

REDUCING THE RISK OF MILITARIZATION IN TURKEY'S REFUGEE CAMPS

The militarization of refugee camps is a pressing issue that is not granted enough international attention. By definition, refugee camps are intended to be temporary settlements which provide refuge to those fleeing violence. However, there have been a number of cases in which armed elements have indeed infiltrated refugee camps, and thus endangered their civilian nature. In this article, the author argues that in contrast to cases in Kenya and Jordan, Turkey's camps have so far not become militarized. This is primarily due to the efficient running of the camps by the Turkish state.

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The term “refugee crisis” has become synonymous with the term, “Syria.” Over the years, and especially in the past year, we have all watched, shared, and read about the thousands of migrants who have risked their lives everyday to reach safety. Unfortunately, the refugee crisis has begun to resonate with us as merely statistics – we are losing sight of the actual stories of the people themselves. Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria in 2011, 4.8 million Syrians have fled into neighboring countries, of which 2.1 million are now registered by the UNHCR in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, and 2.7 are registered in Turkey.¹ We often discuss the plight of refugees’ journey to safety, but what about those who have – perhaps temporarily – settled in camps? More importantly, have these refugee camps remained absolutely neutral and civilian in nature, or are there indications of armed elements? Drawing from case studies of refugee camps in Kenya and Jordan, this article explores whether Turkey’s refugee camps show signs of militarization, and ways in which the Turkish state can mitigate this problem from occurring.

Prior to delving into the topic, a number of key terms should be clarified. Firstly, what is “militarization”? Militarization may be under-studied but it is far from being a novel concept. The most common way to define the idea is, “an extension of military influence to civilian spheres, including economic and socio-political life.”² Secondly, what do we mean by the “militarization of a refugee camp”? Most commonly, a refugee camp is said to show signs of militarization when there is a presence of armed elements (i.e. people) which are not civilian in nature. Evidently, this is a broad definition allowing for a wide range of scenarios varying in scale – from refugees themselves trading weapons, to full-fledged control of the camps by rebel groups. Unfortunately, due to some undesirable but inevitable consequences of globalization, many refugee camps have strayed from their original purpose have become militarized. This process in itself increases both the sources and levels of insecurity. Military threats such as violence, military training and recruitment, infiltration in the camps, and the exploitation of humanitarian aid, can all contribute to the militarization of a refugee camp and the subsequent loss of its civilian nature. Given Turkey’s role in the protracted Syrian refugee crisis, it is relevant to address to what extent militarization of refugee camps is occurring in Turkey, and if so, whether and how the risk can be mitigated.

Kenya and Jordan – Is There Evidence of Militarization?

Before assessing the situation in Turkey, let us first look at the “textbook” case of a refugee camp that has suffered from militarization– the Dadaab camp in Kenya.

¹ “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Regional Overview,” *UNHCR*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

² Richard Johnson, “Refugee Camp Security: Decreasing Vulnerability Through Demographic Controls,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (January 2011).

Currently hosting almost 340,000 refugees, the majority of whom are Somali, the settlement was originally intended to be a temporary shelter upon its opening in 1991. However, prolonged violence in Somalia has turned the camp into a “tent city.”³ One of the biggest refugee camps in the world, it has been a hotbed of security incidents in the past years, which is likely to have influenced the Kenyan

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governments’ May 2016 decision to commence closure plans, although this has been met with fierce criticism on humanitarian and logistical grounds. Due to the relative lack of law and order, management, or security, there have been non-military threats such as theft or intimidation, but also strong evidence of recruitment in the camps by rebel groups, which are a hotbed for recruitment given the abundance of young boys who lack livelihood opportunities, education, or prospects for a better future.

Methods of recruitment in Dadaab are particularly deceptive; Human Rights Watch reports that young boys were often promised a monthly salary of 600 US dollars. One of the strongest examples of militarization occurs when humanitarian aid resources come under the control of combatants. For example, the Islamic militant group al-Shabaab, based in Somalia, is notorious for hindering aid processes in and around refugee camps. Often through intimidation and violence, they prevent a number of aid organizations from entering the Dadaab camp and steal goods daily. Such actions not only strengthen a rebel group’s power and influence, but also furthers the development of a war economy. A political cause is exacerbated by abusing humanitarian aid.

Although the situation in Dadaab is still seen as the academic, go-to example has the more recent Syrian conflict provided us with a new “textbook” case? Let us first look at Jordan. Of the 4.8 million Syrians who have fled their country, 655,833 are currently registered in Jordan.⁴ There has indeed been, albeit minimal, evidence of camps in Jordan losing their civilian nature. A 2013 report published by French newspaper, *Le Figaro* revealed disturbing information. Firstly, Zaatari camp, the biggest UNHCR settlement located on the Syrian-Jordanian border was used as a safe haven by combatants to retreat from the fighting in Syria, to rest and make use of the French military hospital in the camp.⁵ Furthermore, rebel soldiers funded their war campaign

³ “Kenya’s plan to shut Dadaab refugee camp criticized,” *Al Jazeera*, 3 June 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/06/dadaab-refugee-camp-somalia-diplomat-opposes-closure-160603051614121.html>

⁴ “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Jordan,” *UNHCR*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>

⁵ John Rosenthal, “UNHCR Refugee Camp in Jordan: Safe Haven for Jihadist Rebels and Arms Shipments into Syria,” *Global Research*, 12 November 2013, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/unhcr-refugee-camp-in-jordan-safe-haven-for-jihadist-rebels-and-arms-shipments-into-syria/5357816>

“Although the situation in Dadaab is still academically seen as the go-to example, has the more-recent Syrian conflict provided us with a new “textbook” case?”

through the exploitation of a black market which emerged in Zaatari. Lastly, and perhaps most disturbingly, there were reports of the recruitment of child soldiers from Zaatari camp to join Syrian opposition groups, primarily the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Unfortunately, such cases are poorly documented. Indeed, field research and interviews conducted by UN and NGO agencies did find evidence that child recruitment from the refugee populations took place. In August 2013, UN officials were cited as saying that “half of the 200 new recruits that enlisted in rebel ranks and who boarded buses to Syria from the Zaatari camp were under the age of 18.”⁶ Refugee settlements tend to be rich recruiting grounds⁷ and incentives to join can range from feeling morally obligated to help their country, economic benefits, peer pressure or even simply because there is nothing else to do. Joining opposition forces could provide purpose in an otherwise desolate situation.

What about Turkey?

Turkey is hosting an immense number of refugees, with a consistent influx since mid-2011. In 2014 alone, numbers peaked from approximately 500,000 to 1.6 million.⁸ According to November 2016 UNHCR data, there are currently 2.7 million Syrian refugees registered in Turkey⁹, and approximately 45 percent are under the age of 18¹⁰. Only 10 percent of the aforementioned refugees, however, live in the 26 camps set up by the Turkish government, of which the majority are located in three provinces: 109,000 refugees in camps in Şanlıurfa province; 37,000 in Gaziantep; and 32,000 in Kilis. A staggering 90 percent of the refugees have moved further inland and live in cities, and are known as “non-camp refugees.”¹¹ Have Turkey’s refugee camps experienced the same levels of militarization as Kenya and, to a lesser extent Jordan?

A 2013 International Crisis Group (ICG) report revealed evidence that could amount

⁶ Tone Sommerfelt and Mark B. Taylor, “The big dilemma of small soldiers: recruiting children to the war in Syria,” *Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center*, February 2015, http://noref.no/var/ezflow_site/storage/original/application/f2c1eef2efb2c782b9a9dab621ceaf75.pdf

⁷ Richard A. I. Johnson, “Refugee Camp Security: Decreasing Vulnerability Through Demographic Controls,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1, p. 30 (January 2011)

⁸ “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Turkey,” *UNHCR*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

⁹ UNHCR (Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Turkey)

¹⁰ UNHCR (Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Turkey)

¹¹ UNHCR (Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Turkey)

to armed elements in an otherwise civilian space. This report disclosed that several camps in the areas close to the Syrian border were being used by members of the FSA. It revealed that the camps and areas around them were serving as a resting place for FSA members, but also that they were receiving treatment in the camp hospitals.¹² Strikingly similar to the Zataari case FSA fighters have used Turkey's settlements as a safe haven. Scholar Mark Grey expanded on this point and noted that Turkish border guards allowed their free entrance in and out of the camps. Other than these few examples which pre-dated 2013, Turkey's refugee camps seem to have retained their civilian and impartial nature, at least in comparison to Kenya and to some extent Jordan. Absence of evidence does not mean absence of militarization, but it is nevertheless a good indication.

Government and AFAD-Run Camps

Through its success in the secure running of its 26 refugee camps, the Turkish government and AFAD have managed to prevent wide-scale militarization in its camps. The first reason lies in the way in which the camps are being run by the Turkish government and the Turkish Disaster Response Agency (AFAD). Due to their secure and organized oversight of the camps, there is little room for infiltration by armed elements – in

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heavy contrast to the Kenya case study. Rather, the camps are said to be safe, organized, and well-run. AFAD is the lead agency in coordinating the government's humanitarian response. Initially a disaster response and emergency relief organization, restructured to deal with the refugee influx, and has been praised highly for its successful set-up of the camps to host the growing population. As of 2015, AFAD runs 26 camps in 10 different cities, with a total capacity of 300,000 people.¹³ According to a 2015 report published by the Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA), the conditions of the camps that AFAD built go “above and beyond the international standards set by the UN.”¹⁴ The settlements are jointly administered by refugee communities and authorities – representatives are elected from the refugee population in each sector of the settlement, and government employees are assigned to monitor the settlements. This cooperative and mutual administration

¹² “Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey,” *International Crisis Group*, 30 April 2013, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/blurring-borders-syrian-spillover-risks-turkey>

¹³ Kilic Bugra Kanat and Kadir Ustun, “Turkey’s Syrian Refugees: Toward Integration,” *Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research*, 2015.

¹⁴ Kanat and Ustun (2015).

between representatives of the refugees and government allows for the smooth running of the camps, and fosters positive relationships with the local communities.

“Encouraging the integration of refugee communities into urban areas is necessary in order to mitigate the risk of militarization in refugee camps.”

With regards to livelihood opportunities, refugees are provided with accommodation, health care, education, religious, and social services. There are more than 150 adult education programs which have already produced 50,000 graduates.¹⁵ The abovementioned services, provided by AFAD and the Turkish government, ensure that the camps’ civilian nature is upheld as much as possible. Access to basic services and humane conditions prevents dissatisfaction among the refugee population and hence lowers the risk of resorting to militarization. Perhaps, most importantly, the Turkish government has provided security services, ensuring that the camps and their inhabitants remain safe – and that they remain civilian in nature as well. Externally, the camps are protected by gendarmerie forces; internally refugees are protected by private Turkish security guards. It is important not to idealize the situation in these refugee camps, as no matter how developed conditions may be, they are and always will remain settlements. It can be concluded that humane conditions do not guarantee the absence of militarization, but the absence of humane conditions greatly increases the risk of militarization.

It appears that Turkey is already taking appropriate measures to mitigate the risk of militarization in its camps. However, what can be done to ensure this remains the case? Firstly, security measures need to be upheld strictly – those residing in the camps must feel safe at all times, both from internal and external threats. Should there be a lapse in security, it may entice refugees to take up arms in order to protect themselves, which would launch the settlements into a vicious cycle of militarization processes. Security from external factors such as rebel fighters or combatants entering and leaving the camps freely is of utmost importance. Merely their presence undermines the neutrality and impartiality that a refugee camp should have, and could encourage the refugee population to feed into circulation and trading of weapons for protection. Secondly, there needs to be adequate educational opportunities and humane livelihoods. Without opportunities such as education, livelihoods, and skills training, it is possible that the inhabitants of the settlement would seek other ways to pass their time. Lastly, encouraging the integration of refugee

Footnote: ¹⁵ Kanat and Ustun (2015).

communities into urban areas is necessary in order to mitigate the risk of militarization in refugee camps. There needs to be a consistent flow from refugee camps into urban areas in order to prevent the stagnation of livelihood and human development. Refugee settlement areas should be temporary, not permanent solutions. In contrast with Kenya, Turkey is doing this successfully. Syrian refugees who enter not only have the choice of moving towards and settling in cities, but are encouraged to do so. This leads to the second reason levels of militarization are low in Turkey.

Urban Settlement

The majority of the refugees coming into Turkey do not settle in the refugee camps. Rather, 90 percent of all Syrians who have arrived since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011 are living in urban areas. A small fraction are living in Turkey's major cities such as Istanbul, Mersin, Ankara, and Izmir, while the majority live in towns by the Syrian border.¹⁶ The psychological notion of wanting to be close to their home country, the sense that residing in Turkey is merely temporary, and the added challenges of living in big cities are a number of reasons this could be the case. Two-thirds of the "non-camp" refugees live in 10 different provinces in the south-east, notably, Adana, Adiyaman, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Malatya, Mardin, Osmaniye, and Şanlıurfa.¹⁷ Once the refugees have settled in urban areas, the most important step is to effectively integrate them into society. A harmonious relationship between refugees and local communities is contingent on their positive integration into Turkish society.

"Non-camp" refugees have to face a number of challenges such as finding suitable housing, access to education, employment, and health services. With regards to healthcare, all registered refugees are entitled to free healthcare in the towns where they are registered. In reality however, there are often accessibility and language issues.¹⁸ Of the 1.3 million Syrian children in Turkey, 856,000 are of school age but only 325,000 are enrolled in school. This is likely due to a number of reasons, such as language barriers, challenges in accessing education, and the recognition/transferability of diplomas. With regards to employment, 1.6 million Syrian refugees are of working age. An assumed 300,000-500,000 are already working but mostly in the informal sector. This comes with risks as well, such as unsafe working conditions, low wages, exploitation, and child labor. Due to the nature scale of the refugee crisis and the heavy burden Turkey is shouldering, it remains continuously challenging to

¹⁶ Kanat and Ustun (2015).

¹⁷ "Turkey's Syrian Refugee Challenge," *Middle East Monitor*, 3 September 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20160903-turkeys-syrian-refugees-challenge/>

¹⁸ Kilic Bugra Kanat and Kadir Ustun, "Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Toward Integration," *Foundation for Political, Economic, and Social Research (SETA)* (2015).

ensure refugee's rights are protected both on a grassroots level but also on policy level. Despite the countless challenges "non-camp" refugees struggle with on a daily basis, urban settlement is crucial.

Concluding Comments

The situation for the Syrian migrants who have settled outside the Turkish state's settlement camps lies beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it is imperative to identify the domestic and regional implications should urban refugees become militarized. On a local scale, in light of ongoing integration challenges, competition over housing and employment and ethnic divisions within Turkish society could become exacerbated. If not addressed adequately, this could result in increased violence and crime. Regionally, the militarization of these urban refugees could be a source of further instability in the region, and could reinforce the anti-migrant, right-wing rhetoric in Europe.

To conclude, it appears that Turkey is taking the appropriate measures to ensure militarization does not take place in its camps, in contrast to the situation that occurred in Kenya, for example. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance that Turkey keeps it this way — history has shown that armed elements can easily infiltrate the civilian nature of a refugee camp.