

PERCEPTIONS BETWEEN SYRIAN REFUGEES AND THEIR HOST COMMUNITY

Perceptions shape the attitudes and behavior of individuals, which in turn drive and influence policies. The situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey will not improve as long as the public's attitudes continue to be enflamed by the short-sighted and haphazardly-put policies of the government, the sensationalism of the media, and the dire economic situation the refugees are facing. In order to find sustainable, sound solutions to this complicated and unprecedented phenomenon in Turkey, people can start by actively evaluating their own intrinsic biases, and focus on the humanitarian consequences of their output.

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TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Fall 2016

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The injection of three million Syrian citizens into Turkish society has undoubtedly had certain effects, which can be viewed either positively or negatively. In this digital day and age, perceptions are everything. Perceptions influence attitudes, attitudes turn into behavior, and behaviors influence policies and reactions.

A Summary of Syrian Policy in Turkey

Since 2011, more than three million Syrians have crossed the border into Turkey to escape the violent unrest going on in their country and are considered “guests” rather than refugees in technical terminology. These “guests” are given Temporary Protection (TP) that ensures no forced return and no limit on the duration of their stay in Turkey. However, they do not hold the rights of refugees specified by the 1951 Convention and the 1967 UN Protocol because of a geographical exception. The Turkish government has continuously adapted and changed certain policies concerning Syrian citizens in Turkey.¹

Turkey has implemented an unprecedented “open door” policy for Syrian civilians, admitting nearly four percent of its entire population. Since 2011, the Turkish government’s stance towards refugees has shifted both to accommodate the domestic harmony among people in the country, and also to gain a significant voice in international foreign policy decision-making. Turkey has proven to be a very important player in regional politics as the situation in Syria continues to deteriorate. For one thing, Turkey is holding a proverbial “atomic bomb.” A bomb, in theory, so powerful that Europe is actively trying to persuade Turkey not to use it. This bomb is “Syrian refugees.” The Syrian refugees in Turkey are now a bargaining chip in Euro-Turkey relations.

After the body of the young Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore in the most prominent tourist town of Turkey, there was a global outpour of compassion and tolerance. Many countries in Europe opened their borders to Syrian refugees, only to close them shortly thereafter following an uncontrolled flood of people, and very tragic terrorist attacks propagated by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) members posing as refugees in both Europe and Turkey. This accelerated the readmission agreement drafted between the EU and Turkey to close the floodgates on refugees into Europe from Turkey. Geographically, Turkey is the closest buffer zone between Syria and Europe, and thousands of refugees have crossed Turkish borders trying to get to Europe and register with the UNHCR, which is not a possibility under Turkey’s Temporary Protection Status.²

¹ “Syria Regional Refugee Response,” UNHCR, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

² Heaven Crawley, Franck Duvell, et al., “Understanding the dynamics of migration to Greece and the EU,” *MEDMIG*, September 2016, <http://www.medmig.info/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/research-brief-02-Understanding-the-dynamics-of-migration-to-Greece-and-the-EU.pdf>

The readmission agreement drafted in 2013 and put into effect in 2014 enables the return of people entering EU countries illegally using Turkey as a transit country. The paradox is that under the *non-refoulement* agreement of the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees, which, in Article 33(1) states, “no contracting state shall expel or return (*refouler*) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”³

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Changing Policies

In the beginning of the Syrian crisis, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) established themselves as an opposition group to President Bashar al-Assad’s government. The FSA was helped by many international governments including Turkey, which later realized that these loosely governed FSA groups were actually divided into many factions, many of which were dangerous subgroups that threaten world security today.

Turkey is now leading a more pragmatic policy of aligning itself with Russia and Iran, who are closer to the Assad government than the opposition groups that include extremist groups, such as ISIL and Al Nusra. No country on earth has ever gotten one hundred percent of what they want when other countries are involved. There must be a game of give-and-take in order to normalize relationships, but it is a dangerous dance. One of the most important subjects is the formation of a Kurdish State in the south east of Turkey, which is not supported by many countries due to the instability of the region. Although the US supports the People’s Protection Units (YPG) fighting ISIL on Northern Syrian front, Vice President Joe Biden’s visit to Turkey urging that the YPG stay on the far side of the Euphrates was a sign that at least the US will not be advancing a policy that drags Turkey into a war and further destabilizes the region.⁴

Public Perceptions and Social Crises

Turkish citizens were united around the cause of their Syrian neighbors at the onset

³ “Refugee Law and Policy: Turkey,” *Library of Congress Legal Report*, <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/refugee-law/turkey.php>.

⁴ “Remarks by Vice President Joe Biden and Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim at a Press Availability,” *White House Press Office*, 25 August 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/08/25/remarks-vice-president-joe-biden-and-turkish-prime-minister-binali>

of the crisis, and although the Turkish government provided some resources and assistance to their “guests,” citizens also pitched in. Interviews among several members of the community showed that there was a huge amount of compassion observed from the local population in the first years of the crisis. Neighbors and community members taking care of several large Syrian families in need were just some of the many compassionate activities people took part in. Language seemed to be a very big obstacle, and communication between both the Syrian and Turkish population was nigh impossible. It continues to be a problem that prevents Syrians from gaining social mobility, although there are policies now in effect granting certain people work permits.

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People have started noticing some social changes in the community as well. Businesses have begun to cater to the Syrian population through restaurants and clothing stores; children and women formed friendships in the communities despite the language barrier; and more and more Arabic signs popped up all over town. During the interviews, the Turkish population expressed empathy, and although there were also some neg-

ative sentiments, it was easy to detect that there was an overall feeling of toleration.⁵

The Change

This has all slowly changed over time. Just like a guest overstaying his/her visit, the Turkish population increasingly became more impatient and annoyed with the various rights the “guests” were receiving in terms of education and health care. Syrians were no longer viewed as the victims of a horrible civil war, but as people who disturbed the peace and harmony of communities, and were taking advantage of the Turkish government.

Shopkeepers once happy about the influx of wealthy Syrians making Turkey their home, started complaining about the numerous thefts and beggary in their neighborhoods. The Turkish people who performed daily work in construction, agriculture, and other low-skilled labor found themselves in fierce competition due to a lack of regulatory labor laws on Syrian employment. This resulted in their Syrian counterparts working one third of the daily wages for twice as many hours. Although

⁵ Mücahit Navruz and Mehmet Akif Çukurçayır, “Factors affecting changes in perceptions of Turkish people towards Syrian refugees,” *International Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 4 (2015).

the Syrians who worked in these jobs were still grateful to be able to provide for their families, they faced many risks, including a lack of protection in the case of accidents, under-the-table wages for work that was not reported, and numerous health risks. This led to the easy abuse of underage workers, since no identification was needed to perform these “non-existent” jobs. The dozens of alleged Syrian mine workers

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that died during the Soma disaster forced the country to look into such abuses, but no legal investigation took place. Several people in refugee camps that I interviewed personally indicated that they perform such illegal work because of the scarcity of jobs and the determination to earn a living. One 17-year-old Syrian was injured doing construction work by a large cement block that fell and shattered the bones in his foot. The boy was afraid to go to the hospital and so the bones fused incorrectly, giving him a permanent handicap. Those who do go to the hospital receive health care, but the local population is dismayed that their own rights are being infringed. One unemployed Turkish construction worker was expressing his discontent: “We by saying, “we pay taxes, they get the jobs, the money, and now we pay for their health care.”⁶

One shopkeeper expressed anger when he said: “Those damn Syrians can go back to where they came from. They only come here to ruin our lives and steal from us when we tried so hard to help them.” When asked to elaborate, he recounted a story about an apprentice he had hired, only to find out that he had stolen from him later on. When the point not that not all Syrians are “bad” and that there are “good” people as well was raised, the disgruntled shopkeeper answered, “There are very few. They are like this. They have no shame and they lie all the time. It’s in their culture.”

The initial compassion which developed into xenophobia stems not only from the Syrians’ actions, although there are those who take advantage of the situation by abusing the system, and whose actions are placed in the public spotlight as criminal. The perception is that there are more criminal activities perpetrated by Syrians by highlighting the stealing, prostitution, and other illegal activities that take place in the society. Although there is no statistical evidence to suggest that crime has increased disproportionately to the population, compared with the overall crime rates, Syrians have fewer cases than the country ratio. However, rumors and the media

⁶ Personal interview conducted on June 17, 2015 at Oncupinar Settlement, Kilis.

fuel perceptions that crime is higher among Syrians, which is becoming impossible for the local population to ignore.

The Turkish public is sensitive to the stories of abuse the Syrians have endured. However, they feel cheated as well. One woman talked about her daughter's university entrance preparation journey.⁷

We are not rich, but I work two jobs in order to have her take extra classes to prepare for the [university entrance] exam. She is so stressed; she is losing her hair. Somebody from her school committed suicide last year when the news came that she didn't make it into a university. This is her only hope, and now the Syrians waltz in and study wherever they want.

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The more the public is exposed to life with Syrians, the more these perceptions are considered their only reality. Throughout the interviews, any attempt to mitigate the negative views of Syrians is met with resistance, and projections of their frustration at having limited resources is directed towards the refugees. Turkish citizens are feeling resentment towards the millions of refugees who are using the state's public services, which are provided by taxpayers' money that Turks themselves are not benefiting from.

Those interviewed in 2012 that had responded positively to Syrians have a different attitude in 2016. One university professor explained clearly: “They ruined this place. When they first came, we pitied them, but now they act like they are the residents and we should feel uncomfortable.” She said there are about 1,500 Syrian students at the university she works at, also mentioning the difficulty of getting into university in Turkey, citing her daughter as an example. Her daughter is a senior going to a private school from eight in the morning until eight in the evening and not allowed any extracurricular activities in order to prepare for the university entrance exam.

She continued: “Another sociological wound is people taking advantage of the vulnerability of Syrian refugees. Men get second and third wives illegally under the guise of helping Syrians. Syrians need money and the men need immoral pleasure;

⁷ Personal interview conducted on June 15, 2015 in Gaziantep.

it is disgusting. The Syrians themselves allow this too. They send their underage daughters to marry complete strangers.”

“Our society has turned upside down,” a shopkeeper exclaims. “The streets are full of kids begging, fighting, and panhandling. Some Syrians send their kids to steal, or jump in front of cars so they would hit them, get scared, and give them money.”

With no fair system to handle the number of Syrians in Turkey, examples like these continue to take place and frustrations keep growing. Turkish society is already vulnerable due to its religious and secular divisions, which has been compounded by economic struggles as well as the state of emergency imposed after the failed coup in July 2016. These grievances have fueled resentment towards the refugee community.

Syrians' Attitudes

After the coup attempt, Syrians' fears doubled: “When we first heard about the coup attempt, we felt an unprecedented fear,” remembers a 30-year-old logistics manager living in Istanbul. “Most of my friends started asking: ‘Which country should we go to now?’”

Syrians are not only concentrated in the south east anymore; they have dispersed into other areas of the country in search of other opportunities. Most of them have hopes and dreams of going back to their country, but recognize this is far from a reality at the moment.

The situation is very complex in Syria as well. One Syrian English teacher at a private high school explains,

My village is not far from Aleppo. Before the war, nobody thought about the possibility of a revolution. When the protests started and the situation escalated some people in my village sided with the revolution, and some with the government. Immediately, society was divided. The media made it worse. Showing violence and tragedies fueled people's anger towards each other. First, the government took over our village, then there was fighting and the revolutionaries took over. After that ISIL came and took over. The villagers were in the crossfire. All groups were fighting, and our people were being killed. I was determined to stay, but finally I left with my family. I am so lucky to work here.

When asked about the attitudes of people towards them he has mixed feelings: “In the beginning, the Turkish people sympathized with us. But there are some Syrians

with bad intentions and morals, and the Turkish people overgeneralized and started treating Syrians as if everyone was immoral. That is very sad, but I can understand.”

In light of the likely long-term settlement of Syrian refugees in Turkey, multi-layered, comprehensive policymaking is required in order to achieve sustainable resolutions. This must start with the host country’s acceptance that Syrians constitute a vibrant society, and just like any society they want to thrive and be valuable members of the community. State discourse should be a reflection of this approach, which will in turn facilitate the peaceful co-existence of the refugee and host communities.