

## Syrian refugees in Turkey: changing attitudes and fortunes

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# SWP Comment

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## Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Changing Attitudes and Fortunes

*Suat Kınıkhoğlu*

**In view of a substantial loss in local elections and an urge to demonstrate that the Turkish government is in control of the situation, Ankara's attitude toward the approximately four million Syrian refugees changed in July 2019. Security forces started to round up Syrian refugees, send them back to the Turkish provinces where they were registered, deport some, and encourage others to move to areas controlled by Turkey in northern Syria, including the conflict zone Idlib. The change in Turkish policy vis-à-vis the Syrian refugees as well as dramatic developments in Idlib have renewed international attention to the plight of the refugees. Ankara needs continued European support to deal with the situation, particularly if a new wave of refugees is forced to flee to Turkey from Idlib.**

Since 2012 Turkey has done a remarkable job in hosting close to four million refugees, primarily from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Ankara applied an open-door policy to Syrians escaping the violence in Syria until 2015 and has quickly set up camps for them in border regions. However, contrary to expectations in Ankara, the conflict dragged on, and the initial approach of simply hosting the refugees for a limited time period turned into all-encompassing long-term protection.

Turkish society has shown great resilience in absorbing a total number of refugees that now equals the size of Croatia's population, constituting almost five percent of Turkey's population. Turkey has approximately one percent of the world population but, according to Amnesty International, it

hosts nearly 15 percent of the global refugee population. It is also one of the largest humanitarian assistance providers in terms of percentage of gross national income. That said, negative public perceptions toward the refugees have grown significantly. Although incidences of violence have been negligible, numerous public opinion polls confirm a stark decline in public support for hosting the refugees. Not surprisingly, Turkish citizens are expressing considerable concern about the future in relation to life with Syrian refugees. This negative trend is compounded by Turkey's authoritarian political climate, an ongoing economic crisis, the suppression of the rule of law as well as freedom of expression, and the shortcomings of a peculiar presidential system. Although lower than in 2015, the

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number of refugees trying to enter the EU illegally via Turkey is on the rise again. In 2019 the number of refugees increased by 46 percent compared with 2018.

## **Election Loss Triggers Tougher Stance toward Syrians**

Turkey's hegemonic Justice and Development Party (AKP) experienced a historic loss in local elections in 2019. The ruling AKP lost most major cities to the opposition, including Istanbul, Ankara, Antalya, Mersin, and Adana. One of the primary reasons for these losses was the widespread discomfort felt due to the Syrian refugees in Turkey's urban centers. Recent public opinion polls confirm that Turks see the refugee issue as one of the most important problems facing the country. Syrian refugees are present in almost all Turkish cities, including cities far away from Syria, such as those on the Black Sea coast. Due to the government's decision to close the camps gradually, the camp population has decreased considerably. Refugees have moved to cities, taking their problems to urban settings with them. This situation has transformed the Syrian refugees into "urban refugees," as 98 percent of them currently reside in cities. Consequently, even formerly welcoming attitudes by AKP supporters have soured vis-à-vis the refugees. Although the AKP government knows that most of the refugees are unlikely to return to Syria anytime soon, the election loss necessitated the need to demonstrate to the Turkish public that Ankara was in command of the situation. Similar to the operation in Afrin in 2018, Operation Peace Spring, undertaken in October 2019, was also reasoned on the need to resettle Syrian refugees into northern Syria — a point that helped boost Turkish public support for the operation.

## **Syrian Refugees Associated with Erdoğan's Syria Policy**

An important factor influencing Turkish citizens' perceptions about Syrian refugees

is the association with Turkey's unpopular Syria policy. Since 2011 public opinion polls have reflected domestic apprehension with Turkey's direct involvement in the Syrian civil war — an issue even further aggravated due to the recent bombardment and fighting in Idlib. In Turkey's polarized political climate, the Syrian refugees are seen as a byproduct of a failed Syria policy. Furthermore, the refugees are overwhelmingly conservative, religious, and sympathetic to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP, which puts them in direct contrast with Turkey's urban middle-class opposition on values and lifestyle issues. However, there is also a sectarian dimension to the issue. Whereas the AKP has a distinct Sunni *Weltanschauung*, Turkey's main opposition party is dominated by Alawites. The main opposition has been critical of Ankara's Syria policy from the very beginning and has repeatedly called on the Turkish government to deal directly with President Bashar al-Assad. In other words, the antipathy against the refugees is compounded by the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict. Also, the AKP government's argument that hosting such a large number of refugees demonstrates Turkey's strength and status in the international arena increasingly rings hollow amidst a lingering economic crisis. Another aspect complicating the refugee issue is the tension between the central government and the newly opposition-administered cities that host the refugees. Until now, refugee issues have primarily been administered by the national government, but an effective response to the issue requires better coordination and cooperation with municipalities. That means more communication between Erdoğan and the newly elected opposition mayors. However, Erdoğan has demonstrated clearly that he does not wish the new mayors — especially Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu — to become critical players on the refugee matter or other issues he deems important, such as the massive Canal Istanbul project, which aims to create an artificial seaway between the Black Sea and the Marmara Sea. The contradictions are self-evident.

## Mutual Perceptions Diverge

A recent study by the Turkish-German University's Migration and Integration Research Center indicates that the perceptions of Turkish citizens vis-à-vis Syrian refugees have significantly turned negative. In stark contrast, the perceptions of Syrians about life in Turkey have dramatically improved; 60 percent of Turks believe that Turkey has done its best to host the Syrians. Contrary to theories that Syrians are culturally close to Turks and therefore prefer to stay in Turkey, 82 percent of Turks feel they have no cultural commonalities with Syrians. While 72 percent of Turks believe that Syrian refugees will harm Turkey's socio-cultural structure, 74 percent think that public services will either deteriorate or diminish because of the refugees.

Although Turks and Syrians cohabit common spaces in urban settings, they lead parallel lives with limited interaction. Nevertheless, perceptions among Syrian refugees vis-à-vis Turkish society are overwhelmingly positive. Most Syrians do not feel discriminated against and continue to harbor feelings of gratitude and desire for co-existence toward their host society. Overall, most Syrian refugees express that they are happy to live in Turkey and see the Turkish government as the primary provider of critical assistance.

Although objections to the refugees' presence has increased among Turks, most Turks understand that they are likely to remain in Turkey for the foreseeable future. As Assad is regaining his grip over Syria, expectations about the refugees' return to their homeland have significantly diminished. However, when asked, Turks still prefer Syrians to be resettled in secure zones in Syria or want them to live in camps or cities that are set up especially for them. Whereas the government is working toward further integration, Turkish citizens prefer segregation rather than integration and cohabitation. Furthermore, resettling Syrians in "safe zones" in northern Syria is fraught with several difficulties. Apart from the financial aspects of resettlement, such as

security, housing, and infrastructure, there is also the problem of convincing refugees to resettle in these "safe zones." Currently, only 6 percent of Syrian refugees indicate that they would return to a "safe zone" in Syria. More than a quarter of Syrians refuse to return to Syria no matter what the conditions, and most would only agree to return if Assad were removed, according to the aforementioned poll. Finally, various attempts to change the demographics of northern Syria since the beginning of the civil war in 2011 further complicate the resettlement issue.

## Divergence between Public Discourse and Policy

Turkey's nationalist body politic entertains a discourse centered on an eventual return of the refugees. However, the Turkish government is increasingly focusing on integrationist policies such as improving employability, language, and vocational training. The Turkish presidency's development plan for 2019–2023 advocates strengthening the bureaucratic architecture dealing with migration, aims at supporting the social adaptation of refugees, and stresses the necessity to develop efficient policies for the economic and social integration of refugees.

The gap between official policy and public discourse is very much shaped by the increasingly hostile domestic political climate toward the refugees. The daily visibility of Syrians in Turkey's urban centers contrasts with the government's discourse, which foresees an eventual return of the refugees, and adds to the build-up of resentment. In the absence of a comprehensive, long-term strategy, the Turkish government is implementing integrationist policies only when it is pressed to do so, and often on a piecemeal basis.

## Economic Lack of Transparency As an Advantage

One of the most important factors easing the integration of Syrians into the Turkish economy is the structural lack of transparency of the process. Approximately one-third of the Turkish economy is deemed non-registered or described as a shadow economy. This shadow economy allows Syrians to find work quickly without having to obtain official work permits, to set up small businesses, and to make a living without having to navigate bureaucratic processes and pay high fees to obtain work permits. Given that a sizeable part of the Turkish economy functions behind the curtain of illegitimacy, it appears that Syrian refugees have found breathing space within this shadow economy. However, the informal nature of Syrian employment also comes with considerable problems. Syrians compete with locals for low-income jobs in Turkey's tight job market and are frequently asked to work 3–4 hours more than their Turkish counterparts – often for less income. The current situation pits different ethnic and social groups against each other, and thus allows Turkish industry to reap the benefits of cheap labor.

Although the shadow economy facilitated the quick absorption and employability of refugees in the early years, it is now necessary to adopt policies and administrative measures to draw them into the formal labor market. This would be in line with Turkish government targets to reduce levels of informal employment from 36 percent to 28.5 percent during the next five years. One proposed measure to facilitate this is to create an economic environment that would encourage formal employment where Syrian labor is involved.

## Conclusion

Turkey is likely to continue to host millions of refugees in the foreseeable future. Their successful integration into Turkish society should be a key concern for European decision-makers. In this regard, Syrian refugees continue to dominate the transactional mode of Turkish-European relations. Berlin should continue to support Ankara on the issue of refugees, focusing on financial and technical support for their social and economic integration. Securing formal employment is one of the most important drivers of integration. Enabling refugees to gain access to livelihoods through formal employment and improving the self-reliance of refugees should be key objectives of European assistance. Within this perspective, the German government should lead an effort within the European Union to offer Turkey trade concessions that are conditional to the formal employment of Syrians. This would be similar to the 2016 EU-Jordan Compact, in which the EU agreed to allow greater access to its market for goods produced by Jordanian companies employing refugees. Since the potential for hundreds of thousands of new refugees entering Turkey due to ongoing developments in Idlib is increasing, initiating intra-European discussions on a potential “EU-Turkey Compact” would seem timely. Supporting Turkey's efforts to facilitate the integration of millions of refugees in the face of adverse conditions is not only important at the political level, but it could also help normalize the post-2016 psychological climate between Turkey and the EU.

That said, European decision-makers should tread carefully and refrain from extending support at the expense of fundamental democratic values such as the rule of law and freedom of expression/assembly and instead seek creative conditionality where possible.

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