



# Turkey in Afghanistan: More than one reason to stay

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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# Turkey in Afghanistan:

## More than one reason to stay

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#### Summary

- Despite a long history of bilateral contacts, Turkey's most intensive commitment in Afghanistan only started in 2001 with the NATO mission.
- A first friendship treaty was signed back in 1921; the first official foreign visit to the Republic of Turkey was made in 1928 by King Amanullah of Afghanistan.
- Turkey's engagement in South Asia started with Afghanistan but has recently been Pakistan-centred.
- As the only majority-Muslim NATO country, Turkey was viewed more positively by the Afghan population and the Taliban than other NATO member states.
- Ankara has been reaching out to the Taliban since summer 2021. However, the Taliban have not met Turkish demands for a more inclusive government, or in relation to girls' education.
- Turkey has become a haven for non-Taliban (opposition) Afghans, who are told not to voice their criticism of the Taliban.
- There are four main motivations for Turkey's engagement in Afghanistan: 1) improving relations with the US; 2) stabilizing Afghanistan to prevent migrant flows; 3) getting a foothold in the geopolitics of the region; 4) benefitting from the economic potential.
- Kabul international airport is important both for the Taliban and for Turkey. For the Taliban, it is their window to the world; for Turkey, it is an opportunity to profit economically and to boost its international status.
- In Afghanistan, Turkey's soft power approach includes TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), the *Maarif* schools, and the Yunus Emre Institute. These institutions have remained operational.
- In 2020, Afghanistan received the third largest amount of Turkish developmental aid, amounting to 36.5 million USD.
- Even if the world, and Turkey, are currently focused on Ukraine, Afghanistan will continue to occupy an important place in Turkey's regional foreign policy.

## Introduction: nostalgia and romanticism

*Despite this distance, there is, at least in Turkey, a sense of familiarity. One reason is history, the other kinship with Turkic peoples.*

Afghanistan and Turkey are geographically distant countries. The distance from Turkey's Eastern to Afghanistan's Western border is over 2000 km, and it is more than 3500 km from Istanbul to Kabul. Throughout history, this distance has never been significantly less: in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Ottoman Empire expanded towards what is now Southern Iraq, the distance from border to border was some hundred kilometres less, but the rival Persian Empire has always stood between the two countries.

Despite this distance, there is, at least in Turkey, a sense of familiarity. One reason is history, the other kinship with Turkic peoples who are significant minorities in Afghanistan.

The historic link cited most frequently is the Sufi mystic Jaleddin Rumi (1207-1273), known as Mevlana in Turkey, who travelled westward from his native Afghanistan and settled after many years in Konya, then capital of the Seljuk Empire. This history is referenced, for example, on [the official site of the Mevlana Museum in Konya](#). Before coming to Konya, he married a local woman (Gevher) in Karaman, with whom he had two sons. After Gevher passed away, he married a second time and had a son and a daughter. The descendants of Mevlana are still based in Konya and preside over the [International Mevlana Foundation](#).<sup>1</sup>

*The first official visit by a foreign head of state was that of King Amanullah of Afghanistan with his wife in 1928.*

After Mevlana, the era most often referred to in order to underline the proximity of the two countries is the (pre)Republican period. Mahmud Tarzi, one of the most influential Afghan politicians of the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, lived in the Ottoman Empire from 1885 until 1902. He wrote a book about his experiences, which was re-published by TIKA in 2019. Back in Afghanistan, he founded the [Seraj-al-Akhbar](#) newspaper, which earned him the nickname the "Father of Afghan journalism." The paper was published from 1911 until 1919. When King Amanullah, who was married to Tarzi's daughter, ascended to the throne, Tarzi became foreign minister. Later he headed the Afghan delegation during the peace negotiations with Great Britain which ended in Afghanistan being given its independence. In the 1920s, he served as Afghanistan's ambassador to France, and he would hold numerous other governmental posts until 1929, when the Amanullah monarchy was toppled by a coup and Tarzi was forced into exile. He chose to spend it in Istanbul, where he lived until his death in 1933. His tomb is in the Pierre Loti cemetery, overlooking the Golden Horn. There, in 2019, to commemorate a century of Afghan independence, Afghanistan's consul in Istanbul at the time, Zekeriya Barakzey, said: "[Today we have gathered at the tomb of this great man, who is a symbol of Afghan-Turkish friendship.](#)"

This bilateral friendship [was formalized in a treaty signed in 1921](#). After the Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923, the first official visit by a foreign head of state was that of King Amanullah of Afghanistan with his wife in 1928, when the friendship treaty was renewed. Amanullah was known for his appreciation of Atatürk and wanted to introduce the Turkish model of modernization in Afghanistan.

Ömer Aslan, professor of international relations at Ankara's Yıldırım Beyazıt University, who specializes in Turkey's Asia policy, wrote in a recent article from February 2022 that: "Turkey inherited from the Ottomans an active interest in Afghanistan, and kept it" (Aslan 2022: 1). He went on to sum up his archival research into relations between the two nations in the 1920s and 1930s: "What we see in the archives of third states, like the UK, US or Australia, is that Afghanistan wanted far more Turkish involvement. Kabul kept demanding more physicians, engineers, nurses, engineers etc., but Turkey had huge difficulties finding people willing to go.

<sup>1</sup> The author met with Esin Çelebi Bayru, a representative of the 22<sup>nd</sup> generation after Mevlana, in Konya in late July 2021.

*“Most of this historic talk is just romanticism and nostalgia.”*

Afghanistan then was not only far away, but it was also a difficult country to live in and not too popular among Turkish experts.”<sup>2</sup> However, even if the contact continued with a small Turkish presence during the Cold War, too, Aslan concluded that “most of this historic talk is just romanticism and nostalgia.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these historic ties, there are also cultural, ethnic and religious relations, though these were initially more between certain political/social groups than they were between the two states. Since the 1980s at least, Turkey’s Islamists have been in closer contact with Afghan religious leaders; President [Erdoğan, for instance, met with Gulbuddin Hekmatyar before he embarked on his political career](#). A photo from the mid-1980s shows him sitting at Hekmatyar’s feet.

Whereas Mahmud Tarzi and King Amanullah were both Pashtuns, the best-known Afghans who have lived in Turkey since the 1990s were all either ethnic Uzbeks or Turkmen. The most (in)famous of them is [General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a Uzbek leader from northern Afghanistan who found refuge in Turkey](#) when he had to leave Afghanistan. The presence of Uzbeks and Turkmen definitely constitutes an emotional bond between the two countries.

## Afghanistan’s place in Turkey’s foreign policy

The end of the Cold War was certainly the most dramatic change in the international order of recent decades, and it also impacted significantly on Turkey’s foreign policy. The most important consequence was a shift towards a more independent and proactive foreign policy, with Turkey reaching out to regions in which it had not been very active during the Cold War years.<sup>4</sup> One such region was South Asia, where Turkey has been trying to intensify relations. As Aslan argues: “Turkey’s engagement in South Asia started with Afghanistan in the 1920s, and there have been two constants in Turkey’s presence in Afghanistan since then: 1) the military; and 2) the Turkish presence in cooperation with Western partners. Turkey has always been more comfortable in the region when acting in alliance with the West.”<sup>5</sup>

However, in recent years, “Turkey’s South Asia policy has become Pakistan-centred. There were efforts to make Pakistan less central to Turkey’s regional foreign policy. These were led by Bülent Ecevit, who read Indian authors and felt an intellectual affinity to India rather than Pakistan, in the late 1970s and again in the late 1990s, but his governments were short-lived.”<sup>6</sup>

Afghanistan only became more prominent in Turkey’s foreign policy agenda with its participation in NATO operations since 2001. Turkey’s ruling AKP, in power since late 2002, built solid relationships with Afghanistan’s previous governments, while also building stronger regional relations with Pakistan and Iran in order to navigate Afghani affairs.

For Salim Çevik, a Fellow at the Centre for Applied Turkey Studies at SWP in Berlin, Turkey’s importance for and in Afghanistan grew because Turkey is the only Muslim-majority member of NATO. Turkish military and civilians served in important positions during this period: [“Former Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin served as NATO’s first Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan, and Turkish officers twice commanded the International Security Assistance Force](#)

*“Turkey’s South Asia policy has become Pakistan-centred.”*

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Ömer Aslan, downtown Ankara, 17 January 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Ömer Aslan, 17 January 2022

<sup>4</sup> See, for an overview, Özdem Zeynep Oktav (2011). Turkey in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century - Quest for a New Foreign Policy

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ömer Aslan, 17 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Ömer Aslan, 17 January 2022.

*"I don't think, the average Afghan cared much about them being Turkish, but the crescent in the flag had a positive effect."*

(ISAF)." There were around 500 Turkish soldiers serving with the NATO mission. Turkey never deployed a combat force, however. "[The Taliban in turn avoided targeting Turkish forces; there has, in fact, been only one attack on a Turkish unit.](#)" For Haldun Yalçinkaya, professor and security expert at TOBB Economics and Technology University, Ankara, the Turkish identity was less important than the Islamic one: "I don't think, the average Afghan cared much about them being Turkish, but the crescent in the flag had a positive effect."<sup>7</sup> During this period, Turkey counterbalanced the Western NATO countries, which bestowed a special emotional importance on its presence.

However, this greater engagement with Afghanistan does not make the country any more central to Turkish foreign policy. For Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, "[Afghanistan itself has little strategic value for Turkey](#)" still. As the Pakistan-centredness continues, "other countries in the region are totally neglected, such as Bangladesh, Nepal or Bhutan."<sup>8</sup>

## Turkey and the Taliban; Turkey and the non-Taliban

Since the summer of 2021, Turkey has been openly reaching out to the Taliban. Even before the fall of Kabul on 15 August 2021, Erdoğan had declared his willingness to meet with the Taliban, lauding the "moderate" nature of the Taliban leaders' statements and expressing his willingness to cooperate, paving the way for more Turkish involvement. This "[moderate allegation was widely propagated in Turkish state-owned media.](#)"

*"The Taliban need foreign help; the country is facing a severe famine. Turkey could engage in emergency relief."*

However, "At first, the Taliban thought that Turkey was siding with the Kabul government, which made it difficult to start relations. But then, with religious language and a vocabulary of understanding, relations improved. The Taliban need foreign help, the country is facing a severe famine. Turkey could engage in emergency relief: there are schools there, the embassy is working, there are humanitarian NGOs, there is a personal communication, which is an important entry point."<sup>9</sup>

On 20 July 2021, Erdoğan said that Ankara "does not have beliefs that contradict those of the Taliban". A day later, Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid told TRT Arabic: "[Turkey is our brother; we share many common points based on belief.](#)" Turkey was one of the six countries, alongside Russia and China, that was invited to the ceremony announcing the new Taliban government.

Thanks to these cordial relations, Turkish institutions have been able to remain in the country throughout. Turkey's embassy has remained open without interruptions, albeit from the airport for a time, and the schools also stayed open.

On 16 August 2021, [Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen told News TV A Haber](#), a pro-AKP TV channel, that they wanted to get along well with Turkey, saying the countries were brothers in faith after all. This was not only popular in Turkey. In reaction, the hashtag #TalibanKardesimDegildir (The Taliban are not my brother) trended on Twitter. But for Kristian Brakel, director of Heinrich Böll's office in Istanbul, "[It cannot be denied that the Turkish leadership is trying to make the best of a difficult situation.](#)" Such cordial rhetoric would certainly not be possible if the Turkish opposition were in government. It is hard to imagine the CHP stressing its religious bonds and similarities with the Taliban. [After the fall of Kabul, the CHP was](#)

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Haldun Yalçinkaya, TOBB University Campus, Ankara, 19 January 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Ömer Aslan, 17 January 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Galip Dalay, 3 January 2022.

[extremely critical of the decision to leave Turkish soldiers stationed in Kabul](#), accusing the government of risking the lives of Turkish soldiers for monetary gains. The Taliban, in turn, would change their attitude towards the secularist Kemalists, who they would never address as “brothers in faith”. However, given that both sides are interested in economic and diplomatic cooperation, the interdependencies would continue after a change of government in Turkey.

In October 2021, a Taliban delegation arrived in Turkey. The meeting in Ankara between Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban-appointed foreign minister, came after Taliban leaders had held a series of talks with the United States, ten European states and European Union representatives in Qatar. However, the visit was very low key: with no flag or protocol, it was labeled an ‘unofficial working visit.’ Çavuşoğlu, speaking after the meeting in the Turkish capital, said they had discussed the airport issue, but also that Turkey had made suggestions concerning a more inclusive Afghan government: [“We shared some recommendations on the subject of educating women, children and girls, and on women joining the workforce. We said, don’t see this as a precondition set by the West or as their demand. We recommended that they see it as an expectation of the Muslim world and of other Muslim countries.”](#)

These Turkish demands are understandable, because if Taliban-ruled Afghanistan remains an international pariah, it will be almost impossible for Turkey to recognize the Taliban government and become more intensively involved in the country, because to do so would simply be adding one more problem to Turkey’s already difficult relations with the West. Ahmet Kasim Han, a professor at Altınbaş University, underlined that if Turkey’s [“role amounts reaches the point where it, or any other country, is viewed as a sponsor... of the establishing of a Sharia regime which is brutal in its practices... Turkey should not want itself there.”](#)

For the domestic narrative, the fate and status of Turkic peoples, especially the Uzbeks and Turkmens, is more important than girls’ education. Therefore, as Galip Dalay has shown: [“Turkey wanted the Taliban to include Uzbeks and/or Turkmens in the new cabinet, as this would have helped the Turkish government’s domestic narrative.”](#) However, the Taliban have not met any of the Turkish demands, demonstrating the clear limitations of Turkish influence over the Taliban. Decisions in late March confirmed that the Taliban were not willing to accommodate foreign demands relating to either girls’ education or the status of women, when [secondary education for girls was banned](#) and [women barred from unaccompanied air travel](#).

For decades, Turkey has been maintaining relations with Afghan leaders of Turkic descent; they often hosted them, too, especially when they were in trouble in Afghanistan. The most enigmatic of all was certainly Abdul Rashid Dostum. The presence of non-Taliban Afghans, especially from the elite, has increased last year. “Turkey hosts a plethora of non-Taliban Afghans, who are largely in opposition to the Taliban. There are Dostum and the Uzbeks, but also the leader of Jamaat Islamiya, Hazar leaders, and former government people. There might have been an initial idea to unite and organize them against the Taliban, but Turkey has realized that their popularity is now quite low in Afghanistan. Many of these people are associated with corruption. What Turkey offers them is safety: they can stay in Turkey, but in return, they have to keep quiet and not voice opposition to the Taliban.”<sup>10</sup> [On 17 May 2022, some of these oppositional Afghani figures met in Istanbul](#) to discuss the future of Afghanistan with representatives from neighbouring countries. They included Rashid Dostum, the heads of several Islamist parties, and former government representatives.

*“If Taliban-ruled Afghanistan remains an international pariah, it will be almost impossible for Turkey to recognize the Taliban government.”*

*“Turkey hosts a plethora of non-Taliban Afghans, who are largely in opposition to the Taliban.”*

<sup>10</sup> Interview with expert in Ankara, January 2022.



*“Turkey could also show that its growing independence outside the NATO alliance could also have benefits for the Alliance.”*

For Turkey, these relations are an ace in their hands, but they also pose a balancing problem. The linguistic, historic and emotional ties with the Turkic world have become stronger since the end of the Soviet Union. President Özal in particular wanted to reach out to the central Asian states and Turkic peoples in the wider region in the 1990s. Now, scholarships and exchange programs are in place. It is much easier for Uzbek and Turkmen Afghans in particular than it is for Pashtuns to integrate in Turkey, mostly because of the familiarity of the languages. However, these contacts can create problems in the country's relations with the Taliban. As Galip Dalay said: “Turkey should not give the image of an ethnicized approach to Afghanistan. That would create difficulties in its relations with the Taliban. They should push for a more inclusive Afghanistan and lobby for the Shia Hazara, too, not only the Turkic groups. Ethnic solidarity is difficult.”<sup>11</sup>

Turkey should use its relations with the Taliban to enable a bigger role for non-Pashtuns in Afghanistan, and not only in the Northern provinces, where they predominantly live, but also in the centre. In the mid to long run, Turkey would hope that these non-Taliban leaders could play a more important role in Afghan politics and through this also strengthen Turkey's position in Afghanistan and the whole region, as it tries to build networks in Afghanistan's Central Asian neighbours.

### Turkey's motives for engaging in Afghanistan

At a time when many countries have left Afghanistan, Turkey is searching for ways to stay. Besides the risks such an engagement could create, it could also offer some potential opportunities for Turkey.

### Improved relations with US, a bridge to the West

*Being the only NATO member in Afghanistan and a key point of communication between the Taliban and the West could provide Turkey with the regional mediating role it has long aspired to.*

After the fall of Kabul, the most frequently cited reason for Turkey wanting to continue to run Kabul airport was a desire to improve relations with the US, the Biden administration and through this the West in general, while demonstrating its continued usefulness to NATO, too. As Aydıntaşbaş wrote in mid-September 2021: [“Turkey's interest in Afghanistan has nothing to do with that country and everything to do with Erdoğan's desire to repair ties with the West .... By jumping into the fray in Afghanistan, Ankara seems to have calculated that Turkey could mend ties with the Biden administration and remind NATO of its geopolitical significance in an age of Great Power competition.”](#)

Turkey could also show that its growing independence outside the NATO alliance could also have benefits for the Alliance. Negotiations over a Turkish presence at Kabul airport began in mid-June 2021, when Biden met Erdoğan in Brussels. These negotiations have thus already helped improve bilateral relations between Turkey and the US.

Being the only NATO member in Afghanistan and a key point of communication between the Taliban and the West could provide Turkey with the regional mediating role it has long aspired to. This could also benefit the United States: it would be good to have a NATO ally on Afghan soil who could negotiate some American interests—such as getting citizens, friends and allies out—without Washington having to engage directly with the

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Galip Dalay, 3 January 2022

Taliban. Beyond the US dimension, “Ankara also wants to use Afghanistan as a source of leverage vis-à-vis Europe.”<sup>12</sup>

Moving ahead to July 2022, this aspect is now less prominent than it was in August/September 2021; it is still one of Turkey’s motivations for remaining active in Afghanistan, but other reasons have now been added to it.

### *Stabilize Afghanistan to stop refugees/migrants wanting to leave, and to enable repatriation*

For a foreign expert in Ankara:

*The real concern in Turkey is about new refugees leaving Afghanistan for Turkey.*

*“The number one driver for Turkey’s engagement in Afghanistan is migration, which has become a major domestic issue. Many in the AKP link the refugee issue to the 2019 municipal elections defeat in Istanbul and Ankara. This made the issue so important. Therefore, the commitment is to stabilize Afghanistan, so that the most important aspect of the Afghan migrant strategy can be implemented, which is deportations. This also makes the airport so crucial. One reason is humanitarian —this is the gate through which humanitarian aid can reach Afghanistan. But second is that this also makes deportations of illegal migrants possible. Turkey suspended the deportations on 14 August 2021.”<sup>13</sup>*

Even if deportations by plane are only cosmetic in terms of numbers, it would send a message to the electorate that the government is trying to reduce the number of refugees. In late April 2022, the pro-government [Daily Sabah reported that 227 Afghans had been deported from Malatya to Kabul](#). In mid-May 2022, 377 more Afghans were deported from Edirne, Istanbul and Kocaeli. In total, [since 27 January 2022, when flights to Afghanistan were resumed, 12899 Afghans have been deported](#). Since there will most likely be elections in 2023, there will most likely be more news reports of this sort ahead of the elections, to convince AKP voters at least that the government is coping with the issue of irregular migrants.

*“As an Afghan, you cannot stay legally in every province, only in designated so-called ‘satellite’ (uydu) provinces.”*

Kristian Brakel, head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s office in Istanbul, confirmed that [the real concern in Turkey is about new refugees leaving Afghanistan for Turkey. Long before the fall of Kabul, the media spent weeks discussing the fact that more and more Afghans were turning up on the Turkish side of the border with Iran. Television images of groups of people coming down hills undisturbed and making their way along country roads led to heated discussions in the country.](#)

When speaking about migrants/refugees in Turkey, the most frequently mentioned group are the Syrians, who have been fleeing the war in Syria since 2011. Their numbers in Turkey are now in the region of 3.7 million. In fact, a special regulation was put in place for the Syrians, known as [temporary protection](#). There is no such special regulation for Afghans, who have to apply for international protection with the [migration presidency](#).

As a migration expert in Izmir described, there are other problems that stem from this form of registration: “As an Afghan, you cannot stay legally in every province, only in

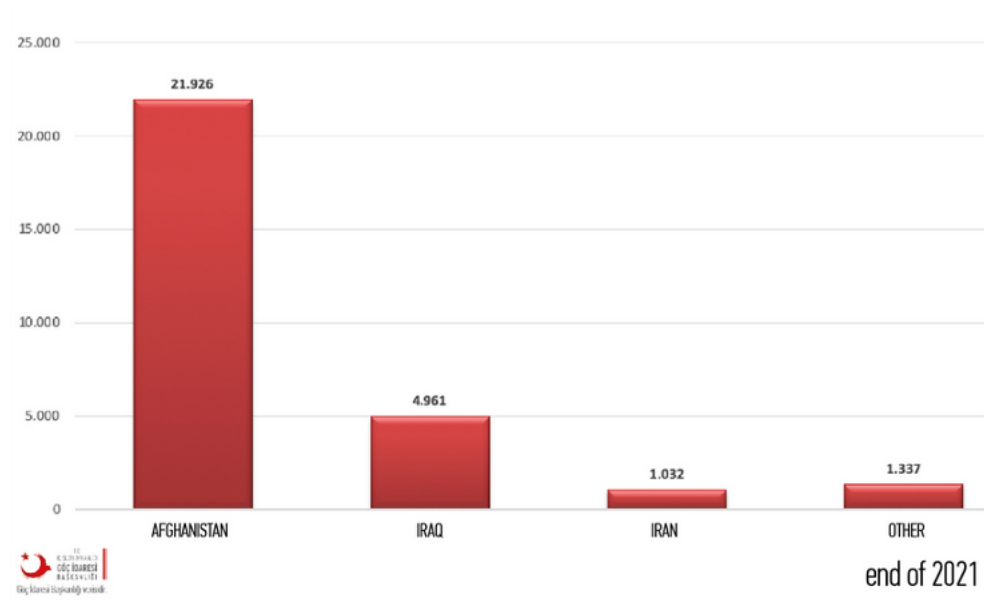
<sup>12</sup> Interview Galip Dalay, 3 January 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Interview in Ankara, January 2022.



designated so-called ‘satellite’ (uydu) provinces, which do not include either Istanbul or Izmir.”<sup>14</sup>

#### APPLICATIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION, THE TOP 3 NATIONALITIES



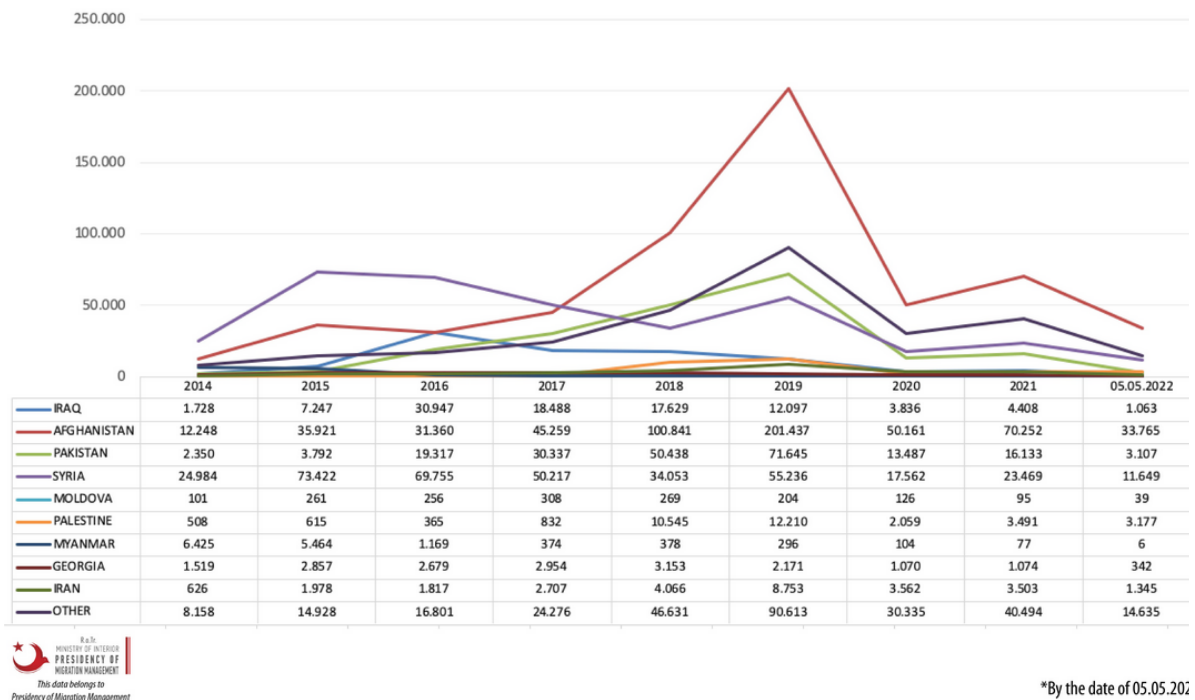
By the end of 2021, only *circa* 22,000 Afghans had registered and moved to or lived in the so-called satellite provinces. “However, most Afghans prefer to be in Istanbul, where there are networks, job possibilities and smugglers, so they can continue on their journey. That is why very few actually move to these provinces, where they would have access to health and education. In the Aegean, Isparta and Denizli are satellite provinces, but so is Malatya in Eastern Anatolia. Only when registered in the designated satellite province do migrants/refugees have access to state services. But there is no public aid program relating to housing, jobs, money or food.”<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir, 24 January 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir, 24 January 2022.

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## DISTRIBUTION OF IRREGULAR MIGRANTS BY CITIZENSHIP BY YEAR



*Afghans have been the biggest migrant group since 2018, with more than 400,000 registered as irregular migrants.*

The above table shows the number of irregular migrants, who were detained either at the border or during controls made inside Turkey. What is striking is that Afghans have been the biggest migrant group since 2018, with more than 400,000 registered as irregular migrants. They were also by far the largest group in the first five months of 2022, representing 49% of all irregular migrants. That is why several experts, both Turkish and foreign, estimate the number of Afghans in Turkey at around 500,000.<sup>16</sup> For a migration expert in Izmir, something is changing in relation to Afghan migration: “A trend we have seen in recent months is that more young male Afghan migrants are arriving in Turkey, while before it was mainly whole families who came here. Now, the young men are aged between 15 and 18.”<sup>17</sup>

Didem Daniş explained why there is a difference between Syrians and Afghans (and many other refugee/migrant groups): “The reasons the Syrians were taken in and accepted generously was because Assad and his regime were perceived as evil by the Turkish government. So, people escaping the evil were welcomed by the authorities. But it’s different with Afghanistan. They cannot blame the Taliban and make them look responsible for a wave of refugees. That’s why there is much stress emphasis placed on the religious bonds and close relations to the Turkic peoples.”<sup>18</sup>

The vast majority of Afghans has been arriving in Turkey via the Turkish-Iranian border. Turkey has been building a wall at this border, similar to the one at the Syrian border. Turkey’s defence minister, Hulusi Akar, said in mid-August 2021 that [the eastern border had been reinforced with thermal and night-vision cameras and more troops, including 750 special operations officers](#). In Iğdır and Ağrı provinces, the wall is finished; in Van province, a section roughly 90km is finished across a relatively flat area. There is no wall

<sup>16</sup> This number was more or less confirmed by Didem Daniş, a migration expert in Izmir, and by foreign experts in Ankara.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir, 24 January 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, Galatasaray University campus, Istanbul, 14 January 2022.

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in high, mountainous territory. It is the winter that prevents migrants trying to cross the border: “Few Afghans come, because under these weather conditions this difficult trip, which can last several weeks, is not possible. It is very high, cold and snowy. In May, we will see whether fewer Afghans really are coming; only then will it be possible to pass the border more easily again. The wall built so far is not a real obstacle. The border is 450 km long and only along 90km is there a wall, which is built in an area where nobody would cross, anyway, because you are too easily detected.”<sup>19</sup>

Human Rights Watch reported in October 2021 that [“Turkish soldiers are also brutally mistreating Afghans, while unlawfully pushing them back.”](#) From 25 September to 11 October, Human Rights Watch remotely interviewed six Afghans, five of them in hiding in Turkey to avoid being expelled to Iran, and one who had been forcibly returned to Iran for a third time. All had fled Afghanistan shortly before or after August 15, when the Taliban took control of Kabul.

The refugee issue has become a problem for the government. Whereas for many years, there was broad consensus about the Syrian refugees in particular and little societal tensions, the situation has changed. Attacks against Syrians have increased, but Afghans have also become targets. After right-wing extremist MP Ümit Özdağ (originally with MHP, after a short İYİ Party intermezzo, he founded the Zafer Party in August 2021) tweeted about a grocery store with the name “Afghan Market” in the city of Kırşehir, [the frightened Afghan shop owner changed the name to “Armağan”](#) (gift, present).

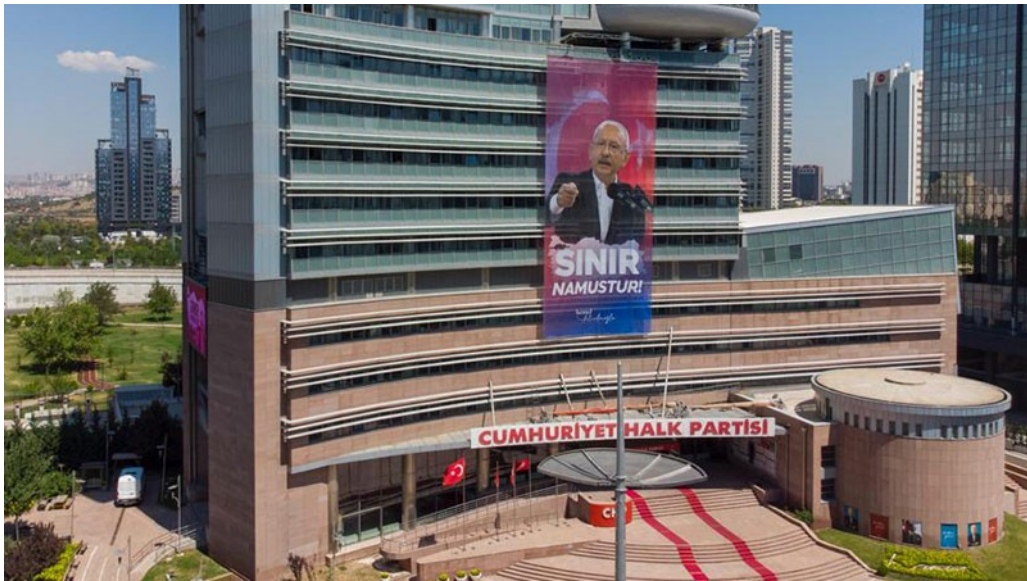
*Whereas for many years, there was broad consensus about the Syrian refugees in particular and little societal tensions, the situation has changed.*



Opposition politicians have identified the issue as suitable for an election campaign, and the largest opposition parties in particular, the CHP and İYİ Party, are stirring up sentiment against Syrians and Afghans while proclaiming that “the border is (our) honour”, as shown in this poster at CHP headquarters in Ankara.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, 14 January 2022.





*“Turkey doesn’t want to legalize the Afghans.”*

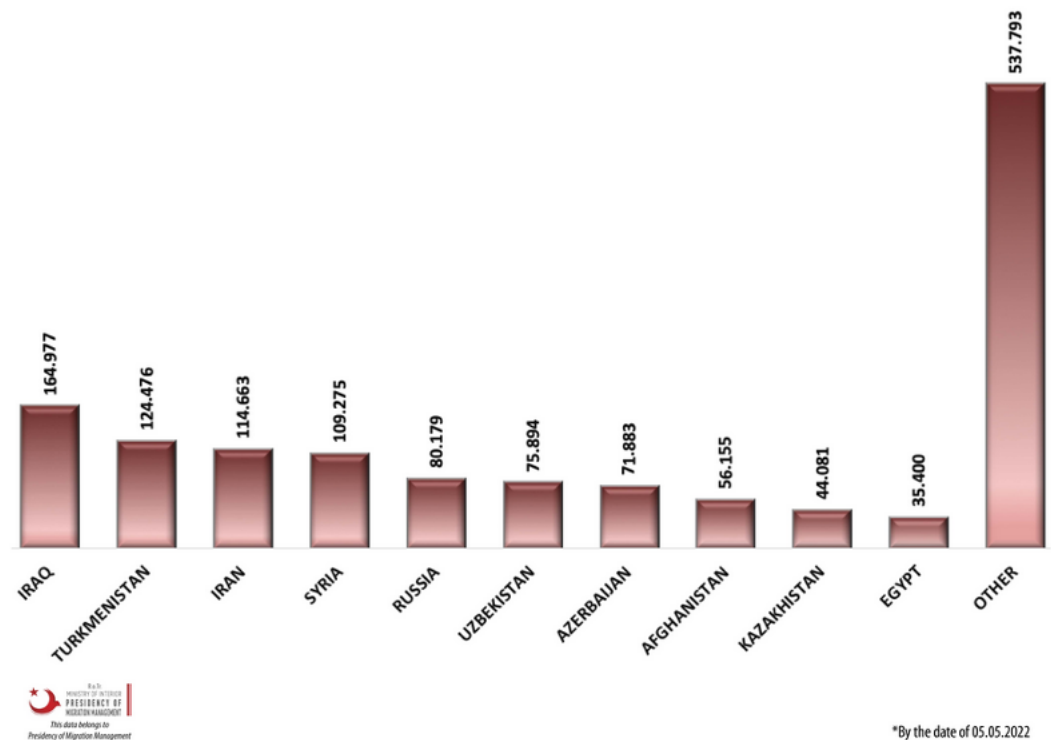
As a result, the government rushed to make it clear that Turkey was not willing to do the same for Afghan as it had for Syrian refugees. Çavuşoğlu, in late September 2021, stated: [“As Turkey, we have carried out our moral and humanitarian responsibilities regarding migration to a sufficient degree.”](#) He added, [“it is out of the question for us to take on an additional refugee burden.”](#) Ankara therefore vehemently rejected the EU's attempt to include Afghan refugees in the third package of the EU-Turkey Statement. The EU will contribute to the humanitarian programs, however, but according to Daniş, this will have to be done indirectly, “because Turkey doesn’t want to legalize the Afghans.”<sup>20</sup>

An additional concern for the Turkish government is that this time round, unlike in 2015-2016, many Afghans are not planning, or are unable, to continue their journey on into Europe. “For the Afghans, the Turkish economy is still promising. We will have to see how this changes with the deepening of the economic crisis. Many work here for a few years to pay off their migration debt (the money they paid for the trip) and to send some money back to Afghanistan.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, 14 January 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, 14 January 2022.

## FOREIGN NATIONALS IN TURKEY ON A RESIDENCE PERMIT IN 2022 (TOP TEN COUNTRIES)



*“Another reason most Afghans now have to stay in Turkey is because the trip to Europe is far more expensive than it was in 2015.”*

In early May 2022, Afghans were in 8<sup>th</sup> position regarding residence permits, with 56,155 nationals.

Another reason most Afghans now have to stay in Turkey is because the trip to Europe is far more expensive than it was in 2015. Working the jobs Afghans usually do in irregular labour, they can currently earn 150 TL per day at most (less than 10 Euros). Saving 2000-3000 Euros from such a low income is almost impossible, even if you take into account that most Afghans live in miserable conditions to reduce costs.”<sup>22</sup>

*“Whereas the current price for Greece is around 2400 USD, for Italy it has risen to 8000 USD.”*

And 2000-3000 Euros is the cost of the “cheap” trip to Greece, as a migration expert explained: “The level of controls in general is extremely high, both on the Turkish-Iranian border, within the country, and close to the borders with Europe. The pushbacks from the Greek coastal guards add to the difficulties that arriving on a Greek island became almost impossible. Because of this, the route has changed now, with more direct boats to Italy which do not stop in Greece. However, this makes the trip much more expensive. Whereas the current price for Greece is around 2400 USD, for Italy it has risen to 8000 USD.”<sup>23</sup> However, if the Turkish economy collapses, many migrants will move on towards Europe, because staying there would become untenable. On the journey to Europe, “Afghans are in a worse position than Syrians. They lack networks, they are less knowledgeable about their situation and where they could go, which makes them more vulnerable, too.”<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, 14 January 2022. Daniş was co-coordinator of the study “Afghans at the Margins of Precarity,” published in January 2021.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir, 24 January 2022.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir 24 January 2022.

*“The younger generation goes to school here and you cannot send them back; 10% might go back, the rest will stay.”*

For Didem Daniş, the Turkish government does not really have a plan for migration governance: “The government has taken rather a spontaneous, non-systematic approach. They react to developments. There is no forward-looking grand strategy.”<sup>25</sup> For a migration expert in Izmir, there is a plan, but no one dares to announce what it is: “My view is that Turkey wants to integrate both the Syrians and the Afghans. The problem is that this is becoming a political issue, with the Opposition proclaiming that the Syrians and Afghans must be sent back. This is far from realistic, however. The younger generation goes to school here and you cannot send them back; 10% might go back, the rest will stay.”<sup>26</sup>

### *Gain a foothold in the geopolitics of the region*

There is also a regional dimension to Turkey’s Afghanistan policy. Turkey wants to use an increased presence in Afghanistan to gain a better foothold in the geopolitics of Central and South Asia. If Turkey succeeds in raising its profile there, others will have to take it seriously. As Graziosi and Carafano argue: [“Ankara sees influence over Afghanistan as a key factor in its political and economic expansion into Central Asia.”](#)

*Ankara sees influence over Afghanistan as an important supporting factor in its political and economic expansion in Central Asia.*

This is a difficult task, and it is highly likely that Afghanistan’s neighbours, especially big players like China and Russia, will play a more prominent role, with Turkey a secondary player at best. However, Turkey would still be in a better position to try and [“broaden the chessboard”](#) of its foreign policy and the AKP to play to its base. Ankara sees influence over Afghanistan as an important supporting factor in its political and economic expansion in Central Asia.

### *Economy, reconstruction, natural resources*

According to DEİK (Foreign Economic Relations Board of Turkey), Turkey’s bilateral trade relations with Afghanistan developed positively in the early 2000s. While the trade volume in 2004 was 77 million USD, this number had almost tripled within five years to 200 million USD. The apex was reached in 2012 with a trade volume of almost 300 million USD. Since then, it has fallen back to around 200 million USD. [For DEİK, the most important reason for the country’s low bilateral trade activities is “security”](#) (p. 6).

DEİK sees the biggest future potential in Afghanistan’s natural resources, especially lithium and gold, followed by oil, coal and gas. Other sectors with potential would be mining, pharmaceuticals, and construction-related investments. As Hany Ghoraba wrote in November 2021: [“Erdoğan wants to be part of the new search for minerals and oil in Afghanistan, which is believed to hold 1.6 billion barrels of crude oil, 16 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and 500 million barrels of natural gas liquids according to expert estimates.”](#)

[Turkey-Afghanistan bilateral trade statistics \(in 1000 USD, p.5\)](#)

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Didem Daniş, 14 January 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with a migration expert in Izmir, 24 January 2022.



	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (to Nov)
Export	166,065	149,543	176,879	152,808	156,475	174,848
Import	15,211	14,919	21,832	24,616	24,053	24,377
Volume	181,276	164,462	198,711	177,424	180,528	199,225
Balance	150,854	134,624	155,047	128,192	132,422	150,471

The top ten Turkish exports to Afghanistan are: sunflower oil, diapers, hunting guns, steel storage tanks, aircraft components, hinges, corn oil, medicine, electrical equipment, women's clothing.

The top ten export from Afghanistan to Turkey are: raisins, other seeds, animal hides, almonds, handmade carpets, other medical plants, animal intestines, green cumin, shelled walnuts, saffron.

For Turkey to become more active in Afghanistan, the Afghan economy will have to be fundamentally transformed. An economic model based on foreign aid, illegal activities such as drug production, and trade is not a good match for a modern economic environment. In this new Afghan economy, the energy sector will have to be central, as will the construction of a national infrastructure. Otherwise, more people will leave, and few will return.

To date, very few Turkish entrepreneurs have moved into Afghanistan. One of the few who have is Süleyman Ciliz, the chairperson of [DEIK's Turkey-Afghanistan Business Council](#) and president of the [77 İnşaat](#) company, which he founded in 1988. In the late 1990s, Ciliz became active in Iraq. His contacts brought him to Afghanistan in 2009, where his primary focus has been the Kajaki dam in Kandahar province.

"My total investment in Afghanistan is 150 million USD. I currently have 500 people working at the plant, of whom 150 are Turks and 350 Afghans. We have also trained a lot of Afghans in recent years. Our projects continue. Our contacts in Afghanistan were with the Energy Ministry and the electric administration. This is also continuing. What has changed are the following: While before August 2021, I had to fly from Kabul to Kandahar and then take a helicopter to Kajaki, you can now just drive by car, either from Kabul, which of course takes longer, but also from Kandahar. The Taliban are oriented towards problem solving. The Ghani government had an Afghan Investment Office, which was very slow in taking action. The Taliban now help more, solve problems, and are more interested in getting things done. Previously when submitting a tender, you had to consider high security costs, which were obligatory. Now the expenses for security have been reduced by half. You could not use Iranian products, because of the sanctions, which made everything much more expensive. Now it is a lot better. I come regularly now to Afghanistan without interruptions."<sup>27</sup>

Ciliz is thus optimistic that given the improved security scenario, investments will increase: "Investments are also vital for Europe and Germany. Without investments and

*In this new Afghan economy, the energy sector will have to be central, as will the construction of a national infrastructure*

*"The Taliban now help more, solve problems, and are more interested in getting things done."*

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Süleyman Ciliz, 12 January 2022.

an improvement in welfare in Afghanistan, many will migrate. The Germans were in Mazar-i Sharif for 20 years, but they didn't do anything outside their compounds. Now would be the time to come and invest."<sup>28</sup>

### Airport and security

*Controlling the airport would allow Turkey to regulate what comes in and out of Afghanistan in terms of aid.*

The Taliban's outreach to Turkey is thought to be an attempt to stop the new regime from becoming isolated and sanctioned by the international community. For Turkey, having control of the airport could open economic relations with the Taliban and allow cheap Turkish goods to reach the Afghan market, while providing opportunities for AKP-aligned Turkish construction firms to rebuild the war-torn country. Controlling the airport would allow Turkey to regulate what comes in and out of Afghanistan in terms of aid.

Turkey is already familiar with Kabul airport. During [NATO's ISAF mission](#), Turkish troops were responsible for running the international airport in 2005. In order for Ankara to leverage Afghanistan for other purposes, it first needs to "ensure any role it plays at Kabul airport has a security dimension and is not a strictly technical or civilian role."<sup>29</sup> The Taliban appear to approve of Turkey assuming a role in the running of the airport, along with Qatar, but they are wary of attaching any significant security dimension to it. To overcome the Taliban's resistance, Turkey has shown itself to be flexible. Thus, rather than using its military, it could consider a private security company supported by a limited number of special forces troops at the airport. In early February, [Turkish media reported that the Taliban, Qatar and Turkey had reached an agreement in principle and would now be finalizing the arrangement](#). The foreign ministers of Turkey and Afghanistan discussed the issue again during the [Antalya Diplomacy Forum on 12 March, without achieving any concrete agreement](#). In late April 2022, after meetings in Doha between Taliban and Qatari representatives, [the negotiations on operating five airports reached a deadlock, due to disagreements over the security dimension of the Turkish-Qatari involvement](#). The Taliban seemed to be insisting on a purely technical role for both nations, leaving the security of the airports to their own fighters.

*Turkey has been described as a country that uses soft power in its foreign policy, especially in the first decade of the 2000s.*

### Soft power

As a concept, soft power gained prominence after the end of the Cold War. Without a fierce confrontation between blocs, the significance of military power and concepts like deterrence and economic sanctions declined in significance for some two decades. The mood in the 1990s favoured cooperation and alliances, network building and cultural attraction.

Turkey has been described as a country that uses soft power in its foreign policy, especially in the first decade of the 2000s. Ankara employed a large repertoire of soft power ingredients from intensified trade relations to a very liberal visa policy, from tourism to scholarships and exchange programs, from TV series and music to pop stars.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Süleyman Ciliv, 12 January 2022.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Galip Dalay, 3 January 2022 (online).

Some of these were part of an official state policy, other aspects were developed independently by private initiatives.

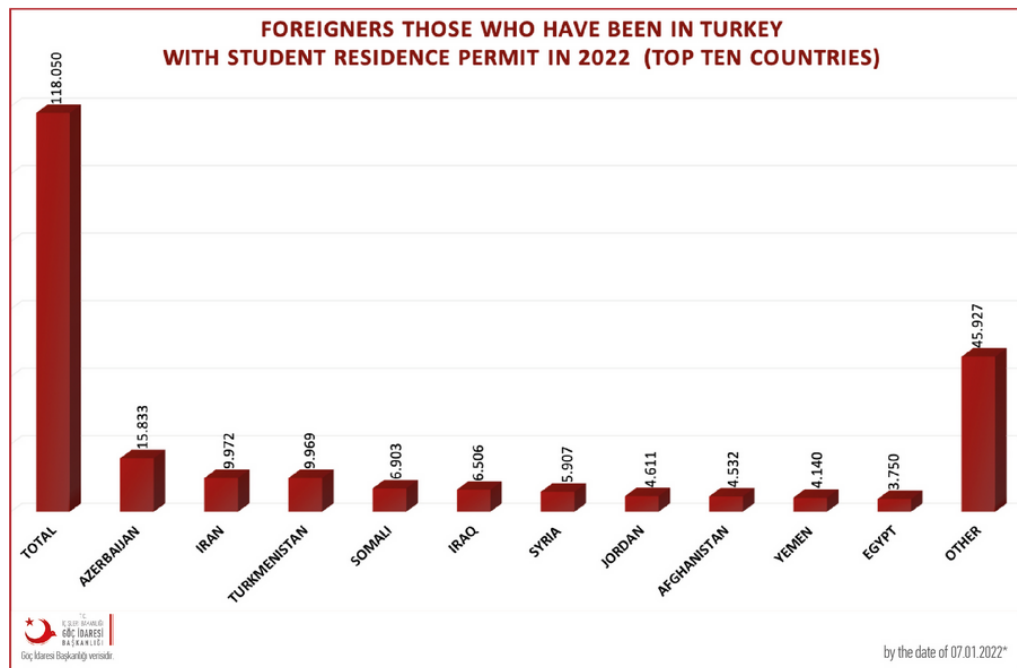
In Afghanistan, Turkey's soft power approach includes TIKA, the *Maarif* schools and the YEI (Yunus Emre Institute) at a very minimum. However, as in other parts of the world, the first Turkish institutions/NGOs to become active were private Islamic movements, among which the most successful abroad was the Gülen Movement. In Afghanistan, the Gülenists were active for over 20 years under the roof of the "Afgan Türk Çağ Eğitim Kurumları" [Afghan Turkish Epoch Education Institutions], which ran 12 schools and 3 tutoring schools in the country until 2018. In February 2018, an agreement between Kabul and Ankara transferred these schools to the state-owned *Maarif* (Education) Foundation. According to the Leftist daily *Birgün*, [General Dostum played a major role in this transfer, and his residence permit in Turkey was only granted in exchange for the school transfers](#). Since then, these schools have been called the "[Afghan-Turkish Maarif Schools](#)." According to the website of the Afghan-Turkish schools, the plan was to have opened 10 new schools over five years (from 2018 until 2023). This would seem to have been clearly exceeded, as the *Maarif* website now lists 31 schools in Afghanistan, of which 12 are either girls' middle or high schools. [The elementary schools are co-educational](#). These activities have not been welcomed by all. On 14 May 2022, [the deputy principal of Kandahar Aino Mena Primary School was killed by unknown assailants](#). On 15 May, the EU's special envoy to Afghanistan, Tomas Niklasson, tweeted: "[Turkey generously offers an ambitious education and grant programme. An attack against education is an attack against the future of Afghanistan - its youth.](#)"

*The Maarif website now lists 31 schools in Afghanistan, of which 12 are either girls' middle or high schools. The elementary schools are co-educational.*



Turkey has educated Afghan police, including women as well as military personnel, and has awarded a large number of scholarships for Afghan students, most of which are for study in Turkey. The [Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities](#) (YTB) has awarded many scholarships, so that in early 2022 Afghan students still numbered among the top 10 national groups of foreign students in Turkey.





What also becomes very clear is the position Turkey enjoys in Central Asia and the Middle East. Despite the EU's Erasmus program, no European/Western country is in the top10.

*Afghanistan received most aid in 2020, with 36.5 million USD, the third highest amount worldwide.*

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) [has three offices in Afghanistan, in Herat, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif](#). According to TIKA's latest report, from 2020, [as one of the least developed countries, Afghanistan received most aid in 2020, with 36.5 million USD](#). This is the third highest amount worldwide after Albania, which received almost 60 million USD, and Iraq, which received 36.7 million USD.

As Salim Çevik, a Fellow at the SWP, summarized: [“Turkish state institutions and NGOs conduct a broad range of cultural and educational activities and supply extensive humanitarian aid. Reports confirm the ability of Turkish officials and volunteers to engage with Afghan society on equal terms. Shared religious and cultural elements certainly help. Although the Taliban accuses of Ankara of being too pro-Uzbek, Turkey is viewed very positively across Afghan society. This, together with its ability to talk with all sides, places Turkey in a unique position.”](#)

One more soft power ingredient is [being a donor. Turkey has raised its profile](#) with regard to aid, especially [in Somalia where it has been one of the main donors over many years](#). Recently, Turkey has also been active on the humanitarian front in Afghanistan. [On 15 March 2022, the third aid train arrived in Afghanistan from Turkey](#) with almost 1000 tons of food aid aboard.

## Conclusion

While it is a truism to say that we live in fast-moving times, in terms of international crises, this has really been the case in recent months. While Afghanistan dominated the world's attention from July until September 2021, the global focus has been on Ukraine

since at least 24 February 2022, with the still dramatic situation in Afghanistan largely forgotten.

Turkey has also adjusted its focus and has committed itself diplomatically to the war [between Ukraine and Russia, as seen for example during the Antalya Diplomacy Forum](#). The impacts of the current crisis are far greater for Turkey than they are for Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Afghanistan and the region remain an area of secondary importance for Turkish foreign policy and one where it can score domestic, foreign policy and economic points more easily than in other parts of the world. Domestically, solidarity with Turkic peoples has broad societal support. If the government's involvement in Afghan affairs succeeds in preventing more Afghan migration, this could help the AKP ahead of the elections. In terms of foreign policy, Turkey could underscore its importance to Western and European organizations while simultaneously presenting itself as a regional power vying for influence with both Great (China) and regional powers (Pakistan, India, Russia). Its presence and role should also be of interest to Europe. Open channels of communication with the Taliban could benefit the EU when direct negotiations between Western capitals and Kabul are not possible. Turkey could convey European concerns to the Taliban and assume the role of a messenger and mediator between the Taliban and the West. This could also include economic activity on the part of European companies, which would like to be present in Afghanistan to engage independently or in joint ventures with Turkish companies.

The EU, like other foreign actors, must walk a tightrope between providing humanitarian assistance to Afghans, supporting ongoing projects, and promoting civil society exchange as much as possible without recognizing the Taliban regime. This is not easy, but it is possible. The last example of a pragmatic attitude of this sort was the decision taken by the [European Commission on 23 June 2022 to provide 1 million Euro in disaster aid](#) to Afghanistan after the earthquake in the east of the country in which more than 1000 people died. In general, [the EU has allocated a total of 114 million Euros for humanitarian projects for 2022](#), which will go directly to humanitarian organizations on the ground. [German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on 28.6.2022 at a meeting with the Afghan diaspora in Germany](#): "It is very important for me that we continue our humanitarian support--and I would like to say explicitly that this does not mean legitimizing the Taliban regime. Our support goes to the people of Afghanistan." That is why the EU must be more than just a donor. With a value-based foreign policy, one must also expect issues such as education for girls and women, an inclusive government, the representation of non-Pashtuns and rights for Shiites to be on the agenda when joint projects are being negotiated. This will not result in quick solutions, but continued pressure, in cooperation with countries such as Turkey too, could possibly bring about an attitudinal change among the Taliban.

Turkey could collaborate with the EU and other international organizations here. Economically, Afghanistan is attractive both for Turkish products as an export market and for energy and infrastructure projects.

For all the reasons stated above, there is much to suggest that Turkey will continue its efforts to maintain good relations with the Taliban and to secure a stabilized and non-isolated Afghanistan, even if this only attracts the attention of the Turks and a world audience when the fighting in Ukraine has ceased.

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