

Migration between Greece and Turkey: from the “Exchange of Populations” to non-recognition of borders

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Migration between Greece and Turkey – in either direction – carries with it multiple connotations concerning national identity and allegiance, ethnicity, and even the existence of agreed and defined national borders. Thus, there is relatively little migration, touristic or otherwise, between the two countries; indeed, the most pressing migration concern for both Greece and Turkey is that of clandestine migration and asylum-seekers. This concern is also shared by other EU countries, which see both Greece and Turkey as primary transit routes for illegal migration to northern Europe.

The stage is set with a brief description of the 1920’s “exchange of populations” between Greece and Turkey, and the contemporary legacy and its implications. Following this, I examine what is known about recent illegal migrations across the Greek-Turkish border, such as principal points of entry to Turkey and known points of entry into Greece. Specific issues such as the notorious minefields along the River Evros (Meriç, in Turkish), and the poorly-functioning Greek-Turkish Readmission Agreement of 2001, are examined in the light of recent data, along with evaluation of the recent Turkish claims of illegal migration from Greece into Turkey. Finally, I offer an overall picture of the situation, suggesting that interstate relations constitute a core component of the management of unauthorized migration flows. The strained nature of recent Greek-Turkish relations has negative implications not only for migration management, but also for the human rights of illegal migrants and asylum-seekers in the Near East.

The Asia Minor atrocities and the “Exchange of Populations”

Toward the end of the Greek Army’s disastrous three-year Asia Minor campaign, the region’s Christian population fled as terrified refugees to various ports around the city of Smyrna in Asia Minor. The Turks entered Smyrna in September 1922, and eye-witness accounts testify to the violence and horrors which rapidly ensued – although not only from the Turkish side (Pentzopoulos, 1962: 46). Hundreds of thousands of refugees arrived at Greek ports, destitute, starving and desperate for assistance. Since the fighting had indirectly involved the Great Powers, an armistice was rapidly signed by the British (thus averting an Anglo-Turkish war) and there was a call for a peace conference at Lausanne. Such was the background to the Lausanne Conference and the Exchange of Population Conventions of 1923.

Throughout the Ottoman period, although the “millet” system had tried to enforce different statuses according to religion (Roudometof, 1998), the population exhibited multiple and complex identities that ill-suited emerging nation-states such as Greece, Bulgaria and later Turkey. Language, for example, was not a defining feature: many Greeks in Asia Minor (known as *Karamanli*) actually spoke Turkish which they wrote in Greek script. Others spoke Greek but notated it in Arabic or Latin characters; and many ethnic groups, such as Vlach, spoke Greek but refused to be called Greeks. Local identities, or class identities, tended to be as important as language or ethnic identity. Even religion, which clearly divided the population into Muslim and Christian, was less divisive than might be imagined. Religion in the Balkans was to some extent a pragmatic issue, riddled with superstition whilst trying to minimize risk and hardship – at the extreme, representing a form of insurance rather than devotion to the religion’s fundamental beliefs. There was also significant intermarriage between Christians and Muslims, multiple conversions between religions, and adoption of various Islamic practices by the Christian population (Mazower, 2003: 70-71). Throughout the Ottoman period, there was “a large number of ethnic groups... [with] intricacy, variability and fluidity of ethnic categorization and identification” (Vermeulen, 1984: 226).

Kemal, the leader of the new Turkish nation state, insisted that there was no place for Christian minorities in the republic – with the clear problem that Greece, already badly drained by wars, might collapse under the strain of accepting over one million refugees into a population of 4.5 million (Clark, 2006: 46). After difficult and dramatic negotiations, a final peace settlement was made with Turkey on 24 July, 1923. A component part of the Treaty had already been signed in January and this document was the *Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations* which was the first time in history that a compulsory transfer of a large number of people was officially adopted for solving a minority problem. International response to it was mixed, with many commentators viewing the procedure as barbaric and a dangerous precedent, whilst others saw it as a realistic policy and subsequently advocated similar ideas in the years preceding World War II (Pentzopoulos, 1962: 53).

According to the Treaty, all Turkish nationals of the Greek Orthodox religion established on Turkish territory (other than Constantinople) and all Greek nationals of Muslim religion established on Greek territory (other than the newly-acquired region of Western Thrace) were to be forcibly exchanged. Thus, the distinguishing criterion chosen for compulsory resettlement was exclusively that of religion: the result was that a minimum of 1.3 million Greeks were expelled from Turkey and some 500,000 Muslims were sent to Turkey. All were dispossessed of their property – which, in the case of many of the bourgeois Greek refugees was substantial – and this loss of property was subsequently confirmed by the Ankara Treaty of 1930. The Lausanne negotiations had left some 150-200,000 “Greeks” in Constantinople and a similar number of Muslims in Western Thrace; the Treaty stipulates the legal obligations and other conditions imposed on the country hosting each minority. These conditions still pertain.

After Lausanne...

The Muslims left in Western Thrace were not of one clear ethnic group, but cast in the Treaty as the official Minority of Greece; in reality, it consists of at least three groups. These are Anatolian Turkish-speaking migrants who settled in the region in the Ottoman period; various native populations, such as *Pomaks*, who converted to Islam in the 16-17th centuries and are slavophone; and Roma, some of whom are Rom-speaking (Dragona, 2004: 170). As the Lausanne Treaty effectively froze in time the socio-religious structures of 1923, the Muslims of Western Thrace (unlike those in Turkey) have *mufti* who alongside their religious role also have civil and judicial functions. Furthermore, the *mufti* are not elected but are appointed directly by the Greek state – a system opposed by the residents who frequently elect their own unrecognized *mufti*. Over the twentieth century, the economic situation of the Minority has remained dire whilst Greeks in the region have prospered. Numerous repressive measures adopted by the Greek authorities, including the notorious removal of their Greek citizenship from those who dared to travel to Turkey, have inclined even the non-Turkish speaking component of the Minority into public identification as Turkish. Throughout the Ottoman period, Christians had informally referred to non-Arab Muslims (e.g. Kurds, Turks, Albanians) as “Turks” (Quataert, 2000: 173); despite this long tradition, such identification is prohibited under Greek law and they can only identify themselves as Muslims.

By the late twentieth century, the number of Greek Muslims was unknown owing to state connivance in data collection, such as not asking the appropriate questions in censuses. Academic estimates for Thrace range from 115,000 to 130,000 of which at least 48% are Turkish-speaking (Dragona, 2004: 170-1). There is also a sizeable number of the official Minority who left Thrace, because of the poor economic conditions there, and relocated in the Greater Athens area: again, there are no data. Unlike their kin in Thrace, these Muslims are not protected by the Lausanne Convention and have no rights concerning religious freedoms, such as access to mosques or the correct funeral rites. Currently, there are no mosques permitted outside of Thrace and no possibility of other than Orthodox funeral rites: even Christian requests for cremation are denied.

If the situation of the Minority in Greece seems bad, it has been arguably worse for Greeks in Turkey. Just the number of remaining Greeks in Istanbul, who were at a minimum of 150,000 in 1923, is indicative: despite the presence of the globally-important Orthodox Patriarchate, there are now fewer than 2,000 mostly elderly people constituting the Greek Orthodox minority there. The mass exodus of population occurred twice: in 1955, over tensions in Cyprus when Turkish mobs ran amok in Istanbul's Greek neighbourhoods; and again over Cyprus, in 1964, when Turkey expelled several thousands of resident Greek nationals (Clark, 2006: 88). Throughout the twentieth century there have been continuous disputes between the Patriarchate and the Turkish state, too numerous to discuss here, but which reflect an essentially repressive environment for the Christian minority.

Both countries' treatments of each other's minorities over the twentieth century have clearly been less than required by contemporary international standards, although both Greece and Turkey insist that they have followed the Lausanne Treaty to the letter. However, the very limited migration between the two countries indicates the persistence of religious-ethnic divisions – most of which were actually manufactured by leading Greek and Turkish politicians prior to, and during, the Lausanne negotiations. By 2006, there were some 1,000 Turkish nationals with valid residence permits living in Greece, although nearly 8,000 (presumably Kurdish asylum-seekers with various statuses) declared themselves as Turkish in the 2001 Census. Schengen visas granted by Greece for temporary visits of Turkish nationals are also few – some 44,000 in 2003. These are very small numbers, for a country the size of Turkey adjoining a relatively prosperous EU country.

Illegal transit migration through Turkey into Greece

Detected irregular migration through Turkey, according to Turkish official data, peaked in 2000 and apparently has been in decline since. Turkey, and Istanbul in particular, is a focal point for illegal migration from the Middle East; entry points are mainly on the Iranian and Iraqi borders, such as Van province (Icduygu and Toktas, 2002: 33). Transit migrants tend to be from the Middle East (Iran and Iraq) and Asia (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) and Africa (Nigeria, Somalia, Rep. of Congo) (Icduygu, 2004a: 8). Table 1 shows the principal source countries of transit migrants for the period 2000-05.

Table 1
Apprehended transit migrants in Turkey, 2000-05, top five source countries

Country of origin	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	TOTAL
Iraq	17,280	18,846	20,926	3,757	6,393	3,591	70,793
Pakistan	5,027	4,829	4,813	6,258	9,396	11,001	41,324
Afghanistan	8,746	9,701	4,246	2,178	3,442	2,363	30,676
Iran	6,825	3,514	2,508	1,620	1,265	1,141	16,873
Bangladesh	3,228	1,497	1,810	1,722	3,271	1,524	13,052
Others	53,408	53,978	48,522	40,684	27,380	24,221	248,193
TOTALS	94,514	92,365	82,825	56,219	51,147	43,841	420,911

SOURCE: Icduygu, 2006: Table 4

The departure points from Turkey are mostly in the West – either in the coastal areas such as the provinces of Istanbul and Izmir, or close to the border with Greece, such as Edirne province (Icduygu and Toktas, 2002: 32). More recently, there is informal evidence of illegal migration into Bulgaria and then on to Greece (Yaghmaian, 2005). The proportion of migrants taking each route varies, according to the effectiveness of border controls at the time: for example, as patrols around the Greek islands increased, more illegal migrants attempted to cross into Greece through

the landborder of the River Evros. Table 2 gives some recent unpublished data on apprehensions by the Greek authorities.

Table 2
**Detected illegal entries into
Greece, 2004-6**

	Total border arrests [land + sea]	caught on Gr-Tur border [land + sea]	% detained on Gr-Tur border	arrested on Gr-Tur landborder only	% arrested on landborder out of total Gr-Tur arrests	arrested on Gr-Tur seaborder only
2004	15,182	6,985	46.0	2,957	42.3	4,028
2005	26,919	7,944	29.5	3,706	46.7	4,238
2006	n.d.	17,096		12,178	71.2	4,918
SOURCE: Ministry of Public Order data						

As can be seen from the Table, border apprehensions by the Greek authorities have been increasing markedly for the landborder with Turkey, from 7,000 in 2004 to 17,000 in 2006. Apprehensions by the coastguard have remained at a constant level over the least few years, although the above data for the Greek-Turkish coastal area are inconsistent with smaller numbers for all of Greece, from the Ministry of Merchant Marine.

The landborder with Turkey was defended with landmines in 1974, after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus. Since 2004, Greece has been a State Party to the Mine Ban Treaty, and information has only recently been made available. Out of a total of just over 1.5 million landmines of various types, 24,751 anti-personnel mines were recorded on the River Evros minefield bordering Turkey; by April 2006, 10,002 of these had been cleared in accordance with Greece's treaty obligations (Landmine Monitor Report, 2006). Additionally, measures were taken in 2005 and 2006 to reinforce existing double-fenced perimeters with barbed wire, in order to prevent illegal immigrants from cutting through. Over the period 2001-5, Landmine Monitor reported 67 casualties, of which 47 were killed and 20 injured; most of these were aliens. The Ministry of Defence estimates that between 1987 and 2004, 66 people were killed and 149 injured on the Evros minefields (Landmine Monitor Report, 2006). A record of injuries from the River Evros is maintained by the University Hospital of Alexandroupolis, which over the period 1991-2003 treated 169 cases out of which 15 were dead on arrival, 4 died after arrival and 48 were severely injured (Anagnostoulis *et al.*, 2006). Presumably, the total number of deaths over this period is the sum of the two sources, i.e. 66+19=85; moreover, the increased annual rate of deaths since 2000, as recorded by Landmine Monitor, is probably related to increased illegal migrant crossings of the border.

Distinguishing asylum-seekers from illegal migrants

Since there is no lawful way for asylum-seekers to arrive in Greece, and also no practical way to arrive as migrant workers, all asylum-seekers arrive in Greece in the same way as do illegal migrants. Roughly half of asylum-seekers in Greece over the last decade are nationals of Iraq, Turkey and Iran – of which, the majority are Kurds who arrived in three waves after 1990 (Papadopoulou, 2004: 170). Apart from those who are detained at the border, there are presumably also large numbers who escape detection. However, many do not apply for asylum in Greece for several reasons. Since 2001, the recognition rate – even for clearly vulnerable nationalities – has been the lowest in the EU, e.g. 0.3% for 2002 (Papadopoulou, 2003). Secondly, the reception conditions and general treatment of refugees are amongst the worst in Europe, so there is little point in struggling to achieve the status. Thirdly, by registering with the Greek authorities the asylum-seekers deprive themselves of the right to apply in another EU country:

thus, their intention is frequently to “move on” to a more hospitable environment (Papadopoulou, 2003: 350-2). Others, most notably Kurds, feel at home in the Greek culture and economy, owing to similarities with their own experiences: they are more likely to stay and try to integrate into Greek society. Recent research has noted the supportive role for Turkish and other Middle Eastern asylum seekers by Greek society, particularly in those areas populated by the descendants of the 1923 Population Exchange (Papadopoulou, 2004: 178). Overall, however, it is extremely difficult to distinguish between genuine asylum cases and economic migrants, owing to the massive overlap between these categories. Furthermore, the number of recognized refugees remains unknown but is thought to be diminishing, rather than increasing, as so few new awards are made and previously recognized refugees either leave Greece or become illegal immigrants. Similar problems are found in Turkey, with respect to asylum policy (Baldwin-Edwards, 2005).

The Greek-Turkish Rapprochement

In late 1999, what has been termed “earthquake diplomacy” took hold of Greece and Turkey (Morris, 2005: 117). For the first time since 1923, Greeks and Turks found their common roots in 400 years of shared destiny, ultimately leading to Greek support for Turkey application to join the EU. At the same time, regional initiatives were being developed by SECI and the Stability Pact for combating transborder crime: thus it was that Greece and Turkey came to sign in 2000 an *Agreement on Combating Crime, Especially Terrorism, Organized Crime, Illicit Drug Trafficking and Illegal Immigration* (Icduygu, 2004b: 308). In 2001, the Foreign Ministers of Greece and Turkey signed a Protocol on detailed co-operation procedures between the Ministry of Public Order, in Greece, and the Interior Ministry, in Turkey, for the readmission of citizens of either country or of a third country, who enter either country unlawfully.

The Readmission Agreement was slow to start, although Greece was keen to control more effectively the eastern border. By 2006, it became clear that although Turkey was accepting some readmissions, there were considerable delays and problems. According to the Greek authorities, between April 2002 and November 2006, they had submitted 1892 cases (covering 23,689 aliens) out of which Turkey accepted to take back 2,841 persons, but in reality took only 1,463. Table 3 shows data for the last three years.

Table 3
Requests for readmission to Turkey

	No requested	No. readmitted	%
2004	4,006	119	3.0
2005	1,992	152	7.6
2006	2,055	73	3.6

SOURCE: Ministry of Public Order data

Amongst problems mentioned by the Greek state, are complaints that the Turkish side has not been implementing certain specific articles of the Protocol. In particular, Article 12 designating six border posts for readmission is not being applied, as all transfers have to be made at Evros; this involves significant transport and other costs for the Greek side. Greece also complains that the compensation of €75 per immigrant is on occasion increased to €400 or even €1,000, without basis in the Protocol. An additional issue, which is counterintuitive, is that Turkey claims readmission to Greece of some 8,000 illegal migrants who crossed into Turkey from Greece over the period 2002-2006. Given the serious lack of real information and independent analysis, it is difficult to comment upon any of these issues. Certainly, the complexity of illegal border-crossing in the region, along with the rapidly-changing strategies of the smugglers, makes it possible that migrants are crossing into Turkey from Greece. The most likely scenario would be that they had originally transited through Turkey and Bulgaria, and mistakenly crossed the River Evros again.

However, the numbers are rather high for such a geographical error to be made repeatedly. A more powerful explanation can be found in various reports, some of which have been substantiated by UNHCR, that both Greek and Turkish border police routinely expel migrants across the River Evros (Yaghmaian, 2005). In one case, the Turkish authorities forced 200 Africans to sign a document in Turkish, saying that they had entered Turkey through Greece (BBC News, 24 July, 2001). More recently, there have been press reports of immigrants drowning in the river after being denied access to both Greek and Turkish territory.

The primacy of interstate relations in migration management

Since the rejection of the Annan Plan for Cyprus, and the extreme difficulties for Turkey in accommodating Cypriot demands for border and port recognition, Greek-Turkish relations have soured. The rapprochement which seemed to herald a new era has been, at least temporarily, scuppered; as throughout the post-WW II period, it is again over Cyprus. There are also disputes with Greece over territory and Aegean borders, which apparently is one cause of the problem with border posts in the Readmission Protocol. Yet, the Protocol was agreed and signed in 2001.

The logical conclusion is that state relations are paramount, not only for the management of the common borders but also for the protection of ethnic minority groups in each other's territory. The damage to the human rights of illegal migrants may seem a minimal cost to both Greece and Turkey, but there is also damage to the reputation of both countries. The inability of an EU member state to guarantee appropriate behaviour from its border guard is a serious deficit, and one which is increasingly being noted in European and international circles. Similarly, the failure of Turkey to respect fundamental rights (or, for that matter, the provisions of the Readmission Protocol) is hardly a positive contribution to its EU membership bid.

Despite the positive changes which began in 1999, there is still a sense that both Greece and Turkey are stuck in some strange time-warp, located in 1923, which hardly serves any purpose. On the basis of nationalist ideology, which a century ago was needed for the formation of new nation states but is now dysfunctional, Greece and Turkey fail to co-operate and, ultimately, fail to act in their own interests.

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