

Dossier: Mobility and Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean

Syrian Refugees in Turkey: between Heaven and Hell?

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According to the World Bank, Turkey now hosts the largest refugee population in the world, with the number of Syrian refugees registered under temporary protection standing at around 2.7 million. 10.5% of the total number of Syrian refugees are living in tents and temporary shelters, while the rest have settled mostly in urban areas, where they seek their own accommodation and employment opportunities.

Turkey became a transit country not only for Syrians but also for irregular migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan. The number of refugee transits through Turkey to Greece was more than 800,000 in 2015. Tragically, nearly 800 people lost their lives in the Aegean Sea in 2015. Turkey faces three main challenges: the management of refugee flows; the integration of migrants and refugees; and the control of irregular migration towards EU countries. The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, signed on 15 October 2015 in Brussels, constitutes a new step regarding the support of Syrians under temporary protection and regarding migration management.

Overview of Migration and Migration Policy in Turkey

Traditionally, Turkey has been a country of emigration with large numbers of its citizens migrating to Western Europe, particularly to Germany, since the 1960s. After the 1980s, however, it became a country of immigration.

Turkey was one of the original signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and signed its 1967 Protocol with 'geographical-limitations.' Until 1994, there was no comprehensive Turkish legislation relating specifically to refugees and asylum seekers. The 1994 Asylum Regulation was aimed at adopting the UNHCR's refugee status criteria.

Geographical limitations mean that Turkey assumes full responsibility for refugees coming from countries that are members of the Council of Europe. Although, Turkey does not recognize the people fleeing from the Middle East as refugees, the individuals have the right to apply for refugee status and seek resettlement through the UNHCR (Latif, 2002).

As of April 2011, the Syrian refugees in Turkey were officially received as 'guests' and given 'temporary sheltering status' in October 2011. After that, the first legal regulation on the status of the Syrians is Directive 62, dated 30 March 2012, which embodies the basic elements set out in the UNHCR temporary protection scheme (Bidinger et al, 2015).

The Law on Foreigners and International Protection, adopted by the Turkish Parliament in April 2013, constituted a corner stone in Turkish migration policy. A new regulation issued on 22 October 2014 granted temporary protection status to Syrian refugees: temporary protection to specific rights, such as access to emergency care, shelter, food, water, medical treatment, education, housing, the labour market and social security mechanisms.

Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Syrian refugees were settled in camps in 2012 and 2013. However, in 2014, the camps' capacity was insufficient to deal with the massive influx of refu-

gees. Many of the refugees were spread out across Turkey's provinces according to their own preferences. Firstly, they preferred to live in provinces close to the Syrian border. Afterwards, some of the refugees moved to other cities in which they could either easily find work or transit to EU countries. More than 270,000 Syrian refugees are residing in 26 camps across 10 provinces along the border with Syria. The camps are managed according to UNHCR camp guidelines and have been assessed as exemplary due to their cleanliness, safety, maintenance, power lines, schools and other services. The Turkish Disaster Response Agency (AFAD) has been the leading agency in managing the camps and coordinating the government's efforts to respond to the refugee inflow.

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While the camps are well managed and resourced, the non-camp refugee population continues to experience significant problems that need to be addressed. For the refugees living outside the camps, the most urgent issues are housing, food, education, health services and employment.

AFAD reports that 75% of Syrian non-camp refugees live in houses or flats, while 25% live in informal settlements or makeshift arrangements. Most of those who live in houses or flats rent these units. As of October 2014, about 250,000 Syrian refugees received inpatient care; more than 200,000 patients were operated on; there were almost 150,000 births; and over 6 million consultations took place (WB, 2015).

Children's education is another important issue with more than a million Syrian refugees aged 15 and nearly 650,000 under 24 (DGMM, 2016). There

were over 663,000 registered Syrian refugee school-age children, more than 300,000 of which were enrolled in schools in 2015.

Currently, the number of Syrian refugees with informal employment is estimated at around 400,000 (Erdogan and Unver, 2015). Despite the work permission regulation on 15 January 2016, to date fewer than 10,000 Syrian refugees have work permits (Sak, 2016).

Syrian refugees are mostly working under exploitative conditions in the informal sector; these include long hours, unsafe conditions and low wages. Child labour is also a problem yet to be solved (OXFAM 2015, Kanat and Ustun, 2015).

Socioeconomic Impact and Attitudes of Turkish Society towards Syrian Refugees

The mass influx of refugees into Turkey created major economic and social problems, such as increases in food and house prices and property rents. The arrival of low-paid refugees onto the labour market increased the unemployment rate across the country, notably in southern Turkey. Municipalities have faced major problems due to limited budgets and inadequate infrastructure (WB, 2015).

On the other hand, Syrian refugees are becoming an economic actor in Turkey, not only in terms of their labour power, but also their entrepreneurial skills. The number of companies opened by Syrians has increased around 40-fold between 2010-2015 (Ozpinar *et al*, 2015). About 3,300 firms were established in this period. Out of 2,395 foreign capital companies registered in the first half of 2015, 750 belong to Syrians.

Few surveys indicate a negative attitude of Turkish people towards the Syrian refugees.

The HUGO survey conducted in 2014 and Turkish Perception Survey conducted by GMF in 2015 state a large majority of Turkish society feel concern about the negative impacts of Syrian refugees on Turkish society and its economy (Erdogan 2014, GMF 2015).

Turkish communities have complained that refugees are taking their jobs and pushing wages down and rents up. It could be said that, while the contribution of Syrian refugees to the unemployment rate

in the country as a whole is nearly 1%, this rate is higher in the southern part of Turkey. Moreover, local communities suffer from negative impacts on municipal services. Around 60-70% of the surveys' respondents think that the refugees "should be asked to go back home." Only 10% support the proposition that refugees should be offered official status or Turkish citizenship.

EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan and Agreement

After the war in Syria, Turkey conducted an open-door policy for refugees, parallel to the Government's Syrian policy. The Turkish government expected the conflict to end quickly and the refugees to then return to their homes. The government has accelerated the socioeconomic integration process through new regulations in the fields of education, healthcare, food assistance and work permits in 2015. These efforts have implied a heavy financial and administrative burden.

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Despite the Turkish government's efforts to provide temporary protection rights to the refugees, the number of refugees in transit to Europe dramatically increased in 2015.

Consequently, the EU reached a deal with Turkey to stem irregular migration and refugee flows within the framework of the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan signed in October 2015. The Joint Action Plan Implementation Reports indicate significant progress in combating irregular migration.

Following up on the EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan, the EU and Turkey signed a new agreement on 18 March 2016 aimed at stemming irregular migration from

Turkey to the EU. The EU and Turkey agreed on the following (EC, 2016):

- *All new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands as of 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey;*
- *For every Syrian being returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled to the EU;*
- *Turkey will take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for irregular migration opening from Turkey to the EU;*
- *Once irregular crossings between Turkey and the EU are ending or have been substantially reduced, a Voluntary Humanitarian Admission Scheme will be activated;*
- *The EU will, in close cooperation with Turkey, further speed up the disbursement of the initially allocated €3 billion under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. Once these resources are about to be used in full, the EU will mobilize additional funding for the Facility up to an additional €3 billion to the end of 2018;*
- *The EU and Turkey will work to improve humanitarian conditions inside Syria.*

On the other hand, the agreement created strong reactions both in the international and Turkish camps. Reactions from international organizations such as the UN's Refugee Agency, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch focused on the deal's 'legality.' Critics from the Turkish camp warned that the agreement would transform Turkey into a "permanent buffer zone" for refugees.

Conclusion

The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan prioritizes border security and encourages Turkey to keep refugees within Turkish borders. Turkey has already spent seven billion euros on refugee programmes. Clearly, financial support from the EU for 2016-2018 will ease the financial burden for dealing with the refugees' basic needs, but it will be insufficient for providing better living conditions for them.

There are some difficulties in the implementation of the Summit's decisions: Firstly, mass returns of refugees are not compatible with international law. Sec-

ondly, further harmonization of the Turkish asylum system with the EU is necessary. Thirdly, it is not so easy to find EU Member States who are willing to accept more refugees, even if they are regular.

With regard to integration problems in Turkey, the implementation of integration policies is no easy task since the majority of refugees (around 90 per cent) are scattered and have settled throughout the country. The readmission of illegal migrants would create new challenges for Turkey's integration policy.

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