

# TACKLING THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS: PROSPECTS & CHALLENGES

*The Co-Opinion Network organized a thematic workshop titled “Regional Development, Refugee Crisis, and Youth Unemployment” on 27-28 February 2016 at Hasan Kalyoncu University, Gaziantep. The workshop brought together representatives of distinguished civil society organizations, academic institutes, and international institutions. This article draws on the proceedings of this workshop, and discusses policy reforms necessary for the socioeconomic integration of Syrian refugees, including labor market reforms, and legal and institutional reforms. The article also focuses on the European experience in dealing with integration related issues and the European Union’s policies towards the Syrian refugee crisis.*

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**T**he refugee crisis in the Middle East requires our most urgent attention. Although it has been five years since the start of the war in Syria and the beginning of the displacement of people, there still does not seem to be a clear solution. Refugee crises are not new to the world but the Syrian refugee crisis has challenged the global system in an unprecedented manner, not only because of the sheer number of people displaced but also because of the way the system currently works, namely the fact that it is exceedingly more global, mobile, and confrontational. It is obviously a very complicated and a multi-faceted issue that requires international cooperation.

According to official numbers provided by the Turkish Government and the UNHCR, the number of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey rose to 2.75 million people in April 2016.<sup>1</sup> 85 percent of these people live outside of refugee camps, giving them a vague status in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> Temporary protection provided to refugees covers access to the labor market in accordance with Article 29 of the Temporary Protection Regulation. In addition to this Article, the Council of Ministers announced the new Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection on 15 January 2016. According to this regulation, foreigners under Temporary Protection can apply for a work permit as long as no more than 10 percent of workers in a given enterprise are Syrian refugees. The issue of labor market integration, the language barrier, socioeconomic problems, and other integration related issues pose a great threat not only to Syrians in Turkey but also to the social fabric of the Turkish community at large.

In order to diagnose some of the short and long term issues that Turkey and Syrian refugees face and to offer some policy-oriented solutions, a thematic workshop titled “Regional Development, Refugee Crisis, and Youth Unemployment” was organized by the Co-Opinion Network on 27-28 February 2016 at Hasan Kalyoncu University, Gaziantep/Turkey to bring together representatives from distinguished universities, civil society organizations, international institutions, and think tanks.<sup>3</sup> During the sessions, several challenges and policy proposals were raised with a primary focus on the long-term integration of the refugees and EU-Turkey relations.

<sup>1</sup> “Syria Regional Refugee Response,” UNHCR, 18 April 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

<sup>2</sup> “Europe has a deal with Turkey, but migrants will keep coming,” *Economist*, 16 April 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, Al Sharq Forum, Ankara University, Bilkent University, Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Global Relations Forum, Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Center, Hasan Kalyoncu University, Middle East Research Center, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, Istanbul Bilgi University Centre for Migration Research, International Labour Organization, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul Kültür University, International Republican Institute, Kadir Has University, Kırıkkale University, Koç University Migration Research Center, The Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), The Ministry of Development Turkey, UNHCR Turkey, World Bank, Yeditepe University and United Nations Development Program.

### *The Story of a Young Syrian Refugee in Turkey*

Rawdanur, a Syrian refugee who is a university student in Gaziantep moved to Turkey after the war in Syria started. She speaks fluent Turkish, yet she emphasizes that the language barrier is the most pressing challenge for Syrian refugees. “I would like for there to be more language courses because as asylum seekers, newcomers to Turkey first and foremost lack the ability to express their immediate needs to authorities. I was able to learn Turkish, but my parents as well as an overwhelming majority of Syrians are not so lucky,” said Rawdanur. This language barrier also makes it difficult for them to participate in formal labor markets. Even though Syrians in Turkey are able to work in many sectors, their skillsets are not utilized in an optimal fashion. According to Rawdanur, even if they manage to find work it is often not in their field. “Many doctors, engineers, and teachers end up doing unskilled labor when they could be providing more valuable services in Turkey to both Syrian and Turkish people. For youngsters, it is much worse. When I ask them what they want to do in the future, they tell me that they just do not know,” she lamented.<sup>4</sup>

Rawdanur’s story demonstrates the crux of the issue and highlights the fact that the refugee crisis is also a youth-related problem. According to UNHCR data, 54 percent of Syrian refugees in Turkey are under 18 years of age. As a result, the socioeconomic integration of young Syrian immigrants will require their participation in productive sectors.

The main destinations of Syrian refugees in Turkey are cities such as Mersin, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adana, Diyarbakır, Hatay, and Kilis. As they have not been able to engage in any productive activity, their consumption has exacerbated the rate of inflation in the region. One of the immediate impacts of this influx of Syrian refugees is the rise in the cost of living, especially in rent prices. High costs of living are also associated with high levels of unemployment. The percentage of unemployed youth in Turkey excluding refugees is striking. In 2015, the unemployment rate for youth between the ages of 15-24 was 19.7 percent, but this number rises to 22.4 percent in the Mediterranean region and to 25.9 percent in the Southeastern Anatolia region.<sup>5</sup> Since the private sector requires greater infrastructure capabilities to encourage more and better investment in the areas where there is high youth unemployment and an influx of

*“The majority of Turkish people believe that they are losing job opportunities due to the influx of Syrian refugees.”*

<sup>4</sup> Hasan Kalyoncu University: Co-Opinion Thematic Workshop, “Regional Development, Refugee Crisis and Youth Unemployment,” 27-28 February 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Turkish Statistical Institute, 15 April 2016, [http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt\\_id=1007](http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreTablo.do?alt_id=1007)

*“In view of the number of refugees and the scope of challenges Turkey faces, the creation of a ministry solely to deal with immigration issues should be considered.”*

refugees, Turkey needs to pursue regional development policies and to continue investing in infrastructure in order to create more jobs. If there can be new job opportunities for refugees as well as for the locally unemployed workforce, the well-being of refugees and the region can be enhanced tremendously. These economic problems can be turned into opportunities for both locals and refugees, as Turkey can utilize the skillset of young Syrian refugees to contribute to regional development. Nevertheless, this window of opportunity also causes social instability and xenophobia. For a country like Turkey with a relatively high unemployment rate of 10.3 percent, the competition created by a population increase of 2.5 million leads to tension between communities.

### ***Labor Market Integration***

Illegal and underpaid workers constitute a significant problem in the domestic labor market. While employers exploit illegal labor with low wages in unskilled jobs, the majority of Turkish people believe that they are losing job opportunities due to the influx of Syrian refugees. Since their work histories are not recorded and a diploma equivalency system has not yet been implemented, qualified workers have to work for very low wages. Due to inadequate auditing and low prosecution rates, Syrians are employed illegally with no social security. Therefore, heavier auditing mechanisms must be put in practice to prevent employers from evading taxes and using illegal employment, especially child labor.

A first step could be opening up language courses so that refugees will have at least a basic understanding of the Turkish language, and creating an equivalency system for Syrian diplomas (as well as the education systems of other countries) in the Turkish education system. These steps alone could create significant momentum in the integration of some of the refugees who would like to settle in Turkey. It is essential that both civil society and intergovernmental organizations share some of the burden that the Turkish government will carry in this process. For instance, providing vocational training to refugees will minimize differences, in practice, for several professions, and help refugees obtain skills to start practicing new professions in Turkey. Cooperation with local authorities, such as municipalities, and organizing collective vocational training projects in relevant sectors can tackle the challenge of regional development even more efficiently.

Another issue to be considered is the employment of women. Though this is a generic challenge in the Turkish labor market, it is a sensitive issue in the context of Syrian refugee women because they are among the most marginalized and under threat in Turkey. Some women also have to carry the added burden of single motherhood, as the majority of men in families are either fighting or were killed during the war in Syria. Given these circumstances, policymakers should take into consideration the challenges Syrian women face when entering the workforce.

### ***Legal and Institutional Aspects***

Another aspect of integration is institutional reform. Turkey has a directorate responsible for migration related issues. This directorate operates under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and is called the General Directorate of Migration Management. Some of the decisions related to immigrants require a higher authority for implementation, and having a directorate handle refugee related issues usually entails bureaucratic hardships. In view of the number of refugees and the scope of challenges Turkey faces, the creation of a ministry solely to deal with immigration issues should be considered. Since the formation of a ministry will take some time to work through in terms of dividing responsibilities with other ministries and designating its place in the bureaucracy, bureaucratic procedures should be simplified and the level of decision-making should be elevated in the interim period.

Legally, Turkey might need to reconsider granting full citizenship status instead of temporary protection status. Calling Syrians in Turkey “guests” or “people under temporary protection” does not provide long-term sustainable answers for the core issues. In 2011, Turkey thought that the Bashar-al Assad regime would soon fall and that his days were numbered, so Syrians in Turkey would be going back to Syria after the civil war.<sup>6</sup> The last five years have proven otherwise, and it is time for Turkey to start making plans to host Syrian refugees for longer periods of time, and to prepare for even more waves of refugees. Needless to say, institutional and legal reforms can only partially facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey. In view of the fact that they are not likely to go home, relevant stakeholders should take action to promote the social integration of Syrian refugees.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Social Integration***

One way to ensure this social integration and shape the perception of the hosting community is to give it extensive insight into the daily experiences of Syrians, by breaking down the barrier of the unknown and fostering empathy with this experience.

<sup>6</sup>“Turkey warns Syria’s Bashar al-Assad his days are numbered,” *The Telegraph*, 21 November 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Kemal Kirişçi and Elizabeth Ferris, “Not Likely to Go Home: Syrian Refugees and Challenges to Turkey – and the International Community,” *Brookings Institute*, No. 7 (September 2015).

This can be achieved by incentivizing more volunteer work, interpersonal exchange, and political activism by Turkish citizens. Although first reactions are often positive and welcoming, self-interest may take precedence once difficulties and competition start to arise. Therefore, genuine exchange is needed for harmonious cohabitation. This can be promoted through local and neighborhood-based initiatives.

*“EU foreign policy on immigrants and refugees is becoming more unified and exclusionary as the Syrian refugee crisis continues to challenge the European political system.”*

The refugee crisis and integration concerns are not new phenomena for European countries, which raises the question of whether or not Turkey can capitalize on the European experience to foster social integration of Syrian refugees. In the past few decades, different countries have taken varying approaches to the issue of integration and multiculturalism in terms of governance.<sup>8</sup> The UK has recently tried to integrate and accommodate immigrants and refugees by giving them political status where individuals are perceived and

represented through their groups of belonging. While this does enable socioeconomic integration to a degree, it also creates tension between different identity groups. France has used assimilation as an integration method, forcing different groups to conform to French identity and predetermined linguistic and cultural norms. While this provides more equality in terms of citizenship, it forces refugees to abandon their own culture and heritage. In the long run, this creates resentment and radicalization. Lastly, Germany has an accommodating approach, especially since the 2000s, where different identity groups have more freedom to preserve their culture, albeit with very limited integration. This results in the creation of parallel communities between which there is very little to no interaction. However, EU foreign policy on immigrants and refugees is becoming more unified and exclusionary as the Syrian refugee crisis continues to challenge the European political system.

### ***The EU Foreign Policy Towards the Crisis***

Despite the unforgettable image of the drowned Syrian boy washed ashore, European countries in general have tried to prevent the influx of refugees by implementing regulations aimed at deterrence.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the Danish government declared that it would seize the belongings of all refugees as they enter the

<sup>8</sup> Kenan Malik, “The Failure of Multiculturalism: Community versus Society in Europe,” *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Helena Smith, “Shocking Images of Drowned Syrian Boy Show Tragic Plight of Refugees,” *The Guardian*, 2 September 2015.

country.<sup>10</sup> Another example is xenophobia and racism in Eastern Europe, where a news reporter was filmed tripping a refugee who was running for his life.<sup>11</sup> Apart from the ethical considerations, this exclusionary approach stems from concerns about social integration. The incoming refugees are perceived as a threat to the social fabric of European countries. Even in the process of resettlement, the profile of the refugee applicant is compared to an ideal candidate, and ones who do not fit are even more marginalized, becoming, in the words of Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, “human waste.”<sup>12</sup> The exclusionary EU foreign policy is also evident in the recent EU-Turkey negotiations.<sup>13</sup> The main aim of the deal is that for each illegal migrant sent back to Turkey, a legally registered Syrian refugee will be permanently resettled in Europe. The EU’s decision to implement this deal has elicited harsh criticism from civil society, in part because of increasing human rights violations in Turkey.

The EU-Turkey deal, which exemplifies a confrontation between civilizations on an individual and societal level, is being played out against the backdrop of a proxy war and the ongoing insurgence of extremist Islamic terrorist groups. The human aspect is in constant tension with political considerations, resulting in all sorts of reactions. In a way, the situation has forced a physical, face-to-face encounter between the East and the West, and challenges preconceived ideas. An anecdote was shared during the workshop about a Moroccan refugee in Greece who

*“The EU’s decision to implement the [EU-Turkey] deal has elicited harsh criticism from civil society, in part because of increasing human rights violations in Turkey.”*

was beaten and tortured in every European country he entered.<sup>14</sup> He remembered his mother talking about Europe when he was little as a place where people have rights. He said that was not what he experienced. This is true for thousands of refugees fleeing their country hoping to find the Europe they imagined, but unfortunately rarely do. However, it is important to note that despite the extreme right-wing, xenophobic, and exclusionary regulations, there are also highly empathetic civil initiatives like the “Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS),” which was started by a family who rented a boat in order to save refugees from drowning in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Rick Noack, “Denmark Wants To Seize Jewelry And Cash From Refugees,” *The Independent*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Ben Quinn, “Hungarian Journalist Sacked For Kicking Refugees Plans To Sue One Of Them,” *The Guardian*, 21 April 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Zygmunt Baumann, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> “The Dark Side Of The EU-Turkey Refugee Deal,” *Aljazeera*, 9 March 2016.

<sup>14</sup> Hasan Kalyoncu University: Co-Opinion Thematic Workshop, “Regional Development, Refugee Crisis and Youth Unemployment,” 27-28 February 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew Speiser, “A Rich American And His Italian Wife Are On A Mission To Save Migrants In The Mediterranean,” *Business Insider*, 7 May 2015.

When each individual is reduced to a statistical unit, we tend to forget our humanitarian duty. While initiatives like MOAS are promising, the magnitude of the crisis requires more systematic planning in several different aspects; social, economic, and legal to name a few. Turkey has set an example with its open-door policy and outstanding assistance; since the crisis began, Turkey has spent 10 billion dollars.<sup>16</sup> However, if Turkey fails to seek multilateral solutions to this problem or if the EU falls behind in overcoming issues regarding policy coordination within member countries as well as with Turkey, accommodating and integrating Syrian refugees will continue to pose a great deal of challenges for the region.

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<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Rankin, "Turkey Outlines 'One For One' Plan To Tackle Syrian Refugee Crisis," *The Guardian*, 7 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/07/eu-offers-another-3bn-to-turkey-at-emergency-migration-summit>