

Last week's discovery of 96 Pakistani and Afghan migrants who had [spent](#) a month chained in an Istanbul basement was met with reactions of shock and horror. The men had paid traffickers between four and five thousand lira to cross into [Turkey](#) with the intention of eventually reaching Europe. Upon arriving in Istanbul, they were locked in a basement, with their captors demanding that the men call their families to inform them they had arrived in Europe, and ask for money. Those who refused were tortured. Fortunately, one of the men was able to get a hold of a key. After he released the others, they banded together to attack their captors and then summoned help.

Irregular Targets

Although this incident is particularly horrific, migrants being kidnapped and held for ransom is far from a rare occurrence in Turkey. As Turkey has grown in importance as a transit or destination country for migrants, the practice of kidnapping them for ransom has also grown. Over the course of 2017, [146,084](#) irregular migrants have been caught in Turkey, along with 3,947 smugglers. The vulnerability of irregular migrants makes them an ideal target for traffickers and professional kidnapping gangs. These gangs are aware that people fleeing poverty and conflict are willing to take major risks to arrive at their destination. Irregular migrants and their families also lack the resources to seek help. Victims who are illegally present in Turkey fear going to the authorities, as they risk being deported if they do. There have even been allegations of the police [colluding](#) with the kidnappers.

In the past year alone, numerous incidents have been reported. The victims are of different nationalities, with Iranian, Pakistani, and Afghan being the most common. The kidnapper's methods all follow a similar pattern. Irregular migrants are either lured from their home country or picked up from the street. They are then held captive, often with torture, and their families are contacted with demands to pay ransoms as high as [120,000](#) euros. Many victims are single people or small groups- last week's number of 96 people being held at once appears unusually high. However, large groups of hostages are not unheard of. Last year, [62 Iraqi migrants](#), including women and children, were held for a 10,000 euro ransom by traffickers who had said they would take them to Greece.

Professional Operations

Highly professional gangs of kidnappers have discovered the ease by which they can make exorbitant profits through kidnapping and ransom. In 2016, it was [reported](#) that one such gang in the Kumkapi district of Istanbul had kidnapped as many as 2,000 Pakistani migrants over the course of one year. Witnesses described the gang as having two methods. One was to contact Pakistanis via the internet, offer them a job in Turkey, and kidnap them upon arrival.

The second method was to observe Pakistanis already residing in Istanbul, in order to identify and kidnap those whose families were presumed to have money.

Invisible Slavery

For female migrants, the outcome can be even worse. 2017 has been the highest year on record for human trafficking victims in Turkey, with 251 being rescued over the past 9 months. The majority of the victims are women from Eastern and Central Asia. For them, the situation is even more hopeless, as they are not held for ransom. Rather, they are forced to work, primarily as prostitutes or housemaids. The most recent incident [occurred](#) on November 28, when police rescued two Uzbek women (alongside one Turkish national) who had been forced into prostitution after being lured to Istanbul with promises of work and marriage.

Solutions: Legal Work and Legal Routes

Many of the gangs that have been discovered so far have been Afghan and Pakistani, although these are certainly not the only nationality involved. It seems that kidnapers tend to target victims who are from the same country as them, or at least, whose language they can speak. While both the victims and their captors come from diverse backgrounds, almost all share the experience of having fled a home country that was mired by poverty or conflict. Although it by no means excuses their actions, it is likely that the kidnapers were at one point as desperate as those they would kidnap. Desperate people can easily be exploited, but they can just as easily turn to crime as a way out.

Therefore, to combat this trend, we must address the conditions that lead to such desperation. It is likely that many of the kidnapers, especially those involved in organized gangs, are either international protection seekers or irregular migrants themselves. Making a decent living in Turkey is almost impossible for both groups. Non-Syrian international protection seekers are assigned satellite cities that they must stay in while waiting to be accepted by a third country, a process which can take years. These satellite cities are usually small (none of Turkey's major cities are included), and lacking in job opportunities and social services that could help these protection seekers integrate better into their host society. Thus, many choose to leave for large cities such as Istanbul. However, they cannot work legally once outside of their assigned city. It goes without saying that the situation is even worse for irregular migrants, who have no right to work at all. For those who cannot work legally, there are two ways to make ends meet- through the underground economy, or through crime. Policymakers must take further steps to ensure that all international protection seekers have the opportunity to make a living through legal work, with fair wages and decent conditions. Moreover, NGOs should avoid concentrating the bulk of their services in large cities and strive to serve an ever-diversifying refugee population.



It is even more important to address the situation of the victims. First and foremost, legal routes to migration must be provided. The first step in doing so would be to reassess who counts as "deserving" of migration. For example, it is difficult for Pakistanis or Afghans to receive asylum in Europe, due to parts of their countries being perceived as "safe". The fact that they are willing to risk everything to leave calls this notion of safety into question. Moreover, fleeing conflict should not be considered as the only valid reason for migration. Extreme economic hardship can cause suffering on par with that of war. Regardless of their reason, people will continue to migrate and will do so against all obstacles. Tighter borders and readmission agreements will not change this reality. People will always find a way around new barriers. Until the key questions of legal work and legal routes for immigrants are addressed, we can expect to hear many more reports of people who left their country in search of a better life, and found themselves held hostage in a basement.

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ABOUT US

Bosphorus Migration Studies is an independent “think-together tank” focuses on migration. Founded in July 2015 by a group of independent researchers studying in Boğaziçi University. Headquartered in Ankara.

- Our mission is to promote inclusive and sustainable migration policies and generate alternatives for policy-makers.
- We support junior researchers seeking to deepen their knowledge and networks.
- We engaged NGOs and researchers to develop innovative frameworks.

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*We have another portal in Turkish: bmshaber.com