

ISTANBUL'S SYRIAN CHILDREN AND YOUTH

The unexpected influx of Syrians to Turkey has shifted the focus in political and administrative discussions. Turkey has accepted over 3.5 million Syrians fleeing from the civil war while Istanbul alone hosts over half a million Syrians. The population influx to major urban areas has put further responsibility on the shoulders of local governments, Istanbul being the foremost. Given the low average age of the Syrian community, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality is specifically in a position to address the needs of Syrian children and youth from education to health and from integration to self-realization.

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Since the beginning of Syria's civil war, millions of people have been killed and displaced from their homes. Fleeing from their burnt-down country, the majority of Syrians seeking refuge have settled in Syria's neighboring countries. Among these countries, Turkey has received the highest number of Syrians. In fact, Istanbul currently hosts the largest Syrian refugee community in the world. However, the ongoing lack of an effective and coherent migration policy by the national government has impeded Syrians' integration process and has had a negative impact on their social well-being. This is why local governments play a critical role in this context. In its new term, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM) is dedicated to alleviate, if not eliminate, migration-related problems, with special attention paid to the well-being of the children and youth within the Syrian community.

The number of Syrians under temporary protection status has reached 3,576,344 in January 2020. This figure represents the highest number of refugees in any country and one of the highest cross-border mobility in the history of humanity. Yet, in contrast with its refugee-welcoming political discourse, the Turkish government has not been able to adapt the domestic legal framework to the enormous population influx. Turkey's approval of the Geneva Convention under the condition of "geographical boundaries" prevents the country from accepting non-European refugees. Instead, the status of Syrians has been determined as under "Temporary Protection" (TP), which is defined according to the Temporary Protection Regulation issued in 2014. Temporary protection status offers different rights than the refugee or asylum-seeking status and obliges refugee-seeking individuals to initially settle in Temporary Accommodation Centers (TACs). The government has however enabled access to municipal services and allowed persons under temporary protection to settle in certain provinces.

A smaller portion of the Syrian population settled in the TACs are relatively better off than their counterparts outside since their basic needs are met by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD) and through TAC resources. Syrians residing outside of the centers are in a constant struggle to supply their basic needs. Every passing year, TACs are being shut down or downsized in capacity due to changing migration policies, provoking the residing Syrians to escape the centers. As a result, Syrians who aspire to have better living conditions, instead of living at the level of subsistence, are opting out of TACs and trying to use their rights endowed by their TP status.

Under the TP status, Syrians can participate in the labor market, benefit from public healthcare and education, and receive social assistance. Yet, the legal entitlement

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and exercise of their rights are in contradiction, and do not benefit the ones living outside of the TACs. Syrians who seek jobs in urban areas experience hardship in securing decent living conditions, despite being provided with free accommodation in TACs located outside urban areas. In other words, services and policies are insufficient under this temporality, and are known only partially by the majority of Syrians living outside the camps. The legal regulations, practices, policies, and services addressing the needs of Syrian refugees are inconsistent, resulting in precarious living conditions for Syrians living outside the camps. Syrians living outside the TACs are predominantly deprived of the right to decent housing and live in suboptimal conditions in poor urban areas. Moreover, according to various academic studies, the main difficulties that Syrians face are financial constraints, suboptimal housing, and the inability to secure satisfying jobs. The lack of adequate language knowledge further prevents them from receiving information from the appropriate bureaucratic bodies.

This ambiguous atmosphere also has a profound effect on Syrian children. The dangers highlighted in the Human Rights Watch report from five years ago continue for Syrian children today. Academic researchers shine a light on the problem of healthcare access for Syrian residents. The free, yet limited, healthcare service for Syrians is conditional upon the proof of one living in their place of registration. Syrians who are traveling or seeking for a job in provinces other than their place of registration cannot benefit from healthcare except for emergency and basic services. Yet, the lack of inclusive healthcare policies, and consequential language and information barriers deprive Syrians of even these services, too.

Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Istanbul

98 percent of Syrian refugees in Turkey have settled in urban areas while the rest live in temporary accommodation camps. The Turkish government's lack of an effective and coherent policy position concerning refugees living in urban centers reinforces the cycle of poverty within the lives of refugees. In this context, local governments—especially in urban areas—are the governmental units that are affected the most by mismanagement of the migration process. The legal framework and administrative practices, which allow local governments to only serve citizens, are far from creating an environment conducive to taking the necessary actions regarding migrant communities. Unsurprisingly, the city's urban infrastructure,

resources, service capacity, and resilience fall short in accommodating the huge population influx.

The mass migration of Syrians forced Turkish local authorities to take a critical role in social protection and cohesion efforts to close the gaps in services of the central government and NGOs. However, municipalities still face the absence of authority, financial sources, and standardized services in relation to their activities. Although the National Strategy Document and National Action Plan is an officially approved document of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), which refers to important roles and responsibilities for municipalities, the effective implementation is still missing.

Istanbul, the biggest metropolis of Turkey with a population of 15,519,267, now hosts 482,483 refugees. This number only indicates the number of Syrians legally registered in the Istanbul Municipality and is well below the real number of Syrians who actually reside in the city. Although the number of Syrians living in Istanbul is higher than the provinces close to the Syrian border, the percentage of Syrians living in Kilis, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa is significantly higher when compared to the overall population of these provinces. In other words, the figures correspond to 3.2 percent of the population of Istanbul while it reaches up to 27 percent in mid-sized border cities. The uneven distribution of Syrians and resources across the country underscore the necessity of local policy-making for each individual city.

In Istanbul, Syrian refugees are settled in each of the 39 districts but are clustered across the city for various reasons, leading to a higher concentration in some of the districts. Syrian refugees mostly prefer Istanbul because of its employment opportunities. They prefer to live and work in the peripheries of the European coast where the rent prices are lower and the number of unregistered jobs is higher. Although the needs in these districts have changed in accordance with the refugee populations living there, society still collectively experiences basic problems with housing, employment, health, and language.

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality is now speedily working to support the actors of the solution, principally the district municipalities. As such, IMM is currently establishing its very first migration unit and preparing an action plan for the next five years. Prior to this initiative, IMM conducted research meetings and a workshop with stakeholders in the city in order to create a participatory approach in the planning and implementation process of the action plan. In line with the “Inclusive City for All” strategy, IMM’s plan aims to promote inclusive services for the benefit of all members of society. Thus, the basic municipal services in education, health, child

care, licensing, and security in Istanbul will transform so as to provide equal services for the most marginalized. In order for migrant and refugee communities to have better access to social and economic opportunities, IMM needs to foster more inclusive services and policies.

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Syrian Children and Youth in Turkey

Undoubtedly, the biggest victims of the Syrian war are the children who are deprived of decent living conditions, education, and a healthy life — which are all essential rights. Removing the barriers before the education of children, preventing child labor, and fighting to end exploitation and violence against children are the responsibilities of not only the central government but also of local authorities. We should particularly consider child labor, exploitation, and child marriage as the primary focus for future policies.

Children and youth are key target groups to invest in to create cohesion among people living in Istanbul. The target group is growing as 465 Syrian babies are born in Turkey per day. In addition, the low median age of the Syrian community in Turkey faces a major schooling problem. In Human Rights Watch's report, the barriers to Syrian children's education are listed, describing gaps in practice and underlining the cost of the lack of educational support. According to international law, the government of Turkey should provide free and compulsory education to all children in Turkey, and enable access to secondary education.

Furthermore, a report by the Education Reform Initiative (ERI) emphasizes the importance of ensuring refugee children have access to quality education, and highlights the importance of an inclusive education system for all students in Turkey. According to the report, as of December 2018, 1,047,536 school-age Syrian children in Turkey are under temporary protection and only 580,877 are enrolled in school. In other words, about half of them cannot receive an education. To provide peaceful integration, it is critical to increase access to quality education for these children. Public policies for Syrians in Turkey should not only concentrate on the integration of Syrians into our society, but should also focus on our citizens' perception toward Syrians. This requires a collective view of peace and coexistence,

an integrated approach covering different sectors and institutions, and an effective coordination of public, private, and civil institutions, as well as related individuals.

On the other hand, the difficulty to get involved in the formal employment system is not so easy for Syrian youth and adults. The inability to utilize their existing Syrian diplomas and vocational achievements creates a significant gap. Difficulty in receiving working permits, high employment fees for employers, and the previous 10 percent ratio implementation are some of the barriers before registered employment — not to mention the unemployment rate of 13.6 percent — which add another layer to the already existing barriers. As a result, child labor becomes an inevitable reality. It is observed that children have increasingly been included in the labor market in the last period. Child workers face abuse and serious health problems. Not only are they deprived of the right to education, but are burdened with the responsibility of supporting their family budget.

Uncertainties in legal regulations and increased informality in the labor market prevent Syrian children from receiving education. Children are forced to give up their education due to economic difficulties and share their families' struggle for survival. Children have become the breadwinner of the family due to the increasing difficulty of resolving working permit problems for family elders. These children are the sector's invisible victims. They are doomed to work long hours at small industrial enterprises for very low wages. Children consequently become exposed to chemicals and more prone to contracting occupational diseases.

The economic distress of Syrian families is related both to the prevalence of informal employment and the inadequacy of in-cash assistance. On the one side, even though the regulation on work permits for Syrian refugees was issued in 2016, Syrians still mostly engage in informal sectors with harsh working conditions and low wages due to the long-lasting and complicated bureaucratic process. On the other side, an EU-funded unconditional cash transfer program, the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), provides social assistance with a monthly allowance of 120 TRY to eligible families through the ESSN card. Even if ESSN is provided, the scope of the economic challenges is still harsh. Although the purpose of the assistance is to meet the vital needs of Syrian families in desperate conditions, in this case, it forces Syrian families to encourage their children to find employment.

However, the threat of child labor cannot be explained only through the economic difficulties experienced by families. Working children are disproportionately affected by poor working conditions, long and unrested working hours, discrimination in the workplace, and unfair payments, all while being excluded from the education system.

Many Syrian minor girls are forced to marry, and thus lose their access to educational, social, and economic opportunities. The age and gender-related dimensions of the overlapping problems prove the urgent need for a diversity-sensitive and integrated approach to address Syrians' problems.

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As such, various policies should be produced for Syrian child workers to continue their educational life and to end child labor. Starting from the relationship between child labor and poverty, it is important to facilitate Syrian adults' access to the labor market and ensure their wages be proportional to the labor force. As a signatory, Turkey must uphold the standards set by the UN Convention on Rights of the Child. In this regard, public authorities should work to prevent child labor both in legislation and employment, and invest in the physical and mental well-being of the children.

(The Future of) Syrian Children and Youth in Istanbul

In this context, Syrian children and youth emerge as social categories to be prioritized in Istanbul, and whose problems in education and employment need to be addressed by local policy-makers. In this vein, IMM has projected 150 new child care centers that will be accessible for migrant and refugee communities. These inclusive child care centers will enable children to have access to pre-school education while facilitating migrant and refugee women's participation in the workforce. However, IMM's project would not completely eliminate the need for partnerships between civil society, central and local governments on social integration programs, and other initiatives that teach children to become respectful and peaceful members of their communities.

In its new term, IMM aspires to open up more space for young migrants in society as it enhances the inclusiveness of existing services while creating new ones. Vocational training, language education, as well as recreational and sports activities are the foremost municipal services targeting the integration and well-being of migrant youth along with other policies and services covered in IMM's Migration Action Plan. Furthermore, risk eradication for refugee communities, enabling access to basic rights and needs, and raising awareness in diversity is compatible with the local government's jurisdiction. Campaigns and activities to prevent gender-based violence, child marriages, and child labor are achievable through the local governments' means.

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality is interested in achieving these targets through participatory mechanisms, stimulation of public deliberation, and partnerships. Inclusion in services and policies, for IMM, can only be achieved through inclusive methods. For this purpose, the prospective Migration Unit has become the focal point of IMM's strategic planning regarding migration management. Following roundtable meetings with local and national non-governmental organizations and international organizations, the search conference for migration paired the district municipalities in Istanbul with international donor organizations. The Workshop Migration and Cohesion Strategies and Action Plan on 11 December 2019 included many stakeholders from academia and INGOs as well as representatives of the national government, local NGOs, district municipalities, and local migrant organizations to shape IMM's strategy on migration management. As a result of these search sessions, IMM is on the eve of preparing its first migration unit and action plan in a participatory approach. IMM expects to meet expectations via coordination, capacity building, and social cohesion activities in order to break collective prejudices. Moreover, IMM would like to support local authorities in Istanbul by encouraging standardized activities, trainings, and research to realize the harmonious integration of Syrian youth into society.