

**UNDER PRESSURE
WHAT'S NEXT
FOR 3 MILLION
SYRIAN REFUGEES
IN TURKEY?**

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Under Pressure

What's next for 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey?

Abstract

Turkey is under pressure and in need of a functioning refugee policy more than at any time in its history. But recently lifted state of emergency and constant threat perception created by the political elites give more power to law enforcement, suppress the obvious need for a functioning refugee policy. A new refugee policy should focus on the integration of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey. The objective of this study is to evaluate Turkish policies related to Syrian refugees and argue that while the crisis in Syria is now in its seventh year and Turkey is about to implement a new State system, the policies should be updated.

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The forced displacement of civilians during internal state conflicts has a significant effect on populations. The United Nations' "Report on the World Social Situation 2001" found that civilians caught in internal conflicts are more vulnerable than civilians caught in wars between states. When internal conflicts accelerate, combatants target civilians as part of a strategic objective. Refugees and internally displaced people become a symptom of armed conflicts and as the conflict continues, those displaced people remain in their host communities with an expectation of a long-term stay and eventual integration into the host societies, or of a return to their pre-conflict life. In some cases, neither might be possible, and that creates additional challenges for refugee populations and host communities.

The Syrian conflict has caused more than 11 million people to be displaced — 6 million of them internally displaced and 5 million fled to neighboring countries, according to the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As expectations fade for a peaceful solution in Syria, life for Syrian refugees in the host countries becomes unpredictable, and prospects dim for a brighter future. The policies of countries hosting refugees in the region mostly focus on short-term crisis management practices while disregarding long-term integration policies. The absence of functioning integration policies causes a significant amount of anxiety and strain among refugee populations.

Europe's reluctance to accept more refugees from Turkey and the European Union-Turkey readmission agreement clearly indicate that Syrian refugees will stay in Turkey longer than

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authorities predicted at the beginning of the crisis. Turkey is under pressure and in need of a functioning refugee policy more than at any time in its history. But the current state of emergency, which gives more power to law enforcement, suppresses the obvious need. A new refugee policy should focus on the integration of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey.

Current policies have been developed as the crisis has unfolded, as thousands of people crossed the border. The initial open-door policy and support from the international community saved lives and provided basic needs to millions of refugees. However, with the crisis now in its sixth year, the policies should be updated.

Human displacement

Historically, civilian population displacements have been viewed as a humanitarian challenge. Countries and international organizations have developed measures and policies focused on humanitarian aid. But the limitations of those short-term operations, and a failure to establish long-term integration policies and diverse political approaches to manage refugee flows, create many challenges. Additional obstacles, such as the hostility of right-wing political parties, concerns about national identity, economic impact, employment and crime in host communities, all point to the need for an effective long-term strategy.

In some countries, the arrival of refugee population created significant pressure on governments and they took measures to close their borders to refugees. Others welcomed refugees, provided for their basic humanitarian needs and introduced policies to integrate them into their communities. In 2015, for example, Germany accepted more than 1 million Syrian refugees, and the country is working to integrate them into the host communities. By contrast, Hungary (despite criticism from the EU) developed a much stricter policy toward refugees, building secure refugee camps and restricting their mobility. The diversity of these approaches has been influenced by various political, economic and social factors, and by other issues affecting the policymaking process. All of these intervening factors, along with the growing refugee populations, put a strain on international and national policymakers and leave many unanswered questions regarding the future of those who managed to escape the conflicts in their home countries. Turkey is no exception to this strain and confusion related to the future of refugees in the country.

Syrian conflict

Conflict and civil war in Syria started in the city of Daraa in March 2011, when the government forces used extreme violence against protesters. Although the Arab Spring was the main inspiration for the protests, this particular event became the symbol for the protests against the Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime in the various parts of the country, and the conflict spread rapidly. The government forces used excessive force and violence against the protesters, accelerating the conflict, which turned into a full-scale civil war. As the conflict drew on, the

involvement of regional and global actors added new dimensions and it became a proxy war, as well as an ethnic and sectarian conflict.

Syrian refugees, using mostly unofficial border crossings previously used for smuggling, began flowing into the neighboring countries during the very early stages of the conflict. Turkey received the largest number, with official statistics putting the number close to 3 million. Among those, nearly 45 percent are under 18 years old. In response to initial humanitarian relief, Turkey built 26 refugee camps and provided free access to health care, education and other social services. However, only 260,000, less than 10 percent of the refugees in Turkey, stay in refugee camps; the rest live in different parts of the country, mostly in the southern cities close to the Syrian border. The flow of refugees entering Turkey has varied, but in July 2012, when the conflict in Aleppo intensified, nearly 200,000 people fled across the Turkish border, which is only 50 kilometers from the city. According to the UNHCR calculations, an average of 6,000 people fled conflict zones daily during the escalation of violence.

Syrian refugees in Turkey have been going through five main phases during their stay. Each phase helps to reveal the successes and failures of the government policies and how Syrian refugees in Turkey perceive their future, what they expect from the government as well as the host communities, and their disappointments. Identifying the phases is instrumental in analyzing the whole process in a more systematic way.

Phase 1: Mass displacement and first arrivals

When the crisis in Syria began, Turkey declared an open-door policy and established camps to provide basic needs for refugees. Regional experts said Turkey's open-door policy was part of its plan to establish a "soft power" capacity in the region on the way to becoming a regional power. But as the number of refugees in Turkey reached a level that the country could not effectively manage, the government in 2014 began enacting restrictions.

According to the Amnesty International, the open-door policy has been suspended multiple times. Restrictions applied to border crossings increased the smuggling of refugees and foreign fighters. In a 2013 report, the International Crisis Group claimed that opposition fighters could cross the border freely, but refugees were only allowed when there was room in the camps. The open-door policy was a choice made when other alternatives were limited and was later used by the government as cover for its undeclared policies.

During the initial phases of the crisis, Turkey did not pay much attention to the registration of refugees, which created security problems later. One reason for not registering refugees was the expectation that the crisis would not last long and that refugees would soon return to their homes. When it became apparent that would not happen, registration became a priority. But to some

extent it was too late, since most of the nonregistered refugees had already traveled to different parts of the country.

Turkey approached the Syrian crisis with an assumption that the conflict would be brief and the Assad regime would soon collapse, giving Turkey a window of opportunity to play a significant role in the reconstruction of the region. As part of this optimistic but unrealistic assumption, Turkey considered all displaced people coming from Syria as “guests” and said at every opportunity that the Syrian population in Turkey would be welcomed until they could return to their own country. The term “guest” was used in official documents, but had no practical meaning in the national and international regulations. Turkey also granted “temporary protection” to Syrians from the beginning of the crisis, but the term didn’t acquire a legal meaning until Turkey’s president signed the Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2013.

Another issue preventing Syrians refugees from gaining status in Turkey, according to the international standards, had to do with the limits Turkey placed on those standards. The U.N.’s 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol are the main legal instruments of the international refugee policies. Turkey signed the convention and the protocol with a geographical limitation that provided full refugee status only to those coming from Europe. Therefore, Syrians coming from a non-European country can only benefit from temporary protection and stay in Turkey until finding a third country to apply for full refugee status.

Phase 2: Constructing a new life

Border crossings led to the construction of refugee camps beginning in November 2011. Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) manages 26 camps in cities close to the Syrian border. But given the large number of refugees and the limited capacity of the camps, more than 90 percent of refugees live outside the camps. Housing is much more difficult to find in places densely populated by Syrian refugees. According to a 2015 World Bank report examining Turkey’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis, there is a widespread perception among the local population that the high demand for housing has doubled the prices in the provinces along the border, causing a housing shortage.

Constructing a new life is not easy for Syrians in Turkey. After finding a place to live, economic independence and social acceptance become priorities. Syrian refugees were not allowed to work in Turkey legally until January 2016, when the government passed a regulation allowing them to obtain work permits.

However, the regulation came with limitations and flaws. According to an International Crisis Group report in November 2016, neither employers nor Syrians have an incentive to apply for

formal work arrangements due to the complicated and labor-intensive application procedures, which require conditions and paperwork that are impossible for most Syrians to meet. Less than 1 percent of Syrians obtained work permits in Turkey; the rest work with non-legal status and without any negotiating power for their work hours and wages.

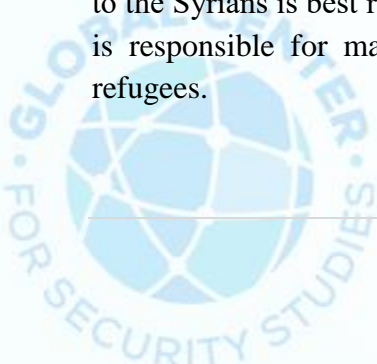
As the Syrian population appealed to the Turkish government for more stable living conditions, officials realized that the lack of a formal refugee registration process created challenges at every stage of refugees' interactions with the government institutions. Although a registration process was technically in place at the border, the volume of refugees made it difficult to register all of them. To counterbalance the initial registration failures and to minimize future security problems, the Turkish government in 2014 began a more vigorous effort that required refugees to register before receiving free access to health care, education and other social services. While the new registration rules provided some benefits, it also limited mobility because a refugee registered in one province could not travel without a permit.

Whether refugees, considered guests in Turkey, will return to Syria continues to be a major issue. With the Assad regime remaining in power and no short-term solution on the horizon, the Syrians have become protracted guests. It appears that the “temporary protection” offered will not be replaced with a comprehensive integration process providing complete refugee status in line with international standards.

According to the UNHCR statistics, more than one-third of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey is under 18 years old. That puts the total at 1.2 million children. Having a significant number of school-age children in the refugee population poses challenges for the state. In a recent assessment, the UNICEF warns about the “real risk of a ‘lost generation’ of Syrian children” in Turkey and other host countries. Despite the sharp increase compared to previous years, the UNICEF warns that more than 40 percent (at least 380,000) of the Syrian refugee children in Turkey are missing out on an education.

Phase 3: Seeking alternatives

The Syrian refugees have started to realize that life in Turkey has many challenges. The open-door policy — initially a lifesaver — did not meet their evolving needs and did not offer an integration strategy. The refugees have failed to develop an attachment to the communities where they settled. At first, people were mostly hospitable, but after a while it became clear that the main reason for the hospitality was because they were considered guests. The official approach to the Syrians is best represented in the report “Syrian Guests in Turkey, 2014” by AFAD, which is responsible for managing the camps and for the social support system of the non-camp refugees.



In an interview by Human Rights Watch, a 29-year-old former journalist from Hama, Syria said he was grateful Turkey had allowed him to stay in the country, but he did not feel that his temporary protection status offered real stability. He concluded, “We fled death, but we have come to a place where we have no life.” This statement summarizes the conditions for many refugees that eventually forced them to look for alternative routes out of the country. About the same time, Turkey started to see local anti-Syrian sentiments and conflicts related to some of the camps. Neighborhood protests led to the removal of Syrians to reduce the tensions. In April 2017, in the southern city of Mersin, local authorities relocated 2,000 Syrian refugees because of a conflict between a Syrian group and local community members over a financial interest.

The legal restrictions denying Syrians refugee status according to international standards, the administrative failure to offer long-term stays, an inability to create an attachment to host communities and negative local sentiments toward the Syrian refugees forced many of them to consider a move within Turkey or to Europe. In addition to those factors, regional security dynamics, such as the emergence of ISIS and an escalation of sectarian violence, played a role in convincing many Syrians to consider finding a way out. In 2014, Turkey was accused of doing little to stop foreign fighters from crossing its borders to join the ISIS, leaving the Syrian refugees vulnerable to attacks and the ISIS recruitment efforts. Unpredictability, instability and insecurity paved a path to Europe.

Phase 4: New migration waves

Syrian refugees with enough money to pay smugglers to cross to Greece started a mass migration in 2015, which captured international attention after multiple tragedies involving thousands of refugees, including children. According to the UNHCR, 1 million migrants reached Europe by sea. The International Organization for Migration statistics indicate that 3,771 immigrants died trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea in 2015. To end the irregular migration, the EU and Turkey in March 2016 reached a readmission agreement that established a support system and legal channels for the resettlement of refugees to the EU.

A significant provision of the agreement was that both sides agreed on the return of the Syrian refugees to Turkey. In May, the EU reported that the number of immigrants arriving in Greece dropped 90 percent, mainly as a result of the agreement. The agreement was criticized by the international organizations saying that Turkey is not technically a safe country for the Syrians, because they cannot benefit from full refugee status. The agreement also proposed 3 billion euros to help Turkey manage the refugees. The EU established the Facility for Refugees in Turkey to ensure the needs of refugees and host communities were addressed. As of April 2017, the EU had allocated 2.2 billion euros and contracts had been signed for 47 projects. The Turkish politicians manipulated the issue on several occasions, claiming money has not been paid and threatening to open the doors and allow Syrians to migrate to Europe. The EU-Turkey

readmission agreement left no option for the Syrian refugees in Turkey but to stay in the country and cope with the unpredictability.

Phase 5: Integration

The lack of a solution that will bring stability in Syria prevents refugees from returning home, and the EU-Turkey readmission agreement blocks their hope for an alternative in Europe. Considering the circumstances created by previous phases, Turkey, the EU and Syrian refugees in Turkey have common interests and obligations to prevent the consequences of a failed integration. Turkey should summon the political will to work on an integration strategy for Syrian refugees that addresses the administrative capacity building and legal changes. The EU, on the other hand, should demand long-term policies from Turkey that go beyond humanitarian aid and give the refugees hope for the future.

This final phase started as an unintentional but foreseeable consequence and a side effect of the EU-Turkey refugee deal: the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey. However, because of domestic political priorities, Turkey is far from producing a functional refugee policy that offers long-term status for Syrian refugees. The current state of emergency declared after the coup attempt in Turkey only postpones a solution to the Syrian refugee crisis. As the Syrian population in Turkey lives in unpredictable legal and social conditions, their need for economic independence, social attachment and further integration grows rapidly. Failure to address and satisfy these needs only makes Syrians in Turkey more vulnerable.

Conclusion

The absence of a comprehensive integration policy means almost 3 million people will remain in a state of unpredictability, instability and insecurity. The Syrian population in Turkey objects to being called guests, a term that reflects social limits and temporary status. The Turkish people in many provinces welcome Syrians as guests, but vague policies and protracted stays change the welcoming attitudes to negative sentiments.

Considering that a significant portion of Syrian refugees are young and looking for opportunities to establish a better life, policymakers in Turkey and the EU must act quickly to protect them from exploitation by criminal and terrorist groups. The Syrian population in Turkey has limited options for a better future. In many places they are accused of causing problems. Social disorganization among refugee communities puts young Syrians in a position that criminal and terrorist groups can manipulate.

Syrian involvement in criminal activities in Turkey is very low. According to official statistics, only 0.33 percent of Syrians committed crimes between 2011 and 2014. Syrians in Turkey are more likely to be victimized by criminal groups than to commit crimes. However, a single

incident can generate media attention that raises tensions between refugees and Turkish citizens and makes it appear as if all Syrians cannot be trusted.

Syrian refugees heard promises from government officials about receiving Turkish citizenship. When those promises turned out to be false, hope turned to bitter disappointment, which increased tension between local populations and Syrians, leading to tighter security measures in the regions where the refugees are staying. In addition, Turkish politicians used refugees as a political tool in its relations with the EU, creating even more disappointment.

Turkey's Syrian refugee policy started as a humanitarian response to a crisis, but policymakers were unable to create effective integration policies. Recent political developments in Turkey decrease the chances of developing a functioning refugee policy. Increasing right-wing populist parties and discourses against refugees in Europe also threaten the opportunities for refugees to migrate to Europe. These five phases show that Turkish policymakers are in a very delicate situation and that their failure to find a solution means more than an unsuccessful integration of "guests"; it is also a continuation, or even expansion, of the unpredictability, instability and insecurity in the region.

