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# TURKEY'S EVOLVING RESPONSE TO MIGRATION MANAGEMENT: FACTS AND POLICY STEPS

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**Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar and Gülşah Dark<sup>1</sup>**

Data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) show that there has been a significant increase in the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide in the last decade, with the number of people in asylum or with refugee status rising from 42.7 million in 2007 to 68.5 million by the end of 2017 (UNHCR 2018: 4). There are a number of underlying causes of this substantial increase. First is the conflict in Syria since 2011. The dramatic escalation of that war and the accompanying human suffering have forced Syrians to leave their homeland and become refugees, generating the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. However, the Syrian conflict is not the only cause; turmoil in other Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries has resulted in the displacement of considerable numbers of people. According to UNHCR data (Table 1), more than 68 per cent of refugees worldwide come from the following five countries: Syria, Afghanistan, South Sudan, Myanmar and Somalia.

**Table 1** | Top five countries of origin of refugees worldwide (2017)

|             |             |
|-------------|-------------|
| Syria       | 6.3 million |
| Afghanistan | 2.6 million |
| South Sudan | 2.4 million |
| Myanmar     | 1.2 million |
| Somalia     | 986,400     |

Source: UNHCR (2018: 3).

Turkey is among the countries most severely impacted by the rise in the number of refugees worldwide. As a neighbouring country to Syria, Turkey became host to the world's biggest refugee population shortly after the conflict intensified following 2011. The first refugees arrived in Turkey in April 2011, and today, according to the most recent data from the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), the country is home to more than 3.6 million Syrians. Table 2 shows the countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees by the end of 2017, demonstrating Turkey's significant share of refugees.

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**Table 2** | Main countries of asylum for refugees

|            |             |
|------------|-------------|
| Turkey     | 3.5 million |
| Pakistan   | 1.4 million |
| Uganda     | 1.4 million |
| Lebanon    | 998,900     |
| Iran       | 979,400     |
| Germany    | 970,400     |
| Bangladesh | 932,200     |
| Sudan      | 906,600     |

Source: UNHCR (2018: 3).

Despite the fact that Turkey has experienced waves of migration across its borders before, this level of influx, both in numbers and in duration, is both new and challenging. Since 1922, Turkey has opened its borders to around 5 million people, more than 3 million of whom arrived after April 2011, when the conflict in Syria escalated. Turkey's first significant wave of inward migration occurred during the First Gulf War in 1991, when around 500,000 Iraqis crossed the border into Turkey. From 1991 to 2001, Turkey received migrants from Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia, but their numbers were not comparable to the influx Turkey faced with the escalation of the Syrian war.

In recent years, Turkey has become a popular destination not only for people fleeing the war or dire humanitarian conditions in Syria, but also for other nationalities from the MENA region (see Table 3). In 2017, a total of 466,333 people migrated to Turkey. The largest number of refugees have come from Iraq, followed by Afghanistan and then Syria (TurkStat 2018).

**Table 3** | Top five countries of origin of refugees in Turkey (2017)

|              |       |
|--------------|-------|
| Iraq         | 26.6% |
| Afghanistan  | 10.4% |
| Syria        | 7.7%  |
| Azerbaijan   | 5.7%  |
| Turkmenistan | 5.6%  |

Source: TurkStat (2018).

Previously Turkey often served as a transit country for immigrants seeking to claim asylum from a third country, but it has now become a country of immigration and a residence not only for Syrian people but also for other people from the MENA region. The population of Turkey has become increasingly diverse as a result of the rise in the number of immigrants. This diversification has occurred at a time when the use of xenophobic and discriminatory rhetoric has risen significantly in European states. Europe was traumatized by the influx of refugees across its borders when the number of refugees trying to reach Europe and apply for asylum peaked in 2015–16. The refugee issue has become a public and political agenda item in Turkey from time to time as well, but the political and public rhetoric has been much more welcoming in Turkey than in Europe from

the beginning, keeping in mind the higher number of refugees in Turkey compared with those in Europe.

**Table 4** | Evolution of national policy on the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey

| 2011–2014                              | 2014–2016   |
|--|---|
| Open-border policy                     | 2015 → Limited open-border policy                                   |
| Guests → Temporary Protection Status   | Temporary Protection Status   |
| Emergency management – “Camp refugees” | Development-related policies – “Urban refugees”                     |
| Limited international involvement      | Increasing international involvement<br>March 2016 → EU–Turkey deal |
| Flexible mobility                      | Restricted mobility   |
| Temporariness                          | Permanence – Socio-economic integration<br>(harmonization)          |
| Limited role of local governments      | Growing role of local governments                                   |

Source: Table presented by Fulya Memişoğlu during the MEDRESET conference “Re-thinking Euro-Mediterranean Relations in a Changing Regional and Global Setting”, Istanbul, 14 December 2018.

Table 4 summarizes Turkey’s approach to hosting refugees and the steps taken so far to integrate them in the local community. The refugee issue became a domestic agenda item in Turkey with the outbreak of war in Syria and in the context of Turkey’s initial response, which was entirely humanitarian. Turkey’s humanitarian approach included the implementation of an open-door policy to help people fleeing the war and to provide them shelter, food and emergency aid in camps. The initial “emergency aid” was mostly run by Turkey’s Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD). Turkey has been very successful in establishing and sustaining liveable and high-quality refugee camps to serve the Syrian people.

Syrians sheltering in Turkey were initially given “guest status”, yet as the conflict in Syria dragged on, their numbers increased and they started to move to urban areas, with fewer Syrians now living in the camps. Turkey later introduced a policy of “temporary protection”, which is the current legal status of the refugees in the country. Although Syrians in Turkey are commonly referred to as “refugees”, the legally correct term for their status is under “temporary protection” due to Turkey’s limitation to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, whereby only people fleeing as a consequence of events occurring in Europe can be given official refugee status. Since 2014–15, Turkey has begun to address the “permanency” of the refugee issue and to discuss policies of integration, including residence and work permits (see Tables 5 and 6).

According to a migration expert, “There is a mental shift; at the beginning, Turkey was working for crisis management and is [now] working on migration management. The situation has turned from a humanitarian into a development issue.”

**Table 5** | Foreigners with residence permits in Turkey (2018)

|              |         |
|--------------|---------|
| Iraq         | 104,444 |
| Syria        | 99,643  |
| Turkmenistan | 67,522  |
| Azerbaijan   | 65,027  |
| Iran         | 44,313  |
| Afghanistan  | 39,283  |
| Russia       | 36,507  |
| Uzbekistan   | 34,727  |
| Egypt        | 25,784  |
| Kyrgyzstan   | 25,645  |

Source: DGMM website: *Residence Permits*, [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/residence-permits\\_915\\_1024\\_4745\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/residence-permits_915_1024_4745_icerik).

**Table 6** | Foreigners with work permits in Turkey (2017)

|              |        |
|--------------|--------|
| Syria        | 20,966 |
| Kyrgyzstan   | 6,359  |
| Ukraine      | 5,760  |
| Turkmenistan | 3,847  |
| Uzbekistan   | 2,465  |

Source: DGL (2018).

## WHAT'S NEXT: POLICY-ORIENTED STEPS ON THE WAY TO THE INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN TURKEY

As Turkey has evolved over the years into a country of immigration, as clearly demonstrated by the figures above (see Table 2), the issue of refugees' integration has risen high on the domestic agenda. Considering that multiple factors, including physical, social and economic well-being, contribute to how smoothly the process of integrating refugees into the host country goes, Turkey has taken a number of policy-oriented steps to facilitate it. These range from healthcare service to labour market access, and from education opportunities for children and youth to social acceptance (Makdisi 2018). Still, refugee management in Turkey has a long way to go and will require the state, civil society, local authorities, the public and the international community to work closely together. In the light of refugees' expectations and the initiatives taken thus far, it is possible to discuss the progress made in a number of social, legal and economic areas, with further recommendations for improvement.

## **INTEGRATED AND SUSTAINABLE MIGRATION PROCESS MANAGEMENT**

Keeping Turkey's geopolitical position in mind, the migration phenomenon has increasingly become a common element in the daily life of the population, requiring the formation and implementation of a practical system of "process management" (see Ombudsman Institution 2018), which should be durable as well as adaptable. For this reason state-level initiatives have been accelerated, notably following the mass inflow of Syrians into the country, with the establishment of public bodies specifically responsible for migration management policy-making. The Migration Policy Council under the Ministry of Interior is now responsible for identifying and implementing migration policies and strategies in close collaboration with the DGMM, which was established in 2014. The Council recently underwent an overall restructuring to address the legal and administrative difficulties encountered in the management of refugees. This body will coordinate relations with local bodies as well as international organizations to improve the level of collaboration and communication in the field of migration. The establishment of similar specific bodies would further the development of integrated policies to address the long-term macro-level needs and expectations of all refugees in the country.

## **ACCESS TO LABOUR MARKET AND PREVENTION OF INFORMAL LABOUR**

As discussed above, among the foreigners residing in Turkey, Syrians have been granted the largest portion of work permits (Table 6). However, given their numbers and the fact that a majority of Syrians now live in urban areas, more incentives should be adopted to strengthen labour participation among Syrians as well as migrants from other countries, especially those with qualifications that could contribute to the national economy, investment, and science and technology.

Access to legal employment also requires taking measures to prevent informal labour. While some Syrians are undertaking commercial activities in Turkey through small and medium-sized enterprises, others are unable to join the labour market due to the constraints in the regulation of the work permit scheme (e.g. diploma equivalency), or work in unskilled and informal jobs for low wages (Memişoğlu 2018, Ombudsman Institution 2018).

Public institutions such as the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) have been working in collaboration with international organizations – specifically the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – to create employment opportunities for a significant number of Syrians in certain south-eastern cities. Aside from similar partnerships between public and international organizations, a comprehensive employment policy that integrates all refugees including Syrians under temporary protection could be introduced in line with the demands of the Turkish labour market.

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS BETWEEN LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND REFUGEES**

The general awareness of the legal framework and legislation outlining the rights and obligations of refugees in Turkey affects the relations between refugees and local authorities as well as the host community at large. The perceived lack of effective communication channels between local

authorities and refugees prevents them from receiving reliable information about their legal rights and can lead to feelings of uncertainty. This can occur due to technical (i.e. language barrier) or bureaucratic constraints, but also as a result of the lack of reliable data for public authorities to access in serving the refugees. Access to up-to-date information about refugees' rights as well as the procedures they need to follow to receive social services is an essential part of a working refugee management system, for which user-friendly online information platforms could be promoted. A good first step is the migration registration system "GÖÇ-NET", initiated by the DGMM in 2015, as a national database to store information on residence permits, international protection, irregular migration and other key issues related to all foreigners in Turkey. More work should be encouraged to ensure its development and effective use.

## **FAIR SHARE OF THE BURDEN IN MIGRATION MANAGEMENT WITH THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

The issue of sharing responsibility for the protection of refugees in situations of mass influx has exposed grey areas in the international protection regime, with many countries being uncomfortable with tackling irregular migration, which has led to an increasing focus on preventing it through overly securitized policy actions.

So far, Turkey has played a pivotal role in the Syrian refugee crisis by accepting extensive responsibility as a host country for the refugees, and its policies have been praised by the international community. At the same time, Turkey has been calling on its allies, including the European Union, to shoulder their fair share of the burden in the management of the crisis. Under the EU–Turkey deal of March 2016, the EU agreed that for every Syrian returned to Turkey from the Greek islands, another Syrian would be resettled from Turkey to an EU member state. Turkey is seen as a safe (third) country, and the capacity problems of Greece are usually pointed to as one of the factors explaining why the deal has not worked effectively. In a recent statement, the European Commission (2019a) also criticized the migration management process in Greece, specifically unresolved challenges such as returns, asylum processing and adequate accommodation. In addition, the deal has only partly addressed the resettlement problem, as only slightly more than 20,000 Syrian refugees from Turkey have been resettled in EU countries (mostly in Germany, France and the Netherlands) under the deal (European Commission 2019b). Furthermore, EU member states appear too slow to respond to the calls for resettlement pledges. Active cooperation and communication among all parties should be incentivized to ease the pressures on the host countries involved, including Turkey.

## **SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE AND THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

Social acceptance is an integral component of the process of integrating refugees, and the deeply ingrained tradition of hospitality among Turkish society has prevented social resistance to refugees from arising at the national level. However, it is possible to argue that there are concerns regarding the presence of refugees in the country, despite the cultural and religious affinities between the host and immigrant populations. Migration management authorities in Turkey have prioritized social acceptance in policy development and emphasized the role of civil society in this process. Civil society is a key stakeholder in establishing sustainable dialogue between central and local

authorities on migration management, and also in the creation of relevant policy mechanisms to promote the social acceptance of refugees. Joint activities between local civil society organizations (CSOs) and CSOs formed by the refugees themselves would also foster a sense of trust on both sides and improve the acceptance of refugees in the society. It is further crucial to implement an effective communication strategy (i.e. through print and online media tools) to raise awareness about refugees among the host population. This would serve to counteract negative perceptions and stereotypes about them.

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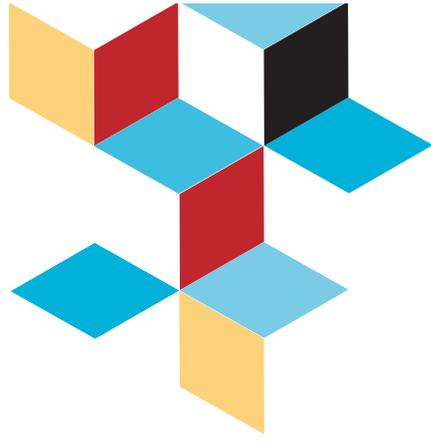
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**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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