

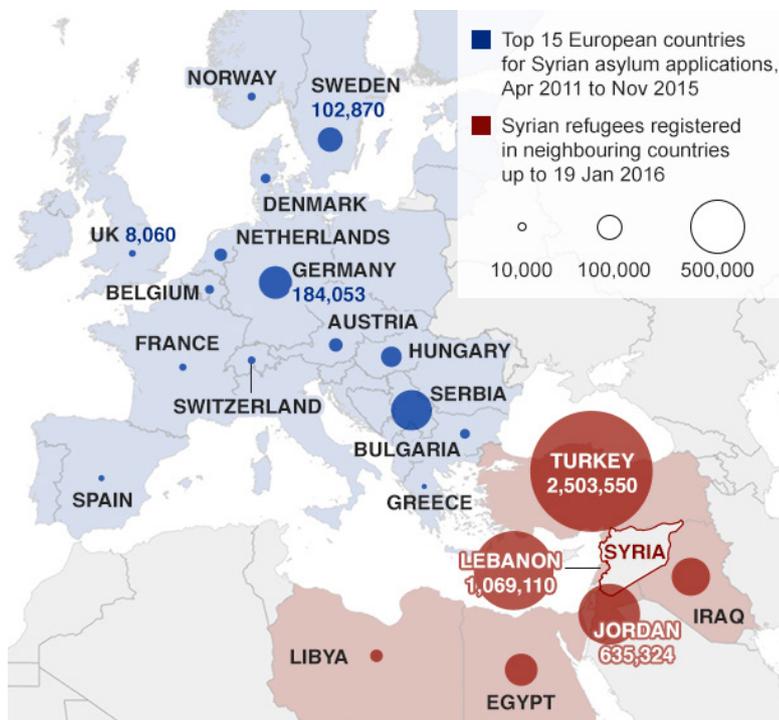
On Governing the Syrian Refugee Crisis Collectively: The View from Turkey

BASAK YAVCAN

According to UNHCR, of the 235 million displaced people in the world today, 60 million are forced to leave their countries to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster. About 80% of this forced migration is destined to arrive in other developing countries, which, in addition to their own social and economic challenges, struggle to develop policies and services to host these vulnerable populations. The Syrian refugee crisis is no exception in that, while we started to hear about the so called “European Refugee Crisis” only in the Summer of 2015, over four million refugees fleeing the civil war in Syria have been hosted by the neighboring countries of Syria since the beginning of the war in 2011. Currently more than half of these 4 million displaced Syrians live in Turkey while the other half is dispersed mainly throughout Lebanon and Jordan.

Even though the number of Syrians arriving in Europe and seeking protection continues to increase, it still remains low as compared to the frontier countries, with a little over 10% of refugees seeking safety in Europe. The number of Syrians in Europe is estimated to be about nine hundred thousand, most of which have arrived in 2015 predominantly through Greece. The map below illustrates the distribution of the Syrian displaced population comparatively and emphasizes the disproportionate burden on the frontier states of the conflict.

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Syrians in neighboring countries and Europe (Source: BBC graphic/UNHCR data)

Since the beginning of the crisis, the need for building an international response to this continuing disaster has been widely discussed and yet, has failed to materialize with any tangible results. Even though the international community has acknowledged the humanitarian and legal responsibility for assisting the victims of the conflict, what is meant by this international burden-sharing, and how exactly it can be pursued, has not been elaborated. The pressing need for a collective response only became evident to the international community with the large influx of refugees who moved from these frontier states to the European Union member-states in the summer of 2015, and with the spread of haunting images showing the dead bodies of infants sweeping the shores of countries like Turkey and Greece. What this so called European Refugee Crisis involved was in fact an overflowing of asylum seekers in the frontier states bordering the EU. Subjected to several push and pull factors, these refugees had been largely denied official entryways into Europe and thus forced to relocate.

Some of these factors relate to the worsening economic and safety conditions in the host countries. For one, in the case of Turkey, the number of displaced Syrian people almost doubled in 2015 after the intensification of the conflict south of its border. This means that already crowded Turkish refugee camps could not host more people, and that the already exploitative working conditions of Syrian refugees have worsened. The inability to find employment and make a decent living, in addition to several problems pertaining to social integration, constitutes a major push factor for immigration – as is evidenced by the results of a UNHCR survey conducted with Syrian refugees in various Greek islands. For this survey, a total of 1,245 Syrians were interviewed between April and September 2015 in an attempt to gather data on their demographics, as well as past and future migration plans. The survey first revealed that contrary to what many believe, educationally, refugees are some of the most advanced members of their country: 86% say they have secondary school or university education with significant skills such as engineering, computer programming, and teaching. These data show a highly-skilled population on the move.¹ Considering the informational and financial resources necessary for taking this dangerous and expensive route, such a finding is hardly surprising. Equally important are the survey's results as to what drove these refugees to Europe in the first place. Close to two thirds of the arrivals have indicated that they resided in a third country before coming to Greece, and not surprisingly, that for the great majority, accounting for more than half of the arrivals, this country was Turkey. The interviewees' main reasons for leaving their previous locations were the lack of non-exploitative employment opportunities that matched their skills, financial needs, concerns for security and protection, search for better opportunities for their children, and the hope for educational opportunities.²

These results also support the view that one of the easiest ways to build a collective response to a crisis of this kind and to prevent it from spilling over into various territories is simply helping the countries at the frontlines in their efforts to cope with the influx of people and develop policies to integrate them, thereby eliminating some of the factors which further push refugees away. While international organizations struggle to sustain humanitarian aid to the

1. <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=248>

2. Ibid.

displaced communities, the continuation of the crisis calls for a far-sighted approach that looks beyond crisis management and toward socio-economic integration. As many Syrians try to adapt to their new lives in host countries, as they become part of the latter's urban, economic, and social life, and as their children require educational and psycho-social support, what kind of institutional solutions might give these vulnerable populations the necessary tools to cope with their prolonged transitional status?

At this point, it is important to look deeper into the Turkish experience in terms of the policies that have been developed for integrating the displaced Syrian population and for moving from a security-focused approach to immigration to one that is focused on governance. First, with respect to the international as well as the domestic legal framework surrounding the refugee crisis, Turkey is a party to the 1951 Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. Signed and ratified by 144 nations, this Convention is the preeminent authority on the manner in which host countries are to receive and treat refugees.³ Nevertheless, Turkey raised a geographical limitation when it signed and ratified the Convention and accordingly, only defines persons of European origin as refugees.⁴ As a result of this geographical limitation, which was once common but now applied by only four signatory states, Syrian refugees in Turkey are not part of an asylum regime. Instead, they are given assistance and resettled in third countries under the status of "temporary protection." Since the Syrian crisis began in 2011, Turkey – estimated to host over two million Syrians – has maintained an emergency response of a high standard, predominantly upholding an open-door policy and ensuring *non-refoulement*. This approach, however, has had a major shortcoming given the prolonged stay of Syrian refugees: the temporary protection regime does not grant any working rights to those who are granted protection (the implications and potential developments in relation to employment will be further evaluated below).

In order to provide assistance – housing, humanitarian aid, education and health services – to Syrian refugees, 22 state of the art camps (soon to be 24) were set-up. Equipped with high standard facilities compared to many refugee camps across the world, these camps host about 217,000 people⁵ which only accounts for about 10% of the Syrian population in Turkey. The remaining 90%, as indicated earlier, are mostly voluntary urban refugees, seeking to survive and take care of their families outside the camps with much less assistance but with more freedom of movement and less isolation in comparison to the camps.

While the data on this off-camp population is limited, one obvious challenge for this group of refugees relates to employment. While under the temporary protection scheme, Syrians in Turkey can have access to health as well as some education and social services, the lack of an existing legal framework for integration into the labor market constitutes a major shortcoming. The Turkish state officials acknowledge this limitation and point to the internationally well received new draft law which is set to allow the Syrian population the right to apply for work permits within the industries selected by provincial governance boards. As it stands, however, most Syrians practically need to work without a

3. Bidinger, S. (2015). "Syrian Refugees and the Right to Work: Developing Temporary Protection in Turkey." *BU Int'l LJ*, 33, 223.

4. See "Reservations and Declarations on the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," Jan. 31, 1967, 606 U.N.T.S. 267 ("[T]he Government of Turkey . . . applies the Convention only to persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe.").

5. <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e48e0fa7f.html>

legal framework in order to survive. This has led to the creation of a dual labor market where refugees are willing to work for two-thirds of the wages paid to locals. Furthermore, with the arrival of more and more refugees from Syria, refugees face a fierce competition with other refugees for jobs, leading to a race to the bottom with regard to paid wages. This situation has also resulted in various exploitative practices, lack of any social security scheme, as well as inaccessibility of high-skilled jobs to the refugees. With the new draft law soon to be passed, it is hoped that refugees' integration into the labor market will be more effective and less of a reason for secondary immigration.

Nonetheless, there is another important barrier to the refugees' entry into the labor market as well as their access to education: language. In the words of the Syrian refugee activist Lina Sergie Attar of the Karam Foundation: "The challenge is that our southern neighbors, with whom we are culturally more similar and share the same language, do not have the economic capacity to host us; and in Turkey, the country that has the adequate infrastructure and a stable economy [to host us], people speak a different language."⁶ Currently, in Turkey, many state, municipal, and non-governmental agencies offer free language education to overcome this barrier. Almost all 330 respondents I surveyed as part of a needs assessment conducted for the International Red Cross, the Red Crescent Federation, and the Turkish Red Crescent, indicated that they absolutely need to learn Turkish, and that the Turkish language is essential to get jobs. This study also shows that a considerable part of this population has above-basic school training and some skills that are quite scarce in the region – the Syrian refugees include a sizable number of electricians, language teachers (mostly English), and mechanics. As a result, overcoming the language barrier will better enable their integration in the labor market.⁷

Today there is an increasing reliance on community centers that are built across Turkey to address refugees' barriers to labor market integration. These centers offer services that range from psychological counseling and cultural activities to language courses and vocational-skills training for free. Some of these centers are supported by central or local governing bodies, while others are supported by international organizations or local NGOs and include those formed by refugee groups themselves. A study I recently conducted in the Turkish city of Şanlıurfa, the border city with the highest Syrian refugee population, illustrates that community centers are a great resource for vocational skills training, as a sizable majority of the displaced Syrians are seeking employment for the first time. Rojen, a 35-year-old widow from Aleppo with 5 kids, currently gets paid nearly \$8 per day – if she can find work – which is just enough to pay her \$120 monthly rent for a mold-infested room. Even a minor improvement in her working conditions will increase the entire family's living standards considerably. In addition to language, Syrians are interested in skills required for hairdressing, tailoring, textile, manufacturing, and information technologies.⁸ Most of these professions are also jobs much needed in the area and could address the skills mismatch, as stated by the members of the Şanlıurfa Chamber of Commerce and Industry in separate interviews. Employers also pointed out that for the blue-collar industry jobs in the area, which are not

6. Excerpt from her speech on the Chicago Council on Global Affairs Panel on December 8th, 2016, titled: Syria and the Global Refugee Crisis. Podcast available at <http://www.thechicagocouncil.org/event/syria-and-global-refugee-crisis>

7. For more on this Needs Assessment Report follow the link: http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2015724_ingg.pdf

8. Ibid.

popular among the local population, an expedited training and job placement of the eager Syrians is imminent.

In addition to serving as buffer and training zones facilitating the integration of refugees into the labor market, these community centers have programs for attracting disadvantaged groups, thereby addressing another important aspect of integration. Children are in imminent danger due to their prolonged displacement; most of them suffer from major war trauma and about 70% of them do not take part in any formal education. There are no restrictions on their admission to schools but the hassle of providing the necessary paperwork, lack of language skills, low household incomes, lack of resources and uncertainty concerning the future, are some of the reasons why enrollment is not higher. The psycho-social counseling and various social activities offered by the community centers address these very problems, though in a modest way. For 15-year-old Hala from the eastern Syrian city of Deirez-Zor, who now lives in a household of 9 people, the community center is the only place for socialization as well as education. Even though she had been going to school in Syria, had finished 8th grade and speaks a little English, today she spends most of her time at home. Her family does not have the resources for her education. There is one thing she loves in Turkey, and that is attending drama classes once a week at the IMPR community center established in partnership with the Danish Refugee Council and with donations from the US State Department, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration.⁹

9. <http://imprhumanitarian.org/en/urfa-community-center/>



Acrobatics and magician performance at IMPR Urfa Community Center¹⁰
(courtesy of IMPR Urfa Community Center)

10. <http://notesfromthefield.imprhumanitarian.org/tag/urfa-community-center/>

Syrians escaping the civil war in their country first need basic humanitarian assistance. However, as indicated by another interviewee, Abdullah, 28, an electrical technician from Al-Raqqah: “The conflict is not going to be over tomorrow, and in the meanwhile, I do not want to sit around in a camp the whole day in idleness and wait for food. I want to make an honorable living with my labor and take care of my family.” With little assistance in language and vocational skills – for those who need it – refugees can learn to become autonomous and better integrate the societies they live in. Hence, one of the best ways to help refugees is to support those developing countries that host 80% of the world’s

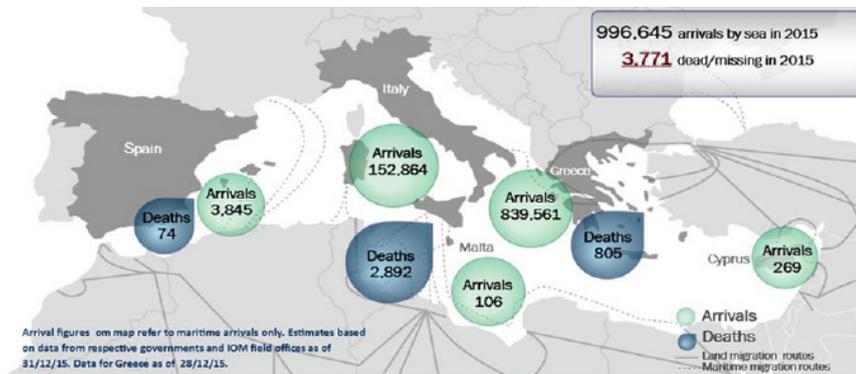
asylum seekers in their efforts to devise policies such as those underway in the Turkish community centers.

In the past four years, the challenge represented by the Syrian crisis has also led Turkish authorities to create new state agencies involved in immigration-related issues. These agencies bring together the ministries of the Ministry of National Education, Labor and Employment, as well as Family and Social Policies, and promote an approach that is predicated on governance – rather than on the perception of refugees as “guests” or as a population presenting a security challenge. Yet, despite such a state-led effort at social integration, and despite the absence of major incidents stemming from inter-group conflict thus far, public perceptions regarding the reception of refugees is still a cause for concern. The majority of the Turkish population opposes further migration,¹¹ objects to extension of economic and social rights to Syrians, and maintains a high degree of social distance from them. Considering that integration is a two way process, still more work needs to be done to assuage the economic concerns of the host population stemming from realistic conflicts and competitions, and to eliminate prejudices by promoting better social and economic interaction among the different groups.

Practical and financial efforts notwithstanding – it is estimated that the Turkish government has spent over nine billion dollars on Syrians in the country since the beginning of the civil war – as indicated earlier, the social, economic, and legal integration of Syrians in Turkey is far from perfect. This condition constitutes a major push factor for the vulnerable Syrian population to take on a risky journey to the perceived lands of opportunities in Europe. According to the Missing Migrants Project by the International Organization for Migration, 3,771 of those who attempted to reach Europe in 2015 are now dead or missing.¹²

11. <http://trends.gmfus.org/transatlantic-trends/country-profiles-2014/country-profiles-turkey-2014/>

12. <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>



Migration flows into Europe across the Mediterranean, 2015 (Source: International Organization for Migration)

At once swamped by the influx of Syrians, for the first time since the beginning of the crisis, and haunted by the images of dead bodies sweeping the shores of Turkey and Greece, European political circles have entered into intense discussions about the responsibilities of the international community and the issue of burden sharing. In that process, EU policy makers have come to a new

appreciation of the urgency of assisting Turkey in its efforts to deal with Syrian refugees. Their decision to work with Ankara on the migrant crisis – which has also provided a new impetus to the long-stalled EU-Turkish negotiations for EU membership – has been made manifest in the revised “EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan.” The latter was announced on October 15, 2015 during the visit of a European Commission delegation to Turkey and further supported by German Chancellor Angela Merkel, when she traveled to the Turkish capital, on October 18.¹³ However, as will be argued below, despite its expressed ambitions, the Plan may neither elicit a significant burden sharing mechanism nor a commitment to resurrect the EU-Turkey membership process due to its focus on securitization of migration and its lack of credibility with regard to other issues.

According to the current Joint Action Plan, Turkey is expected to enact a much debated re-admission agreement within a year, which includes actions in seventy-two issue areas. In particular, Turkey is expected to increase its border control missions and ensure that the re-admission centers are fully functioning and can receive all “irregular” migrants that arrive in Europe after having transited through Turkey. According to the Plan, Turkey can send this group of displaced people back to their respective countries of origin under the conditions that they are not fearing persecution and that it is not possible to provide them with basic necessities such as housing, healthcare and education services.¹⁴ At least one third of the three billion euros to be provided to Turkey by the EU is expected to be allocated for the necessary infrastructure that ensures the EU’s frontiers with non-Europe are secured. The initial plan stated that the remaining funds had to be spent on existing Syrian refugees in Turkey, which is approximately equal to only 900 euros per Syrian refugee.¹⁵ However, as the EU member-states finalized the payment of the funds on February 3, 2015, it was stated that the remaining funds were to be spent on building refugee camps for the re-admitted refugees instead.¹⁶ In other words, the EU’s main expectation in return for financial assistance and for rejuvenating the Turkish accession process is not policies aiming at Syrian refugees’ integration directly, but those that further securitization with increased border controls and containment in camps. Though hardly consistent with the proclaimed intent of the Plan, the fact that it actually focuses on making the EU even less hospitable to refugees is far from surprising in light of the reactions that the arrival of asylum seekers has generated across Europe – to wit, the galvanization of xenophobic feelings and their worrisome politicization as evidenced by the rise of extreme right parties.

In addition to a promise of financial support that is conditional upon reaching vague and potentially impossible targets, such as a fully functioning re-admission system, the EU also pledged to revisit and add momentum to the Turkish candidacy to the EU and grant Turkish citizens a visa-free entry to the Schengen zone.¹⁷ The credibility of this commitment is also questionable due to two potential issues. One relates to the ongoing accession process of Turkey, which has been stalled due to the parties’ inability to open new chapters of *acquis communautaire* in the aftermath of the accession of Cyprus. Because of Turkey’s reluctance to extend the Customs Union it has signed with the EU

13. http://www.usak.org.tr/kose_yazilari_det.php?id=229&cat=405#.Vqotu_krIgs

14. <http://www.mfa.gov.tr/data/agreed%20minutes%20ve%20annotated%20roadmap.pdf>

15. <http://www.igamder.org/haberarsivi/kral-ciplak-2-3-milyon-suriyeli-multecimiz-var/>

16. <https://euobserver.com/migration/132126>

17. <http://www.bloombergvew.com/articles/2015-12-02/refugees-give-turkey-leverage-with-eu>

to a party it has long been in conflict with, namely Cyprus, the commission froze eight chapters of the *acquis*. Furthermore, Cyprus put a veto on opening six more chapters. Considering that, for their part, the remaining chapters are already open and being negotiated, the only possible way of moving forward in the accession process is either the Commission or the Cypriot government lifting their veto: developments that cannot be counted on at this stage.¹⁸ The visa free regime to be granted to Turkey faces a similar challenge: to become a reality, such an agreement needs to be ratified by all member-states of the Union, including those that are less than enthusiastic about the prospect of Turkey's integration in the EU. The reluctance to any rapprochement with Turkey, on the part of European countries, is further heightened by the rising Islamophobia in many European countries, a tendency that goes back at least half a decade but has been further heightened by the Syrian refugee crisis.

Finally, the credibility of the EU's revival of the negotiation process with Turkey is also questionable as it follows a long period when the Union told Turkish authorities that they were failing the requirements of membership in the areas of human rights, and the rule of law. Just before the general elections last November, the European Commission announced, quite unexpectedly, that it had postponed its annual progress report on Turkey, amid a key visit of the Turkish officials to Brussels during which the refugee crisis was at the top of the agenda.¹⁹ Released five days after the elections, the report elicited a very strong criticism of the Turkish government's commitment to a democratization process, human rights, an independent judiciary, and freedom of speech.²⁰ Nonetheless, the EU attempted to reinvigorate membership talks along with collaboration on refugees, thereby lending support to the governing AKP party right before the elections.²¹ Such inconsistencies prompt many observers to argue that the EU's tactical move toward Turkey's membership either destroys its capacity as a rules-based, normative power in foreign policy or, alternatively, casts doubt on its actual commitment to Turkish accession.²²

All things considered, this essay has illustrated the challenges raised by the Syrian refugee crisis to the members of the international community, and more specifically to the relations between the European Union and Turkey, which is both a candidate to EU membership and the main recipient country for Syrian refugees. Our argument has been that one way of establishing a fair burden sharing mechanism for this humanitarian crisis, one that is geared toward facilitating the well-being and socio-economic integration of this vulnerable population, involves supporting the frontier countries in their governance-oriented policies. Despite the existing political will and the allocation of financial resources, Turkey cannot govern this process alone. Any shortcoming in this realm is reflected in the secondary migration of refugees further to Europe. Having illustrated various challenges posed by the arrival of refugees and observing several policies adopted by Turkey that involve a move away from securitization and towards socio-economic integration of the refugees, there are reasons to believe that supporting these efforts can be quite fruitful. As things stand, the "danger" to which European authorities associate the movement of Syrian refugees toward and through Turkey certainly improve the chances of

18. http://www.usak.org.tr/kose_yazilari_det.php?id=2441&cat=405#.Vq4WyfkrIgs

19. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/eu-postpones-progress-report-on-turkey.aspx?pageID=238&nID=89430&NewsCatID=351>

20. <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/1b4044b8-7415-11e5-bdb1-e6e4767162cc.html#axzz3zWUNb5sQ>

21. <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/11/30/turkey-compromise-signals-eu-desperation-over-refugees.html>

22. <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/471-does-the-eu-care-about-turkeys-democracy?.html>

collaboration between the EU and the Turkish government. However, the roadmap that both parties have adopted seems far from ideal both in terms of assuring the wellbeing of refugees and of putting the future of their relationship on the right track. Indeed, the unrealistic and vague goals delineated by the Joint Action Plan are likely to undermine its credibility in the near future, whereas the mechanisms on which it is predicated fail to provide long-term solutions to the needs of the refugees and the problems that they face.

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