

Syrian refugees in Turkey: a burden or benefit?

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When anti-government protests in Syria escalated into a civil war, Syrians began to flee to neighbouring countries. With its 911 km shared border with Syria, Turkey has become the preferred country for refugees. The first wave of Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey on 28 April 2011. Thereafter, the flow of refugees continued without a halt as the crisis in Syria reached ever new peaks and Turkey maintained its open-door policy. According to the Turkish Ministry of Interior as of October 2016, the number of Syrians (“under Temporary Protection”) has reached 2,743,067.¹ Given that over 300,000 Syrians are “pre-registered” but do not yet have “temporary protection” status the actual number is estimated to be over 3 million. Since 2011, Turkey also hosts a considerable number of non-Syrian refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Somalia. They number more than 350,000. As of mid-2016 there were, thus, over 3.4 million refugees in Turkey. Hence, since 2014, Turkey became the largest refugee-hosting country in the world.²

The almost 3 million Syrians constitute 3.5 percent of Turkey’s population of 78 million. Although Turkey has historically been a transit country, there is no doubt that the current experience is unique. The number of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants arriving in Turkey between 1923

and 2011 was approximately 2 million.³ An overwhelming majority of these migrants came from the Balkans, Central Asia, Caucasus and the Middle East, and almost all of them were of Turkish origin. They were integrated into Turkish society rather easily, and all of these migrants were subject to settlement policies which were part of a planned and structured process. In many aspects, the Syrian refugee crisis reveals that Turkey is confronted with a much more complicated situation today.

The situation of the Syrian refugees has changed dramatically over time. Many of the early arrivals were not registered due to expectations that regime change in Syria would occur quickly and that the Syrian refugees would return to their homeland in relatively short time. Turkey made no real effort to register the refugees until mid-2013. In the absence of a strategy to deal with the refugee issue, most Syrian refugees spread across Turkey at their own will. The Turkish government failed to devise a structured policy for their integration into Turkish society. As a result, many refugees experienced severe language problems.

The Syrian Uprising is now in its sixth year. Expectations for a peaceful Syria in the short- and medium-term have faded

considerably. There is, hence, an increasing likelihood that the Syrian refugees will stay in Turkey permanently. The following factors contribute to enforce this assumption:

- The war in Syria is becoming more and more complex and deadly and cannot be expected to be concluded in the short- or medium-term.
- 44.5 per cent of Syrian refugees in Turkey are under the age of 18. Syrian families will not consider returning unless peace and security are fully restored in Syria.⁴
- The 260,000 refugees living in Turkish camps constitute less than 9 per cent of the overall Syrian refugee population. The remaining 91 per cent are spread across Turkey, migrating from one place to another to reach for economic opportunities. This reality makes the return of Syrians even less likely.

- At least 400,000 Syrians are currently employed. This number is expected to increase with government granting additional work permits.⁵ It will be difficult to imagine that those who have begun to set up a new life will be willing to trade their newly won opportunities for future uncertainty in Syria. For Turkey, this challenge to an already conflictual ethnic fabric sounds alarm bells of future problems.

Due to all these factors, Syrian refugees are likely to stay in Turkey permanently. The number of Syrian refugees is also likely to increase as the conflict continues. As the cross border flow is expected to continue, the natural population is likely to increase by an average of 45,000 every year and will result in an increase of Turkey's Syrian population. Family reunifications will further contribute to an increase of Syrians in Turkey. Estimates indicate that there will be over 4 - 5 million Syrians in Turkey within ten years.

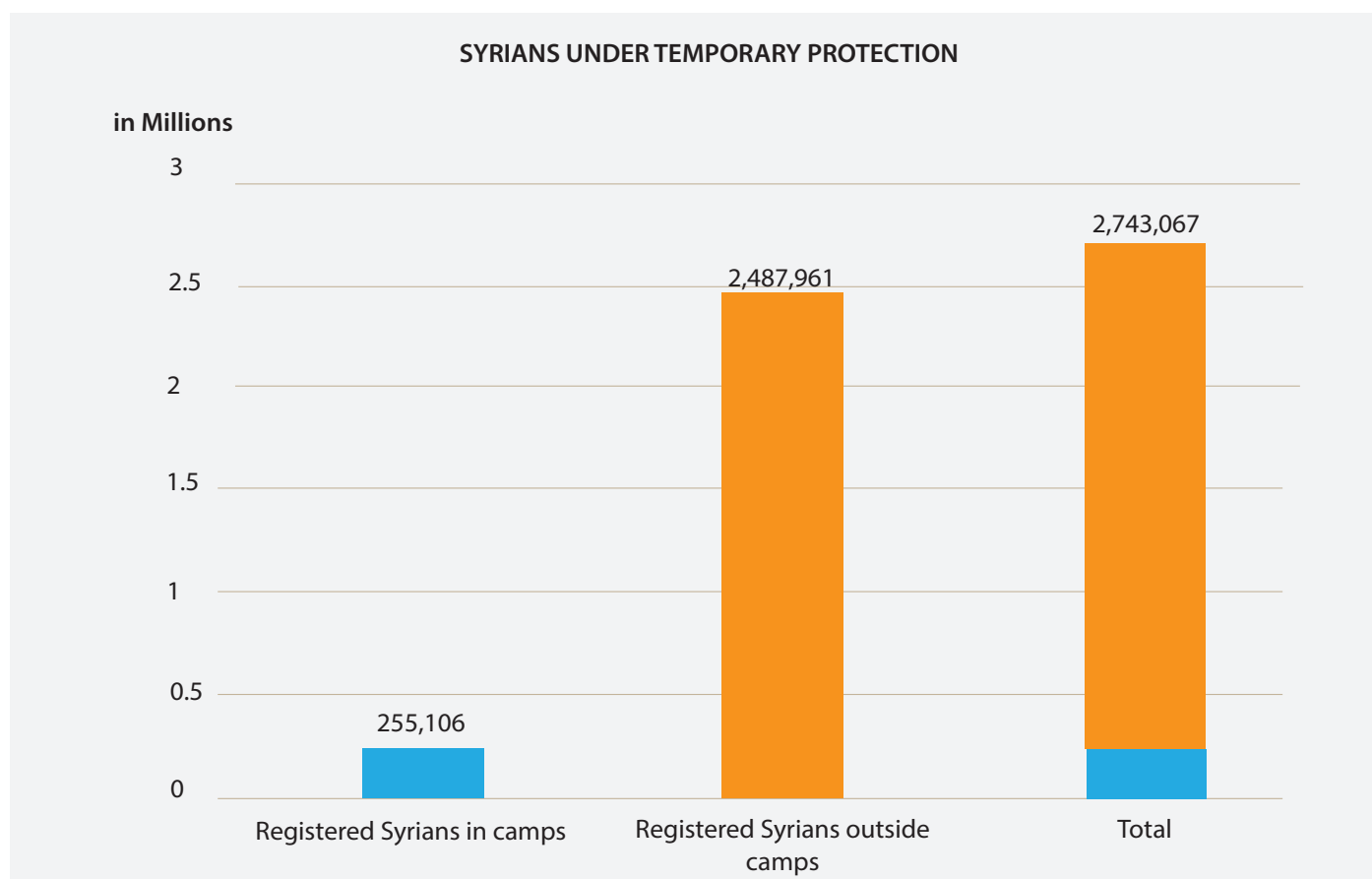


Figure 1: Distribution of Syrian refugees in Turkey living in and outside of temporary accommodation centres⁶

Demographics of Syrians living in Turkey

Age is the most prominent demographic characteristic of Syrians in Turkey. 44.5 percent of Syrians in Turkey are under the age of 18. This corresponds to 1.3 million people. According to the UN, 13.5 per cent of these children are in the age group of 0 - 4 years. Over 370,000 of Syrians in Turkey are, thus, 4 years or younger.⁷ None of the Syrian children born in Turkey are conferred citizenship neither by the Turkish Republic, nor the Syrian Arab Republic and are, thus, de-facto legally “stateless”.

The Turkish Minister of National Education stated in October 2016 that the number of Syrian children at school age in Turkey is 850,000. According to the Ministry of Education, 125,000 of those children are enrolled in Turkish schools and receive education in Turkish, while 316,000 (of which 85,000 in refugee camps) receive education in Arabic, in line with the Syrian curriculum. If the number of Syrian children at school age in Turkey is considered to be 850,000, as stated by the Ministry, it can be concluded that just over 50 per cent of Syrian children in Turkey currently do not attend school. There is little doubt that this issue requires urgent revision to Turkish education policy.

AGE AND GENDER BASED COMPOSITION OF SYRIANS IN TURKEY (REGISTERED - 26.09.2016)

THE DISTRIBUTION OF AGE AND GENDER OF REGISTERED SYRIANS UNDER TEMPORARY PROTECTION AS OF 29.09.2016

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TOTAL	1,456,395	1,279,637	2,736,032
0-4	192,635	179,631	372,266
5-9	197,945	187,018	384,963
10-14	150,494	137,630	288,124
15-18	131,359	110,657	242,016
19-24	218,833	173,667	392,500
25-29	147,068	114,634	261,702
30-34	120,079	96,017	216,096
35-39	86,069	73,454	159,523
40-44	59,292	55,961	115,253
45-49	47,908	44,046	91,954
50-54	37,313	36,042	73,355
55-59	25,202	25,285	50,487
60-64	17,491	17,976	35,467
65-69	11,298	11,675	22,973
70-74	6,146	7,093	13,239
75-79	3,763	4,496	8,259
80-84	1,987	2,531	4,518
85-89	1,075	1,239	2,314
90+	438	585	1,023

AGE GROUPS	NUMBER IN THOUSAND	PER CENT
0-4	371	13.5
5-17	848	31.0
18-59	1,427	52.2
+60	90	3.3
ALL	2,736	100.0

Figure 2: Breakdown of Syrians in Turkey by age and gender⁸

As of April 2016, only 9 percent of Syrians enjoyed temporary protection in Turkey. The remaining 10 percent were pre-registered and are currently waiting for “temporary protection” status. Turkey puts a geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention and, thus, only recognises refugees originating from Europe. Hence, Ankara does not define Syrians as “refugees”. Non-European “refugees” are described as “conditional refugees” with “international protection” or “temporary protection”. Irrespective of the semantics on the status issue, Turkey provides the Syrian refugees with considerable opportunities, rights and services such as work permits, access to education and free health services as well as mobility.⁹

Studies conducted by the Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Centre (HUGO) show that despite occasional negative attitudes of racism, xenophobia and hate, the level of overall social acceptance is unusually high for Syrians in Turkey.¹⁰ However, social acceptance for Syrians may not be sustainable in its current form. Continuity of social acceptance by Turks with all of its financial and humanitarian implications can only be ensured through proper management, involving Turkish society in the process. “Living together with Syrians” cannot merely be ensured by a discourse of fraternity. HUGO research indicates the huge cultural gap between Turkish society and the Syrians. Turkish citizens are not sympathetic at all towards conferring citizenship to Syrian nationals.

The same research concluded that Syrians (1) are content and happy to be in Turkey; (2) feel gratitude towards Turkish society and the Turkish state; (3) want to return to their homeland if and when possible, yet are aware that this is becoming less likely; (4) would accept Turkish citizenship if offered; (5) express eagerness to meet requirements in order to obtain the right to work; (6) are not happy to be defined as “guests”; (7) request an abolishment of the geographical reservations of Turkey in the 1951 Geneva Convention, which prevent them from being legally recognised as

refugees; (8) are eager to be transferred to a third country if possible; (9) are unhappy about the lack of education for their children (10) are increasingly more sympathetic to staying in Turkey.

Conclusion

Turkey’s approach towards refugees is still defined by an assumption that this is a “temporary phenomenon.” This assumption prevents Turkey from taking decisions and implementing measures to develop an integration policy. While continuing to do what is necessary via domestic and foreign policy to facilitate the return of the Syrians to their homeland, it is of utmost importance to recognise that a significant proportion of Syrians will stay permanently in Turkey. Smart strategies for integration and co-existence must, thus, be developed. These strategies must be based on proper registration, better coordination between relevant agencies, facilitating education, language training, vocational education, the right to work and planned placement. A science-based approach is required to devise an integration strategy for Syrian refugees, utilising the knowledge and counsel of experts, academics, NGOs and international organisations.¹¹ It is crucial that strategies related to “permanence” are based on human rights, and supported by Turkish society.

The Syrian refugee crisis has also had significant repercussions for Turkey’s relationship with the European Union (EU). Turkey-EU relations have been diverted from fundamental issues such as democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, and focus largely on keeping refugees in Turkey. This shift of focus marks a return of the Cold War mentality whereby security becomes a primary prism through which Turkey is seen, as a buffer zone for Europe. While Turkey and the EU must cooperate to find a solution for the refugee crisis, it is inappropriate to reduce Turkey’s relationship with the EU solely to the refugee crisis.

Endnotes

¹ Figures obtained from the Turkish Ministry of Interior's Directorate General for Migration Management, available at: <www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik> (accessed on 20.10.2016).

² UNHCR (2015), "Global Trends in 2014", available at: <www.unhcr.org/556725e69.pdf> (accessed on 15.10.2016).

³ Bilgi Yayinevi (2015), "Türkiye'nin Göç Tarihi", (Title in English: Turkey's History of Migration), M. Murat Erdogan - Ayhan Kaya (ed.), Istanbul Bilgi Yayinevi.

⁴ M. Murat Erdogan & Can Unver (2015), "The Perspectives, Expectations and Suggestions of the Turkish Business Sector on Syrians in Turkey", Ankara, TISK.

⁵ Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, available at: <www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik> (accessed on 20.10.2016).

⁶ UNHCR, "Syrian Regional Refugee Response", available at: <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>> (accessed on 10.10.2016).

⁷ Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, available at: <www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik> (accessed on 20.10.2016).

⁸ Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, available at: <www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik#> (accessed on 06.10.2016).

⁹ World Bank (December 2015), "Turkey's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Road Ahead", available at: <<http://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23548/Turkey0s0respo0s0and0the0road0ahead.pdf?sequence=1>> (accessed on 10.10.2016).

¹⁰ M. Murat Erdogan (2015), "Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration", Ankara, HUGO, available at: <<http://fs.hacettepe.edu.tr/hugo/dosyalar/TurkiyedekiSuriyeliler-Syrians%20in%20Turkey-Rapor-TR-EN-19022015.pdf>> (accessed on 08.10.2016).

¹¹ Filiz Demiroz & M. Murat Erdogan (2016), "Child Protection Within the Scope of the Syria Emergency Response Child Friendly Spaces", Ankara, UNICEF, available at: <www.unicef.org/french/videoaudio/PDFs/Guidelines_on_Child_Friendly_Spaces_-_SAVE.pdf> (accessed on 08.10.2016).

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