

The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan and Its results

Armando Donninelli¹

Abstract:

This article seeks to examine the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, which came into force in March 2016, indicating the reasons why it was adopted and what were its immediate effects. Over the years, the original context in which the plan was applied changed and some additions were necessary, which will be indicated together with the results. The current results will then be assessed, ten years after the entry into force of the Plan, on the basis of the latest available data. Finally the desirable future developments will be suggested.

Key words:

EU, Turkey, EU Commission, Eastern Mediterranean, Aegean Sea.

The EU-Turkey agreement and its immediate effects

The armed conflicts that began in 2011 in some Arab countries following the Arab Spring, together with the crisis in Afghanistan, led to a significant increase in the influx of asylum seekers who arrived in central and Northern Europe through Turkey and over the Balkan Peninsula².

In 2015, around one million refugees arrived in the EU, around 75% of which came from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan³.

In November 2015 the countries along the Balkan route began refusing entry to undocumented migrants unless they were from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq. In such a

¹ Armando Donninelli is an independent researcher in the field of international relations with particular interest in Arab countries and the Balkan Peninsula. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0605-5232>.

² ALBANESE, F. P., TAKKENBERG, L., *Palestinian Refugees in International Law*, second edition, page 295, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020.

³ International Rescue Committee. (2022, 18 March). What is the EU-Turkey deal? Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <rescue.org/en/article/what-eu-turkey-deal>

conjuncture, the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan was adopted on March 18, 2016, primarily aimed at preventing new undocumented crossings from Turkey to Greece⁴.

The agreement outlined nine key action points: the return of those who had crossed from Turkey to Greece as after March 19, 2016; the 1:1 resettlement scheme for Syrians; new measures taken by Turkey to prevent new crossing through sea and land routes; the activation of a Voluntary Admission Scheme; the fulfillment of the visa liberalization road map; the lifting of visa requirements for Turkish citizens by the end of June 2016; financial support for the economic effort that Turkey is making to host migrants; effort for upgrading the Customs Union; re-energizing the accession process; and making joint efforts to improve the humanitarian conditions in Syria, in particular in the areas close to the border between Turkey and Syria⁵.

Following the implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, the number of arriving migrants and asylum seekers has plunged. In numerical terms, the data are clear. At the peak of the crisis, Italy and Greece were asylum seekers' main arrival point in Europe, with more than 861.000 arrivals in Greece in 2015. The number dropped to 36.000 the year after the deal was signed. Additionally, the number of dead and missing migrants in the Aegean Sea, which separates Turkey and Greece, decreased from 441 cases in 2016 to 102 in 2020. In the immediate aftermath of the deal, the EU ramped up asylum service staff and relocated thousands of asylum seekers⁶.

The clear success of the agreement made Turkey a key partner of the EU in the field of migration policies⁷.

The evolution of the agreement and its effects

A few months after the 2016 plan came into force, the Project of Promoting Integration of Syrian Kids into the Turkish Education System (PIKTES) was included within its scope. The project, funded by the EU and managed by the Turkish Ministry of Education, was made necessary by the learning difficulties of the largest number of refugee students, namely Syrians. Such difficulties, due to linguistic problems and the years of education

⁴ DALKIRAN, M., "New Approaches of Conditionality in EU-Turkey Relations: Assessing the Role of Irregular Migration", in *Oasis*, No. 39, 2024, pp. 123-143.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Kyillah, Terry. (2021, 8 April). The EU-Turkey deal five years on: a frayed and controversial but enduring blueprint. Accessed on 24 April 2025 from <migrationpolicy.org/article/eu-turkey-deal-five-years-on>

⁷ BARACANI, E., *EU-Turkey Relations*, first edition, page 73, Edward Elgar, Cheltenham-Northampton, 2021.

missed because of the war, were addressed by making available teaching in Arabic, Turkish language classes and specific programs to recover previous gaps in scholastic preparation⁸.

Over the years, under the 2016 plan, Syrian refugees have gone from being temporary guests, due to the changing situation in Syria, to being the addresses of social integration policies. This was possible thanks to the strengthening of the public facilities dedicated to them, with particular attention to social assistance. The EU has provided funding for improving the Turkish asylum system and Turkey has worked hard to enhance it⁹.

The 2016 plan remained the main framework for cooperation between the EU and Turkey, and the EU's engagement with Ankara on migration intensified with the strong consensus of the member countries¹⁰.

The successful implementation of the 2016 plan meant that in 2017, the NATO stopped patrolling the Aegean Sea aimed at preventing immigration¹¹.

The Turkish military operations in Syria, as well as the Turkish incursions in Libya, and other geostrategic issues, have led relations between the EU and Turkey to deteriorate. On 28 February 2020, Erdogan's repeated threats to "open the gates" and allow refugees to enter the EU materialized when Turkey open its border with Greece, setting the scene for a new refugee crisis. Erdogan then backtracked, thanks to the rapid initiative of the EU leaders toward a continuation of the cooperation with Turkey, highlighting the fundamental role of Ankara¹².

Turkey has repeatedly request an accelerated implementation of the 2016 plan in its non-migration elements: the restart of the accession negotiations, rapid Customs Union modernization and visa liberalization. The application of these parts, as provided for by the 2016 plan, would have been subjected to assessments and decisions to be taken according

⁸ Global Compact on Refugees. (2025). Promoting integration in Syria kids into the Turkish education system (PIKTES). Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices-/promoting-integration-syrian-kids-turkish-education-system-piktes>

⁹ Khasanova, Fatika. 82020, May). The role of the EU-Turkey joint action plan in Syria refugees' educational integration into Turkish society: a qualitative case-study of policy implementation. Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/adb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=bgsu1586968891475959&disposition=inline>

¹⁰ Pub Affairs Bruxelles. (2022, 12 October). Key finding of the 2022 report on Türkiye. Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <pubaffairsbruxelles.eu/eu-institutions-news/key-findings-of-the-2022-report-on-turkiye/>

¹¹ Dimitriadi, Angeliki. Kaya, Ayhan. Kale, Basak. Zurabishvili, Tinatin. (March, 2018). EU-Turkey relations and irregular migration: transnational cooperation in the making. Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <feature.uni-koeln.de/sites/feature/user_upload/FEATURE_online_Paper_No_16_D6.3pdf>

¹² Stanicek, Branislav. (2020, March). Eu-Turkey relations in light of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis. Accessed on 24 April 2025 from <europa.europa.eu/RegData/etudies/BRIE/2020/649327_EN.pdf>

to established procedures. In this area the EU's response has not always been satisfactory. Despite this, Ankara has always demonstrated a clear willingness to cooperate with the EU on migration issues¹³.

At the European Council Meeting of 1-2 October 2020, member states agreed to continue cooperation with Turkey based on the 2016 plan¹⁴.

In May 2021, EU member-states announced their willingness to renew the agreement that had expired in March, while the EU Commission had already lined up an additional 585 million euro for a so- called "humanitarian bridge funding" for 2021. The continuous high level meetings between EU and Turkish institutions are a testimony to both parties strong interest in brokering a deal¹⁵.

As the European Commission acknowledged in a joint communication with the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to the European Council in November 2023, the positive results achieved in the phase following the entry into force of the 2016 plan, have been maintained over time. In particular, the communication highlights that, although the application of the agreement could be improved, this led to a drastic reduction in crossings between Turkey and Greece and in the number of deaths in the Aegean Sea¹⁶.

The current effects of the agreement

In December 2024, the EU Commission Issued the Eight Annual Report on the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. In this report the Commission praises Ankara for the commitment to the implementation of the 2016 agreement, which allowed Turkey to adequately address migratory and refugee flows. According to this source, between April 2016 and January 2024, almost 41.000 Syrian refugees were resettled from Turkey to the EU. Since 2016, in application of the EU Turkey Joint Action Plan, 2.140 migrants have been returned from the Greek islands to Turkey. In January 2024, Turkey hosted 3.199.927 Syrians under

¹³ Ianni, Aurora. Acikgoz, Meral. Giannotti, Valeria. (2021, May). The refugee issue in Turkey's relations with the EU. Accessed on 27 April 2025 from <cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/the_refugee_issue_in_turkey_relations_with_the_eu_-_may_2021.pdf>

¹⁴ Drachenberg, Ralf. Anghel, Suzana. (2020, 6 October). Outcome of the special European Council meeting, 1-2 October 2020. Accessed on 25 April 2025 from <epithinktank.eu/2010/10/06/outcome-of-the-special-european-council-meeting-1-2-october-2020/>

¹⁵ Albanese, Daniele. (2021, 18 May). The renewal of the EU-Turkey migration deal. Accessed on 25 April 2025 from <ispionline.it/en/publication/renewal-eu-turkey-migration-deal-30509>

¹⁶ European Commission. (2023, 29 November). State of play of EU-Turkey political, economic and trade relations. Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/>

temporary protection and more than 300.000 registered refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Somalia¹⁷.

In 2024, the EU has allocated 3 billion euro in application of the 2016 plan, which adds to the 6 billion euro already allocated since 2016, in order to strengthen cooperation with Ankara in the migration field. In this context, 65 humanitarian assistance projects have been implemented, covering basic needs, protection, education and health of refugees present in Turkey¹⁸.

The 2016 plan between EU and Turkey, even if not applied in its entirety, has undoubtedly given positive results also in the long term. This is demonstrated by the fact that the country, as seen above, hosts approximately 3.500.000 displaced persons. However, as Ayhan Kaya, a Professor at Bilgi University of Istanbul and migration expert, warns, the country seems to have reached the limits of its reception capacity. Consequently, while maintaining the 2016 plan, the EU will have to find different solutions to possible significant migratory flows, that will pass through the Turkey headed for Europe¹⁹.

According to the latest available data provided by FRONTEX, 9.627 undocumented persons entered via the East- Mediterranean Route, that is, the one that has Turkey as its starting point for Europe, in the first quarter of 2025. This figure corresponds approximately to half of undocumented entries into the EU via Mediterranean, and to a fifth of all entries overall, therefore also including those via land from Eastern Europe²⁰.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, these data are positive, because they demonstrate a clear drop in arrivals via Turkey compared to the period before the 2016 plan. Even if we look at them in detail, we can in fact notice that a high number of people coming from Syria, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, who in the past passed exclusively through Turkey to go to Europe, now leave from North Africa to arrive in Italy. This means that the 2016 plan,

¹⁷ EU Monitor. (2024, 19 December). Legal provisions of COM (2024) 593_Eight Annual Report of the Facility for Refugees in Türkiye. Accessed on 25 April 2025 from <eumonitor.eu/9353000/1/j4nvhdscs8bljza_j9vvik7m1c3gyxp/vmje6lx4uyud>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kaya, Ayhan. (2023, 1 November). The world's leading refugee host, Turkey has a complex migration history. Accessed on 26 April 2025 from <migrationpolicy.org/article/turkey-migration-history>

²⁰ FRONTEX. (2025, 11 April). EU external border: Irregular crossings fall by a third in Q1 2025. Accessed from <frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/eu-external-borders-irregular-crossings-fall-by-a-third-in-q1-2025-k2RWuR>

within the surveillance measures it contains, constitutes a good deterrent against undocumented entries²¹.

It should be remembered, however, that many people from those countries have the right to obtain asylum by virtue of their original context. Since Turkey has probably reached the limit of its reception capacity, it would be appropriate for the EU to proceed to examine the various requests in a place close to the countries of origin, this is because asylum is a right enshrined in international law²².

If we look at these data, the 2016 plan has also given good results in the long term. It could certainly improved in some aspects, however it would be desirable to continue its application in the Eastern Mediterranean and, if reliable partners can be found, in other immigration entry areas²³.

²¹ FRONTEX. (2024, 15 April). Europe migratory situation: Irregular crossings down 12% in first quarter. Accessed on 27 April 2025 from frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news/news-release/Europe-s-migratory-situation-irregular-crossings-down-12-in-first-quarter-hE2mDz/

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Canese, Martina. (2024, 15 Aprile). Il modello controverso dell'accordo UE-Turchia sui migranti. Accessed on 25 April 2025 from geopolitica.info/accordo-ue-turchia-sui-migranti/