nazarbayev.
- More than 150 parliamentarians from 46 countries of Europe, Asia and North America participated in the autumn session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE PA) held in the Ala Archa State Residence in Bishkek. The opening ceremony was attended by President of the Kyrgyz Republic Sooronbay Jeenbekov, Speaker of the Kyrgyz Parliament Dastanbek Jumabekov, and President of the OSCE PA George Tsereteli.
- Defense Minister of Georgia Levan Izoria participated in the NATO-Georgia Commission meeting held as part of the NATO Defense Ministerial in Brussels. The alliance welcomed "the continued progress" Georgia is making on "more effective security and defense institutions and modernizing its armed forces". According to NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg, the alliance appreciates "the close partnership" with Georgia and Tbilisi's contributions to the "shared security".
- Russian Minister of Energy Alexander Novak emphasized that Moscow would continue cooperation with Iran even after a new round of U.S. sanctions that would take effect in November 2018. Following its withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear deal, the United States had pressed its allies to stop their oil imports from Iran. The Russian minister also noted that Washington's vows to halt Iran's exports and attempts to influence non-OPEC countries would significantly affect the oil price in the global markets.
- Thousands of Armenians heeded a call by reformist Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan to initiate protests in Yerevan, as the country's legislators approved a bill making it harder to disband the parliament and hold a snap election. Nikol Pashinyan, who came to power in May 2018, following weeks of mass rallies, has been at loggerheads with the majority of lawmakers, who are allied to former Armenian president Serzh Sarkisian.

- During the protests in the Russian province of Ingushetia, thousands of people expressed their discontent with the land swap deal with neighboring Chechnya signed by the leaders of the two regions. Many in Ingushetia see the agreement to exchange plots of agricultural land as an act against the republic's interests.

## Economy, Finance, and Energy

- According to Podrobno.uz, the World Bank plans to implement a project on integrated development of medium-sized cities of Uzbekistan. This initiative aims to increase the investment and tourism potential of Uzbekistan, as well as to improve the quality of life of its population.
- According to the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of Uzbekistan, the new method of calculation of the unemployment rate in Uzbekistan revealed a 9.3% unemployment during January-June 2018, which is 0.4% lower than in the first quarter of the year (9.7%). The research has covered 310 citizens' self-governing bodies, 3,100 households and 16,425 citizens. The unemployment rate among young people (under 30) was 15.9%, while the unemployment rate among women was 13.4%.
- President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev instructed the government to work with Uzbekistan on the issue of establishing a new international trade zone and a checkpoint entitled "Turkestan". 2018 has been declared the year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan. At the end of 2017, the trade turnover between the two countries increased by 8.6% and exceeded \$2 billion. The countries intend to take further measures to ensure the growth of trade turnover up to \$3 billion in 2018 and up to \$5 billion in 2020.
- According to Prime Minister of Ukraine Volodymyr Groysman, trade between Ukraine and other GUAM member states (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova) increased by 30.3% during seven months of 2018. The statement was made during a joint conference of the participants of the GUAM Summit held in Chisinau, Moldova.
- According to Finance Minister of Russia Anton Siluanov, the de-dollarization plan for Russia's economy has been drafted and submitted to the government for further consideration. The plan encourages exporters to gradually transfer payments from the U.S. dollar to the Russian ruble by 2024.

- According to the Ministry of Economy of Azerbaijan, the country's investments in the Turkic-speaking states exceeded \$14 billion. In their turn, the member countries of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States, which include, along with Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkey, invested over \$12 billion in the economy of Azerbaijan.

## Society and Culture

- According to the Russian Railways JSC, trains will travel weekly between Russia's Kazan and Uzbekistan's Tashkent starting December 9, 2018, thus connecting more Russian regions with Central Asia. The company also plans to replace economy-class berths with sleep-boxes in railway cars.
- Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may introduce a common visa entitled "Silk Road". The initiative was announced during the international exhibition entitled "Tourism on the Silk Road" held in Tashkent. Officials of the two countries expect that this measure will help promote Central Asia as an attractive tourist destination.
- According to the 2019 World University Rankings published by Times Higher Education, the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University was the first and only among Central Asian universities to join the world's best universities. It entered the list in the group of 801-1000. In total, this ranking includes more than 1,250 universities from 86 countries.
- The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology presented the results of the poll showing the level of support to the country's accession to the European Union (EU) among Ukrainians. According to the study, if a referendum on Ukraine's accession to the EU was held, 47.9% of the country's population would vote in favor, 25.1% would vote against, and 11.5% would abstain or would not vote. Another 15.5% of respondents were undecided or refused to answer the question. 65.7% of Ukrainians, who are ready to participate in such a referendum, would vote for joining the EU.
- Kazakhstani actress Samal Yeslyamova won the Best Actress prize at the 55th International Film Festival held in Antalya. Previously, the actress who had starred in the Russian-Kazakh drama film Ayka won the similar award at the Cannes Film Festival.