

THE SYRIAN CONFLICT AND TURKEY'S HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Turkey has followed an open-door policy towards the Syrian refugees since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011. With the intensification of violence, Syria has now replaced Afghanistan as the state that generates the most refugees in the world. Currently, Turkey hosts more than 2.7 million refugees. In this paper, an analysis of Turkey's response to the refugee crisis is presented, by shedding light on the living and working conditions of Syrian refugees. The second part of the article looks at Turkey's border policy and its humanitarian policies in response to this crisis.

Laçin İdil Öztığ*



TURKISH POLICY
QUARTERLY

Fall 2016

* Dr. Laçin İdil Öztığ is a research assistant in the Department of Political Science and International Relations, Yıldız Technical University.

The Syrian war has caused millions of Syrians to be internally displaced or seek refuge in bordering states. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as of 2016, 2.1 million Syrians are registered in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Due to the protracted civil conflict and state fragmentation, Syria has now replaced Afghanistan as the state that generates the most refugees in the world. By hosting more than 2.7 million Syrians, Turkey has now overtaken Pakistan as the country with the highest share of refugees in the world.¹

The Arab Spring spread to Syria with the eruption of anti-government protests in March 2011. As the Syrian civil war unfolded, Turkey witnessed a mass refugee influx. Immediately thereafter, Turkey declared that it would adopt an open door policy towards Syrian refugees. Subsequently, Turkey established refugee camps in its south-eastern provinces. In addition, Syrians outside of the camps have been provided health, education, and food aid facilities.

This article analyzes Turkey's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. The first section looks at the living and working conditions of refugees in Turkey. The second section analyzes Turkey's border policy and its humanitarian policies in response to the Syrian crisis. The article concludes by recommending that the Turkish government should place more emphasis on social policies to ensure the peaceful coexistence between Turkish and Syrian communities.

Syrian Refugees in Turkey

The refugee influx to Turkey began in April 2011, with at first only 263 Syrians crossing Turkish borders. Immediately afterwards, the Turkish government established an emergency tent camp in its south-eastern province of Hatay.² With the intensification of the civil war in Syria, millions of people crossed Turkey's borders either to seek refuge or use Turkey as a transit point to continue further on to European countries. The number of refugees who sought shelter in Turkey escalated after the Islamic State of Syria and the Levant (ISIL) took control of Northern Syria.³ In 2014 alone, one million Syrian refugees crossed the Turkish border.⁴

With the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (which was enacted in April 2013 and came into effect in April 2014) the Directorate General for

¹ "UNHCR country operations profile-Turkey: Overview," *UNHCR*, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>

² Mac McClelland, "How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp," *The New York Times*, 13 February 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/magazine/how-to-build-a-perfect-refugee-camp.html?_r=0

³ Ahmet İcduygu, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead," *Transatlantic Council on Migration*, April 2015, p. 4, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/syrian-refugees-turkey-long-road-ahead>

⁴ "Syria Regional Refugee Response," *UNHCR*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

Migration Management (DGMM) was established. The DGMM took over the tasks of the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) in terms of refugee management and was authorized to work in cooperation with the UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM), along with other international organizations and NGOs.⁵

With the heightening situation, the Turkish government stepped up its efforts to accommodate Syrian refugees. Currently, they are housed (in either tents or containers) in 26 temporary accommodation centers located in 10 cities, most of which are located in Akçakale, Suruç, and Elbeyli Beşiriye.

In these centers, Syrian refugees receive education, health services, and vocational courses.⁶ Furthermore, a recent protocol signed between the DGMM and the Turkish Crescent (Turkey's first aid health organization) approved the provision of accommodation, nutrition, and health services to be provided to refugees under the supervision of experts from both institutions. In addition,

“As the Syrian civil war unfolded, Turkey declared that it would adopt an ‘open door policy towards Syrian refugees.’”

refugees will be given psychological and social support and these services will be monitored and evaluated according to international standards.⁷

Strikingly, only 9.6 percent of registered refugees (281,935) live in accommodation centers, as the majority of Syrians have left the refugee camps and have entered the Turkish labor market.⁸ They have chosen to live in big cities such as Şanlıurfa, Istanbul, Hatay, and Gaziantep, where there are more work opportunities. Some Syrians travel from the Syrian border to the Black Sea region in Turkey as seasonal workers.⁹

⁵ Kemal Kirişçi, “Syrian Refugees and Turkey’s Challenges: Going Beyond Hospitality,” *Brookings*, (May 2014), pp. 36-37, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-Refugees-and-Turkeys-Challenges-May-14-2014.pdf>

⁶ Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, “Geçici Korumamız Altındaki Suriyeliler,” http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik3/gecici-korumamiz-altindaki-suriyeliler_409_558_560

⁷ “Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü Ve Türk Kızılayı Arasında Protokol İmzalandı,” [A Protocol was Signed between the Directorate General for Migration Management and Turkish Red Crescent] Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/goc-idaresi-genel-mudurlugu-ve-turk-kizilayi-arasinda-protokol-imzalandi_350_359_10079_icerik

⁸ Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, “Syrians Under Temporary Protection,” http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik; Ximena V. Del Carpio and Mathis Wagner, “The Impact of Syrian Refugees on the Turkish Labor Market,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (August 2015), p. 2, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/505471468194980180/The-impact-of-Syrians-refugees-on-the-Turkish-labor-market>

⁹ “The Situation of Syrian Refugees in Neighboring Countries: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations,” *ORSAM Report*, No: 189, (April, 2014), p. 16.

Most Syrians have been employed in construction, textile manufacturing, and heavy industry and agriculture sectors.¹⁰ However, without the right to work under Turkish labor laws, Syrian asylum seekers are more vulnerable to exploitation (such as working for lower wages) than Turkish citizens.¹¹ Syrians obtained work permits with a regulation implemented in January 2016.¹² This legislation applies to registered Syrian refugees who have been living in Turkey for at least six months and requires employers to pay the minimum wage (1,300 Turkish lira per month) to Syrian workers.¹³

“In 2014 alone, one million Syrian refugees crossed the Turkish border.”

While the law seems to ameliorate the working conditions of Syrian refugees, it also obliges them to sign a contract with employers before applying for a work permit, which are given only in the province where they first registered upon arrival. However, since the lower wages paid to Syrian refugees were one of the most important reasons for their participation in the labor market, employers are unwilling to sign employment contracts for Syrians.¹⁴

Furthermore, the employment of Syrians has created resentment among Turkish workers, as many Turkish employers have preferred to replace them (especially the uneducated and low skilled) with Syrians.¹⁵ Although Syrians seem to affect Turkey’s job market negatively by taking jobs from Turkish workers, they also contribute to the Turkish economy in positive ways.

Since the civil war, many Syrians have moved their investments to Turkey. According to the recent data released by Turkey’s Banking Regulation and Supervision Agency, Syrians deposits in Turkish banks increased from over 311 million Turkish lira to more

¹⁰ Kemal Kirişçi, “Syrian Refugees and Turkey’s Challenges: Going Beyond Hospitality,” *Brookings*, (May 2014), p. 21, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-Refugees-and-Turkeys-Challenges-May-14-2014.pdf>

¹¹ Kemal Kirişçi, “Syrian Refugees and Turkey’s Challenges: Going Beyond Hospitality,” *Brookings*, (May 2014), p. 21, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Syrian-Refugees-and-Turkeys-Challenges-May-14-2014.pdf>

¹² Ceylan Yeginsu, “Turkey Strengthens Rights of Syrian Refugees,” *The New York Times*, 29 December 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/30/world/europe/turkey-strengthens-rights-of-syrian-refugees.html?_r=0

¹³ Don Murray, “High Commissioner Welcomes Turkish Work Permits for Syrian Refugees,” *UNHCR*, 18 January 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2016/1/569ca19c6/high-commissioner-welcomes-turkish-work-permits-syrian-refugees.html>

¹⁴ Patrick Kingsley, “Fewer than 0.1% of Syrians in Turkey in line for work permits,” *The Guardian*, 11 April 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/11/fewer-than-01-of-syrians-in-turkey-in-line-for-work-permits>

¹⁵ Ximena V. Del Carpio and Mathis Wagner, “The Impact of Syrian Refugees on the Turkish Labor Market,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper, (August 2015), p. 4, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/505471468194980180/The-impact-of-Syrians-refugees-on-the-Turkish-labor-market>

than one billion.¹⁶ While the number of firms operating in Gaziantep before the Syrian civil war was 60, it increased to 209 in 2015. Similarly, the number of firms operating in Mersin increased from 25 to 279. Through their personal networks, Syrian traders sell Turkish goods to Middle Eastern markets. These changing trade dynamics have already mitigated the negative impact of the Syrian war on Turkish foreign trade.¹⁷

Turkey's Border Policy and Its Humanitarian Policies in Response to the Syrian Crisis

The Syrian civil war turned into a transnational conflict with the involvement of the US, Russia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia. The fragmentation of Syria provided a fertile ground for jihadist organizations. ISIL, which grew out of Al Qaeda Iraq, captured the Syrian city of Raqqa in 2013, and named it its capital in 2014.

Northern Syria has witnessed fierce battles between Kurdish forces and ISIL – an attack on Kobani in September 2014 caused more than 130,000 people to flee to Turkey. Subsequently, the US launched air strikes to drive ISIL out of Kobani. In addition, it dropped weapons, ammunition, and medical supplies to Kurdish fighters. In October 2014, Kurdish Peshmerga forces from Iraq joined Syrian fighters in the fighting. On 26 January 2015, ISIL was driven out of Kobani.¹⁸ After the operation, an estimated 25,000 Syrians returned from Turkey to their homes.¹⁹ In June 2015, Kurdish forces captured Tel Abyad from ISIL.²⁰

“The employment of Syrians has created resentment among Turkish workers.”

In response to the Syrian government's request for military aid, Russia launched airstrikes in Syria in the end of September 2015. Although Russia claimed their airstrikes targeted ISIL, they mostly targeted rebel groups fighting the Assad regime. In addition to launching airstrikes, Russia stationed weapons, soldiers, and aircraft in Syria.²¹

¹⁶ “Suriyelilerin Türkiye’de 1,2 milyar lirası var,” [Syrians have 1,2 billion Dollars in Turkey] *The Lira*, 14 June 2016, <http://www.thelira.com/gundem/suriyelilerin-turkiyede-1-2-milyar-lirasi-var-13685>

¹⁷ Oytun Orhan, “Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Türkiye’ye Etkileri,” [The Impact of Syrian Asylum Seekers on Turkey] *Aljazeera Türk*, 13 January 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com.tr/gorus/suriyeli-siginmacilarin-turkiyeye-etkileri>

¹⁸ “Battle for Kobane: Key events,” *BBC NEWS*, 25 June 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29688108>

¹⁹ “Kobani refugees return home to ruins after ‘Islamic State’ defeat,” *ReliefWeb*, 23 February 2015, <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/kobani-refugees-return-home-ruins-after-islamic-state-defeat>

²⁰ Patrick Cockburn, “Syrian Civil War: Could Turkey be gambling on an invasion,” *Independent*, 31 January 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/syrian-civil-war-could-turkey-be-gambling-on-an-invasion-a6844171.html>

²¹ “Russia’s military action in Syria,” *Guardian*, 14 March 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/14/russia-military-action-in-syria-timeline>

On 23 February 2016, the US and Russia brokered a deal on cessation of hostilities in Syria. The deal included the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 by the Syrian government and opposition forces, the cessation of attacks and land grabs, access for humanitarian groups in besieged areas, and the proportionate use of force in self-defense situations.²² The ceasefire excluded the fight against ISIL and al-Nusra.²³ Although violence in Syria dropped dramatically immediately after the ceasefire, as of April 2016, fighting between the Syrian Army and the opposition restarted in Aleppo, Lakatia, and Damascus.²⁴

“*The fragmentation of Syria provided a fertile ground for jihadist organizations.*”

Since the advent of the Syrian crisis, Turkey has followed an open-border policy.²⁵ Nevertheless, after a spillover of violence into its south-eastern region, Turkey strengthened and intermittently closed some parts of its border with Syria, closing its border crossings with

the Syrian towns of Afrin, Kobane, and Jazira after they were taken by Kurdish YPG forces in 2012.²⁶ After the Cilvegözü border crossing attacks which killed 14 people, Turkey deployed NATO Patriot missile batteries in south-eastern provinces (Kahramanmaraş, Adana, and Gaziantep) to deter attacks from Syria.²⁷

The conflict spillover into Turkey has resulted in a number of security incidents. On 11 May 2013, two car bombs exploded in Reyhanlı, a district in the province of Hatay, five kilometers away from the border, killing 51 Turkish citizens. After the attack, Turkey closed Hatay’s Yayladağı customs crossing for a month.²⁸ It also re-inforced its Syrian border with air and ground military equipment.²⁹ In March 2015,

²² “Terms of Syrian Agreement,” *Voice of America*, 23 February 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/content/terms-of-syria-cease-fire-agreement/3202930.html>

²³ Joseph V. Micallef, “Syria: Why the Ceasefire is Unravelling,” *Huffington Post*, 17 April 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-v-micallef/syria-why-the-ceasefire-i_b_9710602.html

²⁴ “The U.S. props up Syria’s sham cease-fire,” *The Washington Post*, 19 April 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/syrias-zombie-cease-fire/2016/04/19/a6d8a250-0654-11e6-bdcb-0133da18418d_story.html; Pamela Dockins, “World Powers Seek to Shore Up Failing Syria Cease-fire,” *Voice of America*, 17 May 2016, <http://www.voanews.com/content/world-powers-seek-progress-on-syria-cease-fire-humanitarian-aid/3333572.html>

²⁵ Sophia Hoffmann and Sahzer Samuk, “Turkish Immigration Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis,” *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, March 2016, https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/arbeitspapiere/Working_paper_Hoffmann_Turkish_immigration_policy.pdf

²⁶ Aaron Stein, “The origins of Turkey’s buffer zone in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, 11 December 2014, <http://warontherocks.com/2014/12/the-origins-of-turkeys-buffer-zonein-syria/>

²⁷ “Turkey Blames Syria for Border Gate Attack,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 March 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-blames-syria-for-border-gate-attack.aspx?pageID=238&nid=42749>

²⁸ “Turkey closes Syria border gate after Reyhanlı bombings,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 May 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-closes-syria-border-gate-after-reyhanli-bombings-.aspx?pageID=238&nid=47326&NewsCatID=341>

²⁹ “Turkey sends military reinforcements to Syrian border after blast,” *Cihan*, 11 May 2013, <https://www.cihan.com.tr/tr/turkey-sends-military-reinforcements-to-syrian-border-after-blast-1029035.htm>

Turkey closed the Öncüpınar and Cilvegözü border crossings, due to concerns about terrorist attacks.³⁰ After the 20 July 2015 Suruç attacks organized by ISIL, which killed 32 people, Turkey began to build a wall along the Syrian border. In addition, Turkish Armed Forces deployed drones and reconnaissance aircrafts along the border.³¹

Despite multi-faceted security challenges along its Syrian border and numerous border security measures in response, Turkey has maintained its open-border policy towards Syrian refugees. When Turkey witnessed another wave of refugees following the Syrian Army's operation in Aleppo in February 2016, then-deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş stated:

“President Erdoğan has consistently accused the international community of turning a blind eye to the violence committed in Syria.”

Turkey has reached the end of its capacity to absorb [refugees]. But in the end, these people have nowhere else to go. Either they will die beneath the bombings and Turkey will ... watch the massacre like the rest of the world, or we will open our borders. At the moment, we are admitting some, and are trying to keep others there [in Syria] by providing them with every kind of humanitarian support. We are not in a position to tell them not to come. If we do, we would be abandoning them to their deaths.³²

In order to be able to deliver humanitarian aid to Syria, Turkey did so under a “zero point operation” policy. By sending trucks containing supplies to the Syrian border which were then picked up by Syrian humanitarian and taken to those in need, Turkey was able to indirectly deliver aid – and managed to stem the refugee flow slightly – without violating international law.³³

³⁰ “Turkey closes two border crossings with Syria amid fears of terrorist attack,” *The Telegraph*, 30 March 2015, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11503524/Turkey-closes-two-border-crossings-with-Syria-amid-fears-of-terrorist-attack.html>

³¹ “Turkey reinforces border with Syria in wake of suspected suicide attack,” *The Guardian*, 23 July 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/23/turkey-syria-border-reinforced-suruc-suicide-attack>

³² Ian Black, “Tens of thousands of Syrian refugees remain stranded at Turkish border,” *The Guardian*, 7 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/07/tens-of-thousands-of-syrians-remain-stranded-at-the-turkish-border>

³³ Souad Ahmadoun, “Turkey’s Policy toward Syrian Refugees,” SWP Comments 47, November 2014, p. 4 https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/comments/2014C47_ahmadoun.pdf; “Turkey’s zero-point operation,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, 11 February 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-zero-point-operation.aspx?pageID=238&nid=62286>

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has consistently accused the international community of turning a blind eye to the violence committed in Syria. On May 2016, he stated that Turkey spent 10 billion dollars for Syrian refugees and complained that the international community did not contribute enough to improve conditions for refugees. He suggested that the UN Security Council should play a leading role in the prevention of attacks on civilians and the creation of a safe zone in Syria.³⁴

Turkey recently advocated for the establishment of a safe zone in Syria and argued that a 10 kilometer-wide safe zone should be established in order to help Syrian refugees fleeing from Russian bombardment. Kurtulmuş noted that if Russian bombing continued, up to 600,000 Syrians could cross the Turkish border. Despite Turkey's calls, the US is unwilling to establish a safe zone on the grounds that it could become a hub for terrorists.³⁵

Discussion and Conclusion

Turkey's policy towards Syrian refugees can be considered a success given its immediate response with the establishment of refugee camps. Furthermore, Turkey made regulatory and bureaucratic changes in order to ameliorate the living and working conditions of Syrians. Nevertheless, the growing number of refugees has fueled anti-refugee sentiments throughout Turkish society.

As previously noted, the participation of Syrians in the Turkish job market has created frustration among local workers, although these negative opinions are not limited to Turkish workers. According to a 2015 Pew Research Centre Survey, 67 percent of the 947 Turkish respondents stated that they wanted fewer Syrian refugees in Turkey.³⁶ Furthermore, the increase in the practice of polygamy in the south-eastern provinces due to the influx of Syrian refugees has also fueled anger among Turkish people.³⁷

In addition to anti-refugee sentiments, the flows of Syrian refugees to Turkey has spurred sectarian tensions. For example, the Turkish province of Hatay is multi-ethnic with Turkish, Kurdish, Circassian, Armenian, Arab Christian, Sunni, and Alawite Arab populations. Local Arabs in Hatay support the Assad regime and were

³⁴ "Erdoğan'ın Guardian makalesi: Dünya mülteci yükünü Türkiye'yle paylaşmalı," [Erdoğan's Guardian Article: The World Should Share Turkey's Refugee Burden] *BBC Türkçe*, 23 May 2016, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2016/05/160523_erdogan_guardian_makale

³⁵ Patrick Wintour, "Turkey revives plan for safe zone in Syria to stem flow of refugees," *The Guardian*, 16 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/16/turkey-safe-zone-syria-refugees-russian-airstrikes>

³⁶ Jacop Poushter, "Deep Divisions in Turkey as Election Nears," Pew Research Centre, 15 October 2015, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2015/10/15/deep-divisions-in-turkey-as-election-nears/>

³⁷ Souad Ahmadoun, "Turkey's Policy toward Syrian Refugees," SWP Comments 47, November 2014, p. 3.

hostile towards Syrian refugees who were Sunni Arabs. As a result of escalating tensions between Sunni and Alawite Arabs in 2012, the Turkish government transferred Syrian refugees to other provinces.³⁸

Given the grim political atmosphere, the Syrian conflict is not likely to end in the near future. The creation of a safe zone in Syria might decrease the flows of refugees into Turkey, however, those already in Turkey are likely to stay long-term. Therefore, in addition to bureaucratic and regulatory changes to ameliorate the living and working conditions of Syrian refugees, the Turkish government should develop social policies in order to foster peaceful coexistence between Turkish and Syrian people.

Currently, there is little policy debate about the social dimension of Turkey's refugee policies. Ways to encourage these discussions could be by organizing debates at universities and municipalities to discuss anti-refugee sentiments and raise awareness among the local population with respect to the refugee crisis. Furthermore, in addition to the DGMM, a directorate, with specific responsibilities, such as providing refugees with language and vocational courses, could be established.

³⁸ Souad Ahmadoun, "Turkey's Policy toward Syrian Refugees," SWP Comments 47, November 2014, p. 3..