



SYRIANS IN TURKEY

Guests without a future?

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EDITORIAL NOTES

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PREFACE

ABOUT TWO YEARS HAVE PASSED since the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR) and its affiliate SKL International (SKL I) started the Sida-funded Resilience in Local Governance (RESLOG) Project in Turkey and Lebanon. In Turkey, RESLOG works in partnership with two regional unions of municipalities – Marmara Municipalities’ Union and the Çukurova Union of Municipalities.

Together with partner unions and member municipalities, RESLOG organises knowledge development processes in the area of local governance and migration, engages in migration policy advocacy, and implements local service improvement projects. Most significantly, RESLOG has facilitated the development of municipal Migration Master Plans in 12 municipalities, linked to their official 5-year strategic plans.

Since the start of the project, the situation in these partner countries and in Syria has changed dramatically, and continues to do so. This study aims to provide a more solid understanding of the current situation in Turkey, especially in regard to Syrian migration. The findings will be used as input for RESLOG conceptualization and future work, as project plans for continued implementation need to be reformulated.

This report draws on the RESLOG feasibility study and project proposal, and investigated RESLOG areas of operation. In October 2020, the author conducted a field study in the Istanbul municipalities of Sisli and Sultanbeyli, and in Adana City and Province, including Sarıçam Municipality. Meetings were also held with the Marmara Municipalities’ Union, the Regional Union of Çukurova Municipalities, the Governor’s office in Adana, and with members of local Citizens’ Assemblies, NGOs and Syrian community members. Interviewees included experts, stakeholders, practitioners and individuals from both Turkish host and Syrian immigrant communities.

The researcher also draws on earlier field trips to Turkey, including during the early days of the Syrian refugee influx. Sources interviewed outside the RESLOG programme include Syrians who have moved from Turkey to EU countries, Turkish academics, foreign correspondents reporting on or from Turkey, European diplomats and experts on Turkey, and Turkish journalists in exile.

This study aims to have a down-to-earth focus. However, Syrian migration to Turkey must be understood in a wider context, encompassing the war in Syria and Turkey’s current financial and health crises. The study thus starts with a brief geopolitical overview.

The Covid-19 Pandemic presents a challenge for RESLOG project implementation, and for field interviews. Nevertheless, the author visited two RESLOG project regions in October.

The report does not include municipalities in east or southeast Turkey run by the pro-Kurdish party HDP, whose mayors have been detained and replaced by government-appointed caretakers, as these are not in RESLOG pilot regions.

The geopolitical situation in the Eastern Mediterranean, Syria and the wider Middle East is volatile, and sudden policy changes and unpredicted moves by non-state actors cannot be excluded, which may ultimately affect Turkey, the people of Syria and Europe.

SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Given the uncertainties and destruction in Syria, millions of Syrian refugees are likely to remain in Turkey, but the government still deals with the issue on an ad hoc basis. Nevertheless, at the local level officials are often aware that Turkey is undergoing a transformation involving a new type of multiculturalism, with Syrian Arabs as a new element in the demographic, cultural and social mosaic.
2. The temporary protection system applied to Syrian refugees in Turkey constitutes a major obstacle for building social cohesion. While Syrians in Turkey have access to public health care and basic education, they are prohibited from travelling outside their provinces of residence, or to family reunions with loved ones still in Syria or elsewhere.
3. The situation resembles the way the Syrian regime has treated Palestinian refugees for decades, according to a highly educated Syrian who once fled to Turkey but now lives in an EU country.
4. As long as the Syrian refugees have neither guaranteed residence nor equal rights in the labour market, it is unlikely that they (mostly Sunni Arabs) will integrate in Turkey society, like many Muslim immigrants before them.
5. Most Syrian children are in Turkish schools, in integrated classes, and this new generation of Syrian children consider Turkey their homeland, in spite of their temporary protection status. However, due to poverty, hundreds of thousands of Syrian children have dropped out of school, only to become child labourers or, if girls, possibly forced into early marriages.
6. Solid data is often lacking. The central government does not normally share demographic data on Syrians in Turkey with the municipalities, which hampers their urban planning.
7. The central government is not allocating extra budget funds according to the number of Syrians that municipalities host. Syrians are thus widely seen as an economic burden by their host municipalities and local populations. Perceived cultural differences add to the problem.
8. In the absence of a national strategy for Syrians in Turkey, politicians at both national and local level are afraid to talk about the Syrian 'guests' from a rights perspective.
9. A source of distress for Syrians is their lack of work permits. Without a permit, Syrian workers cannot benefit from the government's Covid-19 package if they are fired from jobs in the large informal sector. The scope of the Covid-19 Pandemic is widely considered to be downplayed by the central authorities.
10. Structured trade unions are largely absent, especially in sectors where competition for low-skilled jobs is high, such as agriculture and textiles.
11. Police roundups in the summer of 2019, with ID checks of Syrians in major urban centres, stoked fears of future deportations. Stories of forced return to Syria, though hard to verify, circulate widely among Syrian migrants in Turkey.
12. Many Turkish workers blame Syrians for depressing wages, and ethnic tensions between workers in low-skilled jobs is a concern.
13. Turkey has no intention of amending its exceptions to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, whereby only Europeans can ask for asylum. Concerned experts see a need to change the legal status of Syrians, but political leaders are afraid to discuss the issue for fear of losing votes.
14. With the insecure status for Syrians in Turkey, a 'brain drain' has taken place over the past years. Intellectuals, university graduates and people who could serve as bridge-builders, local leaders and role-models have largely left the country.

15. Arabic-speaking Turkish citizens are unwilling to function as bridge-builders due to sectarianism. Syrian refugees are mostly Sunni Arabs, in contrast to the Arabic-speaking citizens in south Turkey who are often Alawite, the same sect as Syria's President Assad.
16. Among Syrians in Turkey there is a noticeable lack of associations, and those that exist often lack structural ties to local governments and Turkish civil society.
17. Syrian women in particular suffer from isolation, due to conservatism within many extended families, but also due to language difficulties and joblessness. Cooperatives, social entrepreneurship programmes, improved infrastructure, sports activities and cultural clubs could enhance social inclusion of Syrian females from conservative families.
18. Domestic violence in Syrian families is mostly 'under the radar'. Law enforcement agencies also lack training on gender issues, which affects women of all ethnicities. For Syrian women, the language gap is an extra barrier.
19. Polygamy among Syrians in Turkey appears not to be criminalized, even though polygamy is forbidden by Turkish law since the early 1900s.
20. At the local level, many observers claim that anti-Syrian sentiments are on the rise.
21. The combined effects of a dwindling economy, mass unemployment, competition over low-skilled jobs and the Covid-19 Pandemic, aggravate ethnic tensions, which may lead to social unrest when the pandemic is over.
22. Turkey cannot exclude a new mass influx of Syrians if the Assad regime, supported by Russia, launches a massive offensive against the Idlib enclave, where more than 3 million civilians, including more than 1 million IDPs, live in an area controlled by the a Salafi group, plus Turkish military outposts.
23. Syrians in Turkey lack a sense of a secure future, and fear that forced returns may yet occur, given how quickly Turkey's policies vis-à-vis Syria and other neighbouring countries can shift.

ABBREVIATIONS

AFAD	The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency
AKP	Justice and Development Party (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi)
CHP	Republican People's Party (Turkish: Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi)
CMU	Çukurova Region Municipalities Union
DGMM	Directorate General for Migration Management
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net
HTS	Hayat Tahrir al-Sham
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also called IS (Islamic State), or Daesh, a derogatory Arabic acronym
MHP	The Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi), a far-right, ultra-nationalist Turkish political party
MMU	Marmara Region Municipalities Union
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PKK	The Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish: Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, Turkish: Kürdistan İşçi Partisi)
PYD	Democratic Union Party (Syrian–Kurdish)
RESLOG	Resilience in Local Governance
SAA	Syrian Arab Army, land force branch of the Syrian Armed Forces
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces
SNA	Syrian National Army (Turkey's proxies)
UMT	Union of Municipalities
YPG/YPJ	People's Protection Units (Syrian–Kurdish forces)

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1. GEOPOLITICAL ISSUES

This chapter describes Turkey as a geopolitical player, and particularly Ankara's policies and interests vis-à-vis various actors in Syria.

1.1 Turkey's long borders

Turkey, a candidate country to the European Union since 1999, has several geopolitical assets: sizeable land mass, strategic location and land borders with eight countries in Europe and the Middle East, i.e. Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq and Syria. The last border is the longest, at 822 km.¹

Turkey is increasingly asserting itself as a military power, in Syria, Libya and the Caucasus, and in the Black Sea, the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, causing a standoff with Greece and Cyprus. Tension between France and Turkey, both NATO members, has become a factor in the regional power play.

TURKEY



Successive governments in Ankara have played geopolitical cards for nearly a century, not least under Tayyip Recep Erdoğan, president since 2014 and previously prime minister from 2003. Long gone are the days when Turkey, as in 2009, declared “zero problems with neighbours” as its foreign policy doctrine. Instead relations with most neighbouring states have soured.

Unlike Athens and Paris, some European capitals seem reluctant to ‘mess with Turkey’ after the refugee crisis in 2015. Turkey’s important geographic location, its NATO membership and its large Syrian refugee population have at times been used by President Erdoğan as a tactical card vis-à-vis Brussels and EU member states. The EU’s inability to reach a consensus regarding

POPULATION:

82.0 million (CIA, July 2020 est.)

POPULATION GROWTH:

0.45% (CIA, 2020 est.)

ETHNICITY:

Turkish 70–75%, Kurdish 19%, other minorities 7–12% (CIA, 2016 est.)

URBAN POPULATION:

76.1% (CIA, 2020)

RATE OF URBANIZATION:

2.04% annual rate of change (CIA, 2015–20 est.)

GDP PER CAPITA:

28 167 USD (WB, 2020)

HDI RANKING:

59 out of 189 (UNDP, 2018)

UNEMPLOYMENT RATE:

12% (WB, 2020)

TI CORRUPTION PERCEPTION INDEX SCORE:

41 on a scale of 0 (highly corrupt) to 100 (very clean). Ranked 78 out of 198 (Transparency International, 2019)

¹ *Geography of Turkey*, Wikipedia

Syria and Turkey seemingly facilitates Ankara's expansionism in the region.²

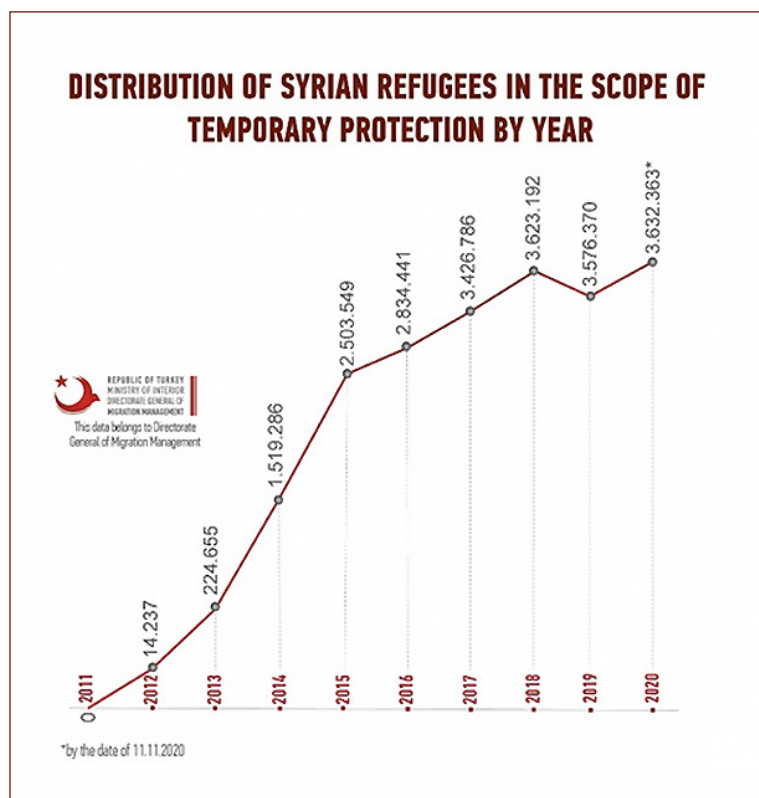
1.2 Shifting interests in Syria

Before the Syrian uprising in March 2011, Erdoğan cultivated warm ties with Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. The presidential couples even spent a vacation together. When the Syrian uprising started, Turkey's initial plan was to pressure Assad to share power with the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. When this attempt failed after Assad's blunt refusal, Turkey turned to supporting Syrian Army defectors, hoping that a militarized Syrian opposition, supported by money from the Arabian Peninsula, would be able to topple Assad.

Turkey consequently opened its long borders to Syria for an inflow of weapons, money and foreign fighters.³ In the other direction, an increasing number of Syrian civilians fled north, seeking refuge in Turkey, which caused a refugee crisis that continues after almost a decade. Turks and Kurds in opposition parties often blame President Erdoğan for an impulsive foreign policy that caused the Turkish refugee crisis.

Inside Syria, the rebellion against Assad splintered into a many groups, and Turkey at first supported the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which soon divided into rivalling factions. Salafi extremist groups grew in strength – on the one hand Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), previously called the Nusra Front, an offshoot of Al-Qaeda, and on the other, the Islamic State or ISIS. The latter attracted some 40,000 foreign fighters, who mostly transited via Turkey, and created a so-called Caliphate, which was physically destroyed in 2017 by an international US-led coalition.

ISIS did not exist in Syria at the beginning of the uprising, and Turkey was not its 'midwife'. However, until the presidential elections in August 2014, Erdoğan had not once condemned ISIS, according to Western diplomats in Turkey.⁴ It took considerable time until Turkey ventured to curb the freedom of movement of ISIS fighters across Turkey's borders. The Turkish military also stood idly by in 2014 when ISIS launched an offensive against the Syrian-Kurdish PYD in Kobane, south of Turkey's border.⁵



SOURCE: Directorate General of Migration Management, Turkey

The Assad regime's subsequent military operations in Syria against opposition-held areas, supported by Iran and Russia, led to a continued influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey over the years. Syrians added to already existing refugee and migrant communities from many other countries, which live in limbo in Turkey. They cannot be granted refugee status or apply for asylum in

2 Pierini, Marc (2020), *New Power Struggles in the Mediterranean*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace & IMED Mediterranean Yearbook, 2020

3 Hammargren, Bitte (2018), *Authoritarian at home and impulsive abroad – Erdoğan's foreign policy in the Middle East*, UI Brief, no. 7

4 Hammargren (2015), *När broarna brändes till Damaskus, i antologin 'Syrien: revolutionen, makten och människorna'*, p. 164

5 Güneş, Hakan (2016), *Så blev jihadismen ett internt hot för Turkiet*, Utrikesmagasinet, 14 juni 2016.

Turkey, due to its exception to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, whereby only Europeans can ask for asylum in the country.⁶

Over the years, Turkey has also conducted a series of military operations in northern Syria, in Idlib, Jarabulus, Afrin and Ras al-Ain/Tel Abiyad.⁷ These incursions have been depicted as both irredentist and neo-Ottoman. President Erdoğan has fuelled such assessments with statements like “We gave martyrs in Idlib, Afrin, Operation Olive Branch in Syria, and Operation Claw in Iraq. But remember, every martyr makes the land our homeland.”⁸

In an agreement with Russia and Iran in 2017, Turkey was allowed to set up 12 military outposts in Idlib, in what was meant to be a de-escalation zone. However, tensions have flared up in Idlib on several occasions. After the Syrian regime, assisted by Russia, tried to retake Idlib from the jihadist HTS and Turkish-backed rebel factions, the head of EU foreign policy, Josep Borrell, warned that the situation could escalate into a “major open international military confrontation.”⁹ In Ankara, fears linger that a Syrian regime offensive could lead to another mass exodus of Syrians into Turkey, with a worst case scenario of millions more civilians being pushed over the border.

Following Russia’s military intervention in Syria in 2015, Turkish–Russian relations reached an all-time-low after the downing of a Russian fighter jet in the border zone between Turkey and Syria in November 2015. Nevertheless, Ankara started to warm towards Russia shortly before the coup attempt in Turkey in July 2016.¹⁰ Later, Ankara came to the conclusion that a Sunni-led Syrian insurgency would not be able to overthrow the Assad regime. While Turkey turned its military against Syrian–Kurdish fighters, it also opened new channels to Damascus “for military and intelligence issues.”¹¹

President Erdoğan has shifted Turkey’s foreign policies over time, adopting them to changing regional and domestic conditions, while often lashing out at international leaders in order to score points at home. His hasty shifts in foreign policy are likely to continue.¹² The U.S. presidential elections in 2020, won by Joe Biden who has called Erdoğan an ‘autocrat’ who needs to ‘pay a price’, may lead to more zigzagging from Turkey.

1.3 Kurds in Syria – a new enemy

During recent years, Ankara’s primary military target in Syria has been Kurdish fighters of the Syrian–Kurdish PYD (Democratic Union Party), the dominant faction of the Syrian Democratic Forces in the Autonomous Administration in North East Syria (AANES), often called by the Kurdish name for the region, Rojava). Whereas the United States, France and other nations in the Coalition to Defeat ISIS, relied on the PYD’s military branches – YPG and YPJ (the Kurdish People’s Protection Units) – as ground forces during the offensive against ISIS, Turkey has designated the PYD a terrorist organization.¹³

This has to be understood from the domestic context of Turkey’s large Kurdish minority and unresolved military conflict with the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party), also labelled a terrorist organization, since 1984. The Syrian–Kurdish PYD can be described as branch of PKK’s ‘extended family’, although the PYD denies being part of the PKK.¹⁴

After the failure of his ruling AKP to reach an absolute majority in the June 2015 parliamentary elections, President Erdoğan called off his previous peace talks with the PKK. Instead, he adopted a more aggressive nationalistic rhetoric, forged an alliance with the ultra-nationalistic MHP, and turned against Kurdish forces in Syria.¹⁵

6 UNHCR, *Turkey*

7 Pierini (2020)

8 Yeni Şafak, on Twitter 1 November 2020

<https://twitter.com/yenisafak/status/1322898018543304704>

9 Josep Borrell on Twitter, 28 February 2020 <https://twitter.com/josepborrell/status/1233307720691965952?lang=en>

10 Hammargren (2019), *Turkey’s tightrope act: Staying in Nato while warming towards Russia*, FOI, Swedish Defence Research Agency, February 2019

11 Reuters, *Wary foes Turkey and Syria hold covert contacts to avoid conflict*, 21 October 2019

12 Hammargren, Bitte (2018), *Authoritarian at home and impulsive abroad – Erdoğan’s foreign policy in the Middle East*, UI Brief, no. 7, June 2018

13 For more background, see the author’s previous reports on Syria and Turkey, listed in the bibliography.

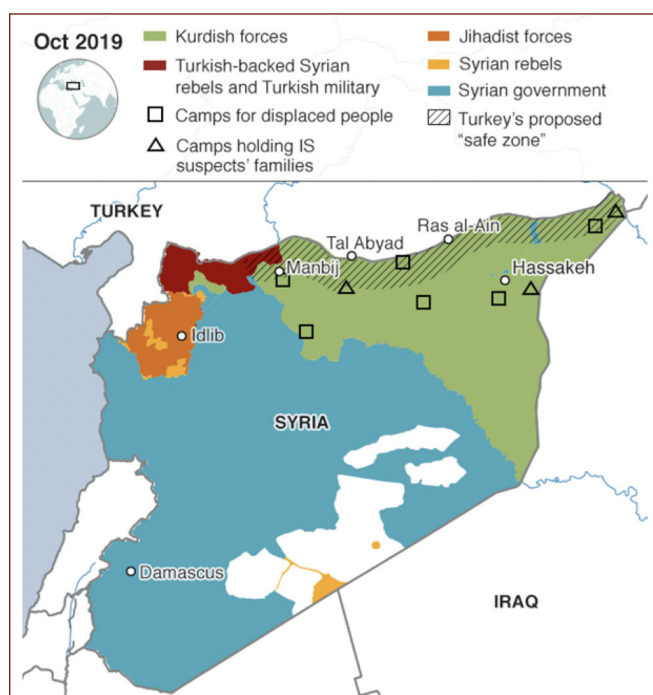
14 Hammargren, Bitte (2012), *PKK-allierade vinner terräng*, Svenska Dagbladet, 29 October 2012

15 Hammargren, Bitte (2013), *Syrien blir aldrig vad det har varit*, Svenska Dagbladet, 23 September 2013.

1.4 Turkish plans in a buffer zone

After a partial U.S. withdrawal from northern Syria in October 2019, Turkey made an incursion, named 'Operation Peace Spring,' creating a buffer zone in north east Syria, between the border cities Ras al-Ain and Tel Abiyad. This zone is 115km long and 30km wide, and is controlled by Turkey's Syrian proxies, the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA). The Turkish incursion pushed Kurdish-led forces away from the border region and displaced 200,000 persons. (Some have since returned.)

Statements by the Turkish president in 2019 that between 2 and 3 million Syrians in Turkey could be resettled in a new 'safe zone' in northeast Syria¹⁶ raised concerns that Turkey aimed to conduct ethnic cleansing against Kurds there. Reports indicated that Turkey's Syrian proxies, the SNA – labelled "the worst cohorts of criminals" by Syrian civil rights defenders¹⁷ – had committed war crimes and prevented displaced Kurds from returning to their homes.¹⁸



<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50011468>

16 Reuters, 18 September 2019, *Erdoğan says 2 million–3 million Syrian refugees can be resettled in 'safe zone'*,

17 Interviews in March 2020

18 Seligman, Lara (2019), *Turkey begins resettling refugees in northeast Syria*, Foreign Policy, 9 December 2019

One year after Turkey's military incursion into north east Syria, minimal voluntary returns to the zone have occurred, according to Syrian sources.¹⁹ As discussed below, many stories are circulating among Syrians in Turkey about forced returns. Turkey's demographic engineering plans in north east Syria to replace Kurds with Sunni Arab or Turkmen cannot gain EU support.²⁰ Meanwhile, if a return of Syrians does not occur, President Erdoğan has threatened Europe with 'opening the gates' again, for Syrians to cross the border into Greece.

In addition to the 'safe zone' in the north east, Turkey's Syrian proxies also control Afrin Province, close to Idlib. Turkey has helped Syrian rebels and displaced civilians to settle in homes abandoned by Kurds who fled in 2018.²¹ "The municipalities in Hatay and Kilis provide things like water and garbage collection to Afrin", says Deputy Governor Zafer Öz of Adana Province. According to other reports, the Turkish response lacks funding.²² But according to the Deputy

Governor, Turkey has provided "Turkish officials and civil servants, employed by the Turkish republic in Syrian border towns like Jarablous, Al-Bab and Azaz", allegedly helping Syrians to return. The core issue is whether the original inhabitants will be able to return safely to their home towns, or if the Turkish initiatives are designed to pave the way for ethnic cleansing, pushing Syrian Kurds further south from the border.

Turkey and other countries have also sent Syrian proxies to fight in Libya, e.g. mercenaries from the so-called Syrian National Army (SNA). In the fall of 2020, when a war broke out in southern Caucasus, Turkey reportedly sent Syrian fighters from the SNA to Azerbaijan.²³

19 Sequential interviews with Syrian sources

20 Adar, Sinem (2020), *Repatriation to Turkey's 'Safe Zone' in Northeast Syria: Ankara's Goals and European Concerns*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

21 Lund, Aron (2018), *Syria's civil war: government victory or frozen conflict*, FOI Report 4640, p. 53

22 SIDA, *Regional Crisis: Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2020*

23 Tsurkov, Elizbeth (16 October 2020) *The Syrian Mercenaries Fighting Foreign Wars for Russia and Turkey*

2. TURKEY'S DECLINING ECONOMY AFFECTS THE MOST VULNERABLE

This section explores the dire economic situation in Turkey, aggravated by the Covid-19 Pandemic.

2.1 From booming economy to depression

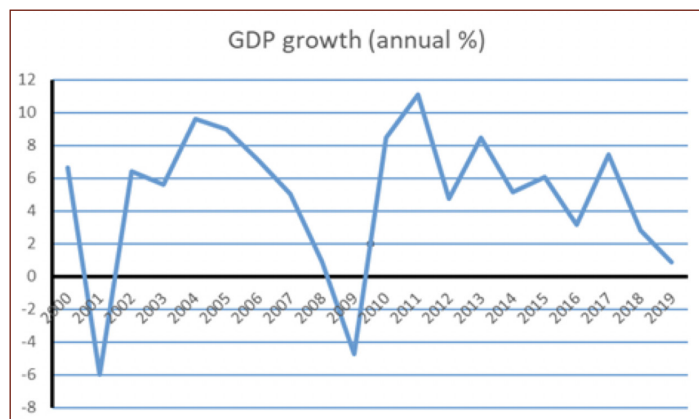
During its early years in government, the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) produced a success story with a booming economy, years of growth and tamed inflation. The ruling party's social conservatism appealed to scores of voters, but its success was largely built on bread-and-butter issues. During the AKP's first decade in power (2002–2012) it is estimated that the GDP per capita grew by 43%.²⁴ During this boom, the employment rate grew, and poverty was halved between 2002 and 2015. Extreme poverty fell even faster, according to the World Bank, and Turkey conducted EU-oriented reforms. The country urbanized rapidly, and access to public services improved. Turkey also recovered well from the global financial crisis of 2008–2009.²⁵

This economic success story has come to a halt in recent years with a sliding Lira, a growing current-account deficit, and increased interest rates. This decline in the economy affects the most vulnerable more than others, including the Turkish and Kurdish poor and Syrian refugees, often pitting them against each other, and resulting in increasing inter-community tensions in rapidly growing urban areas.²⁶

Inflation and consumer price index



Annual GDP growth



(Prepared using WB data)

2.2 Competition over low-paid jobs

Many Turkish citizens tend to see Syrians as culturally different and resent their competition for low-wage jobs. Many also believe that Syrians have preferential access to public services and assistance.²⁷

²⁴ Medeni Sungur (2019), *Erdoğan's Success May Prove to Be His Undoing*, The Wall Street Journal, December 23, 2019

²⁵ The World Bank, Turkey

²⁶ International Crisis Group (2018), *Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions*

²⁷ International Crisis Group (2018), *Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions*

Anti-Syrian sentiments are most palpable in the informal sector, for instance among seasonal workers in agriculture, or in the textile industry. “As firms are closing their businesses, and nationalism is growing, we expect tension linked to the economic crisis”, according to the worried Secretary General of Adana Metropolitan Municipality, Mr Ergül Halışçelik.²⁸

Two findings from the Syrians Barometer (SB), 2019 Murat Erdoğan (2020), *Syrians Barometer*, 2019, Ankara: Orion Publishing

SB-2019-TABLE 39: What kind of an arrangement should be made concerning the working of Syrians in Turkey?

	SB-2017		SB-2019	
	#	%	#	%
Under no circumstances should they be allowed to work/given work permits	1.141	54,6	1.290	56,8
They should be given work permits to work only in specific jobs ¹¹⁸	621	29,8	487	21,4
They should be given temporary work permits to work in any job	169	8,1	336	14,8
They should be given permanent work permits to work in any job	115	5,5	85	3,8
No idea/ No response	43	2,0	73	3,2
Total	2.089	100,0	2.271	100,0

SB-2019-TABLE 41: Should it be allowed for Syrians to open workplaces?

	#	%
It definitely shouldn't be allowed	1.526	67,2
It should be allowed but they should be registered to the Ministry of Finance and pay their taxes	469	20,6
It should be allowed only for specific work fields	193	8,5
It should only be allowed if they will open large workplaces where Turkish citizens will also work	38	1,7
No idea/ No response	45	2,0
Total	2.271	100,0



A finding from “Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Perceptions on Return to Syria” report suggesting that most of the Syrians in Turkey work below average income Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Perceptions on Return to Syria, 2020, The Day After Research Report

While Syrians may benefit from the EU ‘cash-support system’, many Turks accuse them of depressing wages.²⁹ The small town of Tufanbeyli in the Taurus Mountains in Adana Province is an example. According to a member of the local Citizens’ Assembly,³⁰ a regular seasonal worker in the agricultural sector cannot accept to work for less than 150 Turkish Lira/day, whereas Syrians accept 75 Lira/day, which cannot feed a family.³¹

Organized labour could mitigate tensions over low paid unskilled jobs, but trade unions are mostly absent in these sectors. Another hurdle is the quota system for Syrians. In order to hire one Syrian with a work permit, employers need to have at least ten Turks in the workforce though some sectors such as agriculture are exempt from the quota.

Whether they have a work permit or not, Syrians with temporary protection automatically have access to Turkey’s national health service. Many prefer to work in the informal sector, as those with work permits are excluded from the EU cash payment system (ESSN)³². The lack of a work permit is a problem when Syrians in the informal sector get fired, which happened to many as a result of the economic decline and pandemic, as informal workers cannot access government Covid relief funding.

Experience shows that even if they can, employers tend to avoid applying for work permits for Syrian workers, in order to pay low wages, and to avoid paying social

29 Impressions from various sources in the Adana province

30 Citizens’ Assemblies in Turkey consist of representatives from professional organizations, civil society organizations, universities, other public organizations and trade unions. Opinions formed at the citizens’ assembly should be communicated to municipal councils. See Union of Municipalities in Turkey.

31 As a comparison, the price for a kebab with a side dish and a non-alcoholic drink is around 50 Turkish liras in the city of Sarıçam, October 2020

32 European Commission, *The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN): Offering a lifeline to vulnerable refugees in Turkey*

28 Interview, 15 October 2020

security for them. The full extent of the Covid Pandemic is widely considered to be downplayed by the central authorities.

A UN study concluded that up to 95% of Syrian-owned enterprises in Turkey, which on average employ about 10 people, do not benefit from government support. Two thirds of these enterprises cite lack of information as the main reason.³³

2.3 A dire prognosis

Turkey, which recently aimed to become the world's 10th largest economy³⁴, has slid down to 19th in the ranking.³⁵ The Covid-19 Pandemic is expected to slow the economy down even further, leading to closed enterprises, and undermining earlier social and economic gains.³⁶

Turkey's official unemployment rate is currently above 13%.³⁷ However, according to Mr Ergül Halisçelik, Secretary General of Adana Metropolitan Municipality, the unemployment rate is 25%, and Adana is one of the 4 or 5 worst-hit cities in Turkey. Exact figures are difficult to estimate, as Turkey has one of the world's largest informal economies, estimated by some sources at 20 to 30%,³⁸ and by others at 35%. Mr Halisçelik emphasized that the informal sector per capita is bigger among Syrians, and unemployment is considerably higher among Syrians. A study from Brookings Institute in 2019 found that of 2.1 million working-age Syrians (15–65), only 500,000 worked.

Meanwhile, the exchange rate of the Turkish lira keeps falling, and the foreign-currency reserve has been depleted. "If they continue like this, they may have no hard currency left", according to an expert quoted by *The Economist*.³⁹ In early 2020, the International Monetary Fund expected Turkey's economy to contract by 5% by the end of the year.⁴⁰

33 United Nations Development Program (2019), *Mapping of Syrian-owned enterprises in Turkey*

34 Daily Sabah, 10 January 2019

35 Statistic Times projected GDP ranking, 20 February 2020

36 The World Bank in Turkey

37 Officials at Marmara Municipalities' Union

38 Ibid.

39 *The Economist*, *As the lira slides, what will Turkey's central bank do?* 15 August 2020

40 *The Economist*, *From persecution to pandemic: As Turkey locks down, refugees are the first to suffer*, 23 April 2020

3. A PRECARIOUS DEAL BETWEEN TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

A brief background to the EU Refugee Deal with Turkey.

Turkey is hosting the largest refugee population in the world, with some 3.7 million Syrians constituting the majority. In addition, there are Afghans, Iranians, Iraqis and other nationals stranded in Turkey, and who cannot get asylum there, due to Turkey's exceptions to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. Turkey also has a large internally displaced population, mainly due to the decades-long conflict between the state and the outlawed PKK.

The large refugee and migrant populations are primarily a burden for Turkey, but also create unease in the European Union, as in 2015, when a migrant flow via Turkey reached EU member states, with Germany and Sweden becoming the main recipients. In 2016, the European Union concluded the *EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey* agreement with Ankara, in which the EU committed €6 billion to Turkey in two tranches until 2025, "to ensure that the needs of refugees and host communities in Turkey are addressed in a comprehensive and coordinated manner".⁴¹ The main focus areas are humanitarian assistance, education, health, municipal infrastructure, and socio-economic support.⁴² That the EU funds cannot go directly to municipalities is a source of grievance for local governments, as stressed by many interviewees.

Turkey committed itself to prevent an irregular flow of migrants from Turkey to the EU, to be replaced by legal channels of resettlement.⁴³ In a complicated deal, Brussels and Ankara agreed that irregular migrants who arrived at the Greek

41 European Commission, *The EU Facility for refugees in Turkey: Fact Sheet*

42 Ibid.

43 European Commission (2016), *Implementing the EU-Turkey Agreement – Questions and Answers*

border from Turkey would be returned, based on the EU's assessment that Turkey is safe for migrants. In return, for every Syrian sent back from Greece to Turkey, the EU agreed to accept a Syrian refugee to settle in an EU member state. However, there has been scant interest in implementing this agreement, and by August 2020, only 26,000 Syrians had been resettled.⁴⁴

STATISTICAL DATA RELATED TO SYRIAN REFUGEE WHO LEFT COUNTRY IN THE SCOPE OF ONE TO ONE POLICY

COUNTRY	TOTAL
GENERAL TOTAL	27.079
GERMANY	9.765
FRANCE	4.691
NETHERLANDS	4.464
FINLAND	2.176
SWEDEN	2.101
BELGIUM	1.338
SPAIN	754
ITALY	396
PORTUGAL	267
CROATIA	250
AUSTRIA	213
LUXEMBOURG	206
LITHUANIA	102
BULGARIA	85
ROMANIA	63
ESTONIA	59
LATVIA	46
SLOVENIA	34
DENMARK	28
MALTA	17

Source: DGMM (<https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>)

In spite of their differences, and frustration over a compromise which is imperfect for both parties, it appears that neither Brussels nor Ankara can afford to cancel the agreement. President Erdoğan has expressed vocal discontent with the fact that EU financial support for humanitarian and development assistance goes to earmarked projects, instead of reaching the coffers of the Turkish Treasury unconditionally.⁴⁵

President Erdoğan has threatened to 'open the floodgates' and let migrants take the routes to Europe again.⁴⁶

This happened briefly in early 2020 when the deal with the EU was about to be renegotiated, and when Russia made an offensive in Idlib Province, killing Turkish soldiers and forcing thousands of Syrians to flee into Turkey. Following Turkey's losses in Idlib, Erdoğan shifted the focus, directing it against Greece and the EU. Turkish officials promptly encouraged refugees and migrants to leave for Greece, even providing them with transport. Greece's coast guard turned back the migrants, often by force. Migrants of various nationalities lost hard-earned savings and belongings while trying to cross a border river. In the chaotic situation, some even lost family members in the murky waters between Turkey and Greece.⁴⁷

The EU Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen afterwards praised Greece as Europe's shield, but also visited Turkey with the EU Council President Charles Michel, to renegotiate the 2016 migration deal. Currently, the deal still appears to be 'the least bad' alternative for both parties. Nevertheless, uncertainties loom, aggravated by the standoff between Turkey and its fellow NATO members, Greece and France. During 2020, Greece reportedly returned inflatable rubber boats which tried to reach the shores of Lesbos from the Turkish coast.⁴⁸

44 Alhelou, Nay (2020)

45 European Commission (2020), *Fourth annual report on the facility for refugees in Turkey*

46 Timur, Safak & Nordland, Rod (2016), *Erdoğan Threatens to Let Migrant Flood Into Europe Resume*, The New York Times, 25 November 2016

47 Christiansson, Terese (2020), *Deras mamma försvann i våldsamma mötet vid gränsen – corona sätter stopp för sökandet*, TV 4, 7 juli 2020

48 Agence France Press (15 August 2020), *In Greece, loaded on inflatable boats without engines and abandoned in the open sea*

4. SYRIANS IN TURKEY: 'GUESTS' WITH AN INSECURE FUTURE

This chapter focuses on the daily life of Syrian refugees in Turkey, and the multiple hardships they face, including economic stress, insecure legal status and the Covid-19 Pandemic. It also considers the issue of alleged deportations from Turkey to Syria.

4.1 Temporary Protection causes stress for both Syrians and municipalities

For Syrians in Turkey, an overwhelming concern is their insecure legal status, determined by the Temporary Protection Regulation.⁴⁹ Syrians who fled the war to Turkey are not officially or legally “refugees”, due to Turkey’s exceptions to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. Syrians are the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior’s Directorate General of Migration Management. This insecure situation was, according to a Syrian intellectual who has left Turkey for the EU, a repetition of how Syria had treated Palestinian refugees for decades.⁵⁰

Only a small fraction of Syrians – 2% according to UNHCR⁵¹ – live in temporary refugee centres / camps established by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) in 10 provinces. Sariçam in Adana Province, which is part of the RESLOG Project, has for many years hosted one of these camps. Neither NGOs nor municipality officials can enter temporary refugee centres without a permit from the national authorities.

The high birth rate in the Syrian population is likely to further increase the current figure of 3.7 million Syrians. However, Turkey’s central government and Ministry of the Interior do

not share demographic data regarding Syrians in Turkey with municipalities. This flaw was mentioned by several local government officials during interviews. This lack of transparency hinders municipalities in developing data-based Municipal Migration Plans.

“The lack of data collection is one of our biggest problems. We know that the Syrians will stay here in Turkey, but we don’t have the demographic data on them. We don’t want to regard them as ‘guests’. It is not a temporary situation anymore, they have settled here. We need to take care of them as if they were our own citizens, or it may create serious problems in future”, says the Secretary General of Adana Metropolitan Municipality, Mr Ergül Halışçelik.

Initially, the presence of Syrians was based on an open-door policy, plus the “adherence to the principle of non-refoulement” and “meeting basic and urgent needs of the incoming people”. The open-door policy has been limited over the years and non-refoulement has been disputed (see Chapter 6). However, Syrian citizens are provided with Turkish ID cards, beyaz kimlik (white ID), which give them access to health and basic education services provided by the central government. But most importantly, they are neither granted automatic work permits, nor freedom of movement outside the provinces where they reside.

Labelling Syrians as ‘guests’, or *hemşehri* (fellow townsmen), underpins their insecure and temporary status. While municipalities in Turkey are dealing with the challenge of hosting Syrian refugees, they are not allocated extra budget support from central government for doing so. The centralized Turkish state does not allow municipalities much autonomy. They depend on population-based central government transfers for up to 75% of their budgets, but Syrians are not included, which causes constant concern and financial stress for local administrations.

In the Adana Metropolis Municipality, Syrians

49 Konda (2016), *Perception on Syrian Asylum Seekers*, February 2016

50 Interview, 29 October 2020

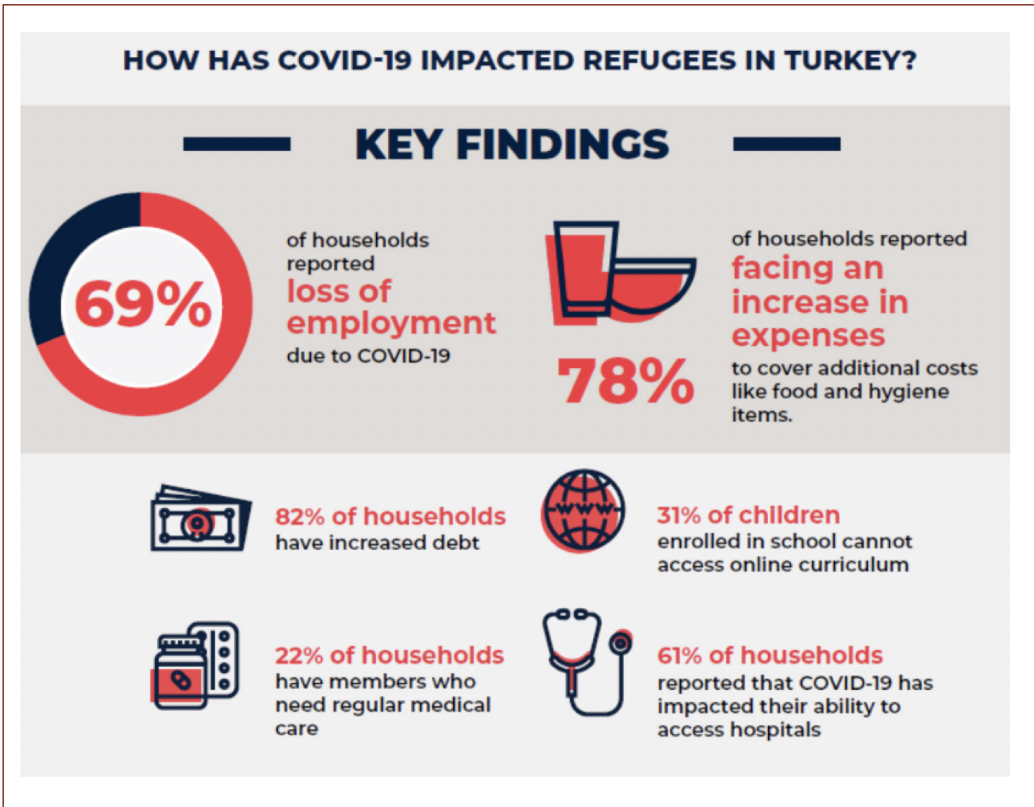
51 SIDA Regional Crisis, Humanitarian Crisis Analysis, 2020

are estimated to be 15% of the population. A civil servant exclaimed “This means minus 15% for our budget. Now add the pandemic to this situation! Municipalities try their best to provide for the locals, but we have had to decrease our budget and aid to our local people. At the same time, the population of migrants is increasing, due to child births and a continued migration. In the future we expect to have 500,000 Syrians here, up from 350,000”.⁵²

Similar messages were repeated by other local officials, including by the Director of the Regional Union of Çukurova Municipalities, Ms Demet Avşar who stated, “Our budget is designed for 2,5 million, but there are also 350,000 Syrians here, so the actual population is 2,850,000”.⁵³

4.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic, layoffs and declining wages

As Turkey struggled with a declining economy and the pandemic, layoffs have swelled. According to UNDP, Covid-19 has affected Syrian more than Turkish-owned businesses, and 80% of Syrian, mainly small or micro-businesses, reported “a substantial impact” due to the pandemic as of May 2020, compared with 70% of Turkish SMEs.⁵⁴ Syrian business-owners, more than their Turkish counterparts, have felt the burden of disrupted supply chains, difficulties in making payments, an increased work load at home, and difficulties in working online. Up to 78% of Syrian small and micro-enterprises said they were unprepared for a second wave of the pandemic.



Source: Impact of Covid-19 on Refugee Populations Benefitting From The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) Programme, 2020, IFRC

52 Interview, 14 October 2020
53 Ibid.

54 United Nations Development Program (2020), In Turkey, Covid-19 hits Syrian-owned businesses harder, study finds, 10 August 2020

Some Turkish officials prefer to look at the other side of the coin. According to Ergül Halizçelik, Secretary General of Adana Metropolitan Municipality, “Turkish SMEs pay taxes, but shops and small businesses owned by Syrians are mostly not registered and don’t pay tax, and their workforce is cheaper, especially in agriculture.”

According to the World Food Program, only 87,000 out of 3.7 million Syrians have work permits.⁵⁵ There are bureaucratic hurdles to getting a work permit, and employers must abide by a quota for Syrians. Syrians can also only get work permits in the province where they are registered.⁵⁶

To get by, Syrians mostly work as “flexible labourers” in the informal, private sector, for “below the minimum wage, with longer shifts and poor working conditions” and employers avoid paying social security premiums and work permit fees for them.⁵⁷ “The former president of the Marmara Municipalities, who comes from Bursa, stated that if you took the Syrians out of the textile industry, it would collapse”, according to Mr Cemil Arslan, Secretary General of the Marmara Municipalities’ Union.⁵⁸

In the southern Çukurova Region, in the MHP-led Sarıçam Municipality, a deputy mayor concluded that “our local people have got used to the Syrian guests, and they are part of the business sector now. At first, when the Syrians started to come, we regarded them as unskilled labourers, but now we see them as skilled workers, for instance in the furniture workshops.”

The picture is not quite as rosy when Syrians speak for themselves, or when locals who are less accepting of Syrians express their concerns.

4.3 Syrian children in Turkish society

It is estimated that 70% of Syrians in Turkey live below, or close to, the poverty line, which increases risk of child labour and forced child marriages, and vulnerable children may become victims of trafficking, both for early marriage and as seasonal agricultural workers.⁵⁹

To reduce such possibilities, the EU provides cash support to Syrian families, but only one third of the refugees are eligible for this support, according to Hali İbrahim Akıncı, head of the Social Support Services Department in Sultanbeyli. He explained that “According to the requirements, a family must have at least three children to benefit from EU cash support. A household with fewer children, or with elderly members instead, receives no EU allowance. This is one reason why many Syrians want at least three children. The EU fund allocates 120 liras/person (around €13). But that does not even pay the rent.”

Out of 640,000 Syrian children in Turkish schools, some 65,000 benefit from EU allowances via UNICEF, provided that they remain in school.⁶⁰ The allowances have increased the average school age of Syrian children. Reportedly, 63% of Syrian school-age children attended school at the start of the 2019/2020 school year.⁶¹ But in high schools, the enrolment of Syrian minors drops, especially among boys. “When parents have difficulties to find jobs, their children work”, according to one expert.⁶² According to UNHCR, some 400,000 Syrian children in Turkey were not attending school in November 2019, with the risk of becoming a ‘lost generation’, vulnerable to isolation, discrimination, exploitation and abuse.⁶³

Data on how many Syrians are minors differ. UNHCR estimates that around 45% are under 18, while a Turkish study claims it is 50+% and growing, due to the high birth rate,⁶⁴ and a deputy governor, interviewed for this report, estimated ±60%.⁶⁵ The Syrian presence is evident in schools, and new schools have been built, often with the help of EU funding. However, kindergartens are not open to Syrian children, according to an expert in Adana’s Citizens’ Assembly.

60 UNICEF (2019), *65,000 refugee children to benefit from School Enrolment Programme in Turkey*

61 Asylum information data base, *Access to education Turkey*

62 Interview, September 2020

63 SIDA, *Regional Crisis, Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2020*

64 Konda (2016) *Perception of Syrian Asylum Seekers*, February 2016

65 Interview with Zafer Öz, Deputy Governor of Adana, 15 October 2020

55 SIDA, *Regional Crisis, Humanitarian Crisis Analysis 2020*

56 Kadkoy, Omar (2017), *Syrians in Turkey: Is work-permit regulation enough?*, Tepav, 5 July 2017

57 Ibid.

58 Interview, 12 October 2020

59 Ecpat, *Sex trafficking of children in Turkey*

**DISTRIBUTION BY AGE AND GENDER OF REGISTERED SYRIAN
REFUGEES RECORDED BY TAKING BIOMETRIC DATA**

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TOTAL	1.954.139	1.678.224	3.632.363
0-4	256.287	247.578	503.865
5-9	283.025	260.198	543.223
10-14	203.814	185.340	389.154
15-18	142.501	119.189	261.690
19-24	287.005	213.205	500.210
25-29	203.367	148.501	351.868
30-34	159.485	116.312	275.797
35-39	119.659	97.405	217.064
40-44	85.254	76.320	161.574
45-49	60.738	57.556	118.294
50-54	50.027	49.065	99.092
55-59	38.305	38.315	76.620
60-64	28.697	29.501	58.198
65-69	20.411	20.908	41.319
70-74	7.801	8.797	16.598
75-79	3.810	4.688	8.498
80-84	2.204	2.926	5.130
85-89	1.088	1.515	2.603
90+	661	905	1.566

Source: DGMM (by the date of 11-11-2020)

While some interlocutors raised concerns about Syrian children being bullied in Turkish schools, the Director of the Regional Union of Çukurova Municipalities, Ms Demet Aşar, stated that “Teachers find it hard to deal with Syrian children and many of our families feel hesitant regarding their presence. For instance, with the influx of Syrians we now have an increase in foot-and-mouth disease. We also face cultural problems in schools”.

Mr Zafer Öz, Deputy Governor in Adana Province, with a responsibility for industries and government education, says that “Out of the 18 million students in our school system, 2,5 million are Syrian. In some classrooms 18 out of 40 children are Syrian”. His figure for Syrian school enrolment is significantly above UNICEF estimates. It is unclear if his figure comprises university students and those who undergo vocational training as well. Due to their high birth rate, the ratio of Syrian children in the school system is likely to increase in the future, and the need for better family planning was advocated by some interviewees.

4.4 Women searching for new strategies

Do Syrian refugee women face any particular problems? “Yes, their uncertainty. Should they

stay or leave? The Syrian women themselves discuss this issue. Since their children are raised here, they see no reason to return to Syria”, says a sociologist in the Social Support Services Department in the Şişli Municipality in Istanbul, Ms Ayşegül Kılıç.

Syrian refugee women often live in patriarchal environments, where tradition obliges them to safeguard the honour of the family. From this perspective, women must avoid mixing with males from outside the family. A strategy for many Syrian women in Turkey is thus to make themselves

as invisible as possible. This also came to the fore during the field study, when Syrian women were mostly absent from the meetings with migrants. Whether this was a random result or not is unclear, but it contrasts with previous field trips to Turkey by this researcher, when she had a variety of spontaneous encounters or interviews with Syrian refugee women.

In Turkey’s big cities, far from the camps, Syrian women may find a way to escape the watchful eyes of their extended families. But much depends on their economic situation. For a Syrian woman, it is theoretically beneficial to ask for a divorce in Turkey as compared to Syria, since Turkish laws generally give the mother the custody of the children. However, Ayşegül Kılıç, a sociologist in the Şişli Municipality, does not know many cases of divorce among Syrian women. “If they don’t work, they don’t have a choice, since they can’t get alimony from the ex-husband unless he has a job with a work permit. If he is employed in the informal work sector, she can’t make him pay alimony. Instead Syrian women become more and more dependent on their husbands here. Since Syrians are here under temporary protection, they can’t plan for their future.”

While data is lacking, observation suggests that the employment rate for Syrian women is far lower than for Syrian males. For example, Syrian-owned SMEs only have a small proportion

of women (12%) among their employees, and the majority of their female staff is Turkish.⁶⁶

Domestic violence is wide-spread in Turkey, but data on violence in Syrian families is lacking. Law enforcement agencies often lack training in gender issues, which affects victims of violence regardless of ethnicity. “Turkey is a patriarchal society. Even Turkish women are afraid to go to the police and report. Police officers and officials need training on gender awareness and related problems”, says Ayşegül Kılıç, migration expert in Şişli. For Syrian women, the language gap is an extra barrier, and they may have hidden need for social counselling.

4.5 Polygamy and child marriages

During field interviews, many Turkish women complained that patriarchal habits among conservative Syrian ‘guests’ constitute a threat to their own well-being and family life. In particular, Turkish female interviewees objected to polygamy among some Syrian migrants. A female official in Sarıçam Municipality said, “Polygamy among Syrian men poses a real problem also for our society. Turkey long ago changed its laws, forbidding polygamy.⁶⁷ But now we have two parallel cultures next to each other. We cannot prevent Syrian men from going to an imam to marry a second wife. This, however, poses a threat to Turkish family life, as it stokes fears that Turkish men also may want to have a second wife. There is also the issue of child marriages. We tend to turn a blind eye to family issues among the Syrians, but this negatively affects Turkish family standards and values”.

During a discussion in Sarıçam, an interviewee mentioned an anecdotal figure of ‘1 000 cases of polygamy’ among Syrians in the municipality. This figure needs to be verified, given that the total Syrian population in Sarıçam is at most 45,000, with 30–35,000 living inside a camp, and 5,000–10,000 Syrians living outside it.⁶⁸

66 United Nations Development Program (2019), *Mapping of Syrian-owned enterprises*

67 Polygamy was forbidden in Turkey in 1926, under the Turkish Civil Code. Even though polygamy is punishable by up to two years in prison, it still exists in Turkish society, primarily in poorer areas in the south-east, according to various sources.

68 Interviews with officials in Sarıçam

Nonetheless, the number of Syrian widows, whose men have been killed or disappeared during the war, increases the risk of polygamy. To be a single mother is extremely difficult for an impoverished migrant woman living in cramped housing conditions in a camp or in a poor neighbourhood where privacy is a scarcity. A male interviewee, a young Turkish man, admitted that polygamy among Syrians did affect the local population, as “maybe some Turkish men want to have more than one wife”.

It is not clear why Turkey is not enforcing its family laws on Syrians under temporary protection, while they must abide by the Penal Code. Prostitution has been legal and regulated in Turkey since the early 20th Century, with brothels operating with a permit from the authorities.⁶⁹

4.6 Bleak prospects of Turkish citizenship

Citizenship has been granted to a limited number of Syrians, based on so-called “exceptional circumstances”, i.e. individuals who can contribute to Turkish society with valuable expertise or capital.⁷⁰ As of September 2020, around 110,000 Syrians had reportedly been granted Turkish citizenship under such prerogatives,⁷¹ including individuals with financial capital, or experts such as nurses, doctors, and teachers. Some university graduates and university students have also been granted citizenship. However, such applications have reportedly been closed en masse lately. Lack of transparency regarding the naturalization procedures increases the spread of rumours.

Claims that “exceptional citizenship” has been given to AKP supporters among the Syrian refugees are often heard from critics of the government, but these claims are difficult to corroborate due to the opaque procedures.⁷² One Syrian business woman, who runs her own company in Istanbul, said that she was not aware of why she was granted Turkish citizenship, but was first nominated by a Turkish institution or association before being vetted by the authorities.

According to the deputy governor, only about 100 Syrians have become citizens, out of a

69 Wikipedia, *Prostitution in Turkey Asylum in Europe*

70 Asylum in Europe

71 Interview with a RESLOG team member

72 Interview, September 2020

migrant population of around 350,000 Syrians in Adana Province.⁷³

The fact that many Turkish emigrants in Germany have acquired double citizenships serves as an example for those who see a need to enhance the legal status of Syrians in Turkey. Claims that Syrians enrolled as proxy fighters for Turkey in Libya have been promised citizenship could not be independently corroborated.

4.7 Voluntary or forced returns?

During the summer of 2019, large roundups and extensive ID checks of Syrians were conducted in Istanbul Metropolis in particular. The purpose, according to Turkish authorities, was to relocate Syrians to the provinces in Turkey where they were registered. According to the Ministry of the Interior, 35 000 registered Syrian refugees and 65 000 non-registered Syrians in Istanbul were referred to other provinces.

However, stories also emerged of deportations after migrants had been arrested for carrying false IDs (kimlik), or for living outside the province where they had their temporary residence. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported cases of forced returns to Syria in 2019.⁷⁴ The Turkish government denies such allegations. The Minister of the Interior stated that Syrians “who voluntarily want to go back to Syria” can benefit from procedures enabling them to return to “safe areas”,⁷⁵ understood as areas controlled by Turkey or its proxies. Binali Yildirim, former premier and AKP candidate in the last Istanbul elections, claimed during his election campaign in 2019 that military cross-border operations had enabled the return of about 500,000 Syrians to their homeland. Evidence that corroborates this figure is not known to this researcher.

Syrians interviewed for this report have no doubt that there were several cases of forced return. Many interviewees claimed to have first-hand knowledge of deportations. During a meeting with young male Syrians in the Adana province, one in the group said: “I know a guy

who was carrying a false kimlik (Turkish ID). He and an Afghan guy were sent to Syria, to Jarablous or Idlib. They were forced to sign a paper of voluntary return. Some illiterate people were also forced to sign. There are groups on social media stating “I was forced to sign” and “I was forced to return.” I know people in Istanbul who have their families in Turkey, but who were sent back to Syria. I don’t believe that these rumours are false”. All his Syrian mates around the table agreed, and stated that they also knew of cases of forced returns.

A Turkish scholar who tried to understand the problem said: “How do you draw the line between forced and voluntary return, if a person is told that they will be kept in detention if they don’t sign? There are also no official figures on these returns. Some came back to Turkey, whereas others might have gone to Idlib, where their lives could be threatened by the Nusra Front” [an offshoot of al-Qaida].⁷⁶

Roundups and ID checks by the police in 2019 have had deep and lasting repercussions for Syrians in Turkey. Many are afraid to move between, or even visit relatives in other provinces, for fear of losing their kimlik, and their temporary protection and access to health services.

An elderly Syrian man in Sultanbeyli explains his ordeal: “I have relatives in Bursa (on the other side of the Marmara Sea), but I can’t see them because I need a clearance for travelling. That requires a long bureaucratic procedure. Most applications, up to 90%, are rejected. If I travel without a permit, I am afraid that my kimlik will be withdrawn and that I will have to pay a fine. If I lose my kimlik, I will not have access to health care, insurance, or anything else that is related to government services. Without a kimlik I can’t even rent an apartment. I know people who were deported to Syria for committing petty crimes or not having a kimlik.”

73 Interview with Deputy Governor of Adana Province, Mr Zafer Öz, 15 October 2020

74 Human Rights Watch (2019), *Turkey forcibly returning Syrians to danger*, 26 July 2019

75 Ibid.

76 Interview, September 2020

5. NARRATIVES AND POLICIES ON MIGRATION IN TURKEY

This section explores developments and narratives regarding migration policy in Turkey, and whether anti-Syrian sentiments are on the rise.

5.1 Are the Syrians here to stay?

As long as Syrians in Turkey are under Temporary Protection, municipalities are unable to plan for their long-time integration. Unanswered questions include: “Are the Syrians in Turkey there to stay? How long will they stay as ‘guests’, and at what point should they become part of Turkish society?” Some possible answers would challenge government policy. Some repeated the official line: “When Syrians have a safe area in their homeland, they will return. For this, they need vocational training in construction.”⁷⁷

However, other responses differed. Cemil Arslan, Secretary General of the Marmara Municipalities’ Union⁷⁸ said “Turkey has a long history of migration, mainly of people of Turkish origin. Syrian refugees came after the Arab uprisings. They are not of Turkish origin and they came in millions. The main problem is that the Syrians have come in a difficult economic period. But as compared to European countries, the acceptance of Syrians here is very high. Our municipalities faced big problems, especially in the early days, but today they are managing to deal with them. We need to work on harmonization, on basic human rights, and convince the Turkish population that the Syrians are now part of their country. Mayors in general realize that the ‘buffer zone’ in north east Syria is not going to function ‘as a plan for social engineering.’

In his view, central government needs a clear national policy and long-term strategic plan for Syrians in Turkey. He emphasised that municipalities cannot be required to strengthen their approach unless the government first develops a national strategic plan.⁷⁹

In the leader-oriented Turkish system, the personality of individual mayors plays a decisive role in policy making, sometimes more so than party affiliation. Ms Ayşegül Kılıç, migration expert in the CHP-led Şişli Municipality in Istanbul stated:

“Politics matter when it comes to municipal services, but it is not dependent on party politics, it depends on the vision of the mayor. Sultanbeyli, an AKP-run municipality, takes initiatives, whereas other AKP municipalities are afraid to act. Şişli is the best among the CHP-run municipalities in Istanbul and was the first CHP-led municipality to establish a Migration Unit. This was decided in a party meeting in 2015, but not every CHP municipality has taken this step. Beşiktaş and Kadıköy, two other CHP-led municipalities in Istanbul, don’t have Migration Units. It depends on the mayors.”

In Sultanbeyli, a working-class area in the eastern part of Istanbul, the mayor has put his weight behind a wide-ranging approach to the local Syrian refugees. “Without our mayor everything would have to be done via an NGO”, says Mr Halil İbrahim Akıncı, head of the Social Support Department in this district municipality. He continued:

“In our municipality with 330,000 inhabitants there are 20,000 Syrians. Our municipality has a good knowledge of the demographics. 40% of the Syrians are children under 18. The number of men and women is nearly equal. We work with NGOs, public institutions and EU institutions.

⁷⁷ Quote from The Director of the Regional Union of Çukurova Municipalities, Ms Demet Avşar,

⁷⁸ Interview, 12 October 2020

⁷⁹ Interview, 12 October 2020

Funding for our projects comes mainly from partners, and mainly the EU. We work in 24 areas of migration, all based on finding solutions, not just consultations. If we can't solve problems, we refer them somewhere else. We work on promoting livelihoods, Turkish language courses, free schooling for adults, and health, including translators for visits to the hospital. And we have a Migration Master Plan.”

Mr Akıncı sees two major reasons why many municipalities lack migration plans:

- Municipalities are not officially responsible for migration issues
- Political parties are afraid to lose votes by raising such issues, as anti-migration feelings are increasing.

The EU funding must go either to NGOs or national government, which is a major impediment for municipalities. Sultanbeyli, however, has found some leeway by establishing a refugee centre as an NGO, which is largely funded by EU donors. Unlike many such projects in Turkey, the centre has the word ‘Refugees’ (Mülteciler) in its name and logo.

According to Mr Akıncı, “Most locals see this NGO as positive, as it serves both locals and refugees, though 80% of our work assists refugees. It is a strong NGO with a successful and holistic approach, based on a good knowledge of our district. We believe that other municipalities should take such initiatives.”

The on-going presence of millions of Syrians in Turkey is a key issue of domestic debate. But official language often differs from what political leaders admit in informal talks. A well-informed source claimed that leaders of political parties, including President Erdoğan and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of CHP, accept that the Syrians are here to stay, but they don't say it out loud, especially not before elections.

However, according to an expert scholar on migration “Supporters of Erdoğan's AKP initially expressed solidarity with the Syrians as ‘sisters and brothers’ on religious grounds. But over the years they started to express discontent. Given the economic crisis, they saw Syrians as depressing the wages of the lowest paid jobs. Turkish workers see them as ‘stealing jobs.’”⁸⁰

The rhetoric of the ultra-nationalist MHP is that Syrian migrants must return to their homeland. With Turkey's increasing military presence in northern Syria, the return-rhetoric coincides with Ankara's reinforced nationalist military-strategic goals. However, a local lawyer and MHP mayor in Sarıçam, Mr Bilal Uludag, had a different view: “Some Syrians will return, but others will stay and become part of our society. If we cannot manage their integration, there will be negative consequences.”

For the secular, Kemalist opposition party CHP, the long stay of the Syrians has become a basis for criticizing President Erdoğan. According to one observer, “The CHP stereotype is that Syrian refugees are Islamists who are transforming our country.”

The MHP Mayor of Sarıçam, Bilal Uludağ described his primary expectation of government: “They must decide whether the Syrians will be integrated or not.” Regarding whether Syrians should be able to change their status to permanent residence or to Turkish citizens, he stated: “We must assess this carefully. There are Turks in Germany with German citizenship. It is a matter of mutual integration. I believe that integration is our main task, without barriers to Syrians changing their legal status. We must see the future generation who are born here and are part of the Turkish society. We need to recognise and change their status, and we need to achieve social integration or we will have ghettos.

We have not experienced social clashes here, but we need to solve these problems before they grow.”

Another source in Sarıçam Municipality was more pessimistic, stating: “I don't think that our Syrian guests will ever be assimilated.”

5.2 Anti-Syrian sentiments on the rise

Several years have passed since Turkey phased out its earlier open-door policy for Syrians. Resentment has grown, with competition over low-skilled jobs, housing, schooling and health care. Fears are mounting of a possible new wave of refugees from Idlib, where 3 million civilians are confined in an over-crowded, highly militarized and tense zone.

Increasing anti-Syrian sentiments were evident in meetings in both Marmara Region

80 Interview, September 2020

with 1 million Syrians in cities like Istanbul and Bursa, and in Adana Province with, according to official figures, 350,000 Syrians.⁸¹ An expert on migration⁸² stated: “I am surprised that Turkey did not explode with the Syrian refugee crisis. I really think that any country in Europe would have exploded under the same circumstances!”

Mr Akıncı in Sultanbeyli said: “Until now Covid has served as a ‘refrigerator’ of social tensions. But if the crisis deepens, it will either stay in the refrigerator or lead to explosions. Our main problem is the local community. Each day, it becomes more negative in its view of the refugees.”

The Deputy Mayor in the Adana province emphasized: “We are in a transition. Instead of regarding the Syrians only as a cheap workforce, we recognise their intellectual skills and help intelligent children to plan for their future.”

However, a poll in July 2019 showed that 82% of Turkish citizens want the Syrian refugees to return to their homeland.⁸³ Though polls in Turkey are not considered very reliable,⁸⁴ this figure shows how controversial the presence of Syrians is. Voices advocating civil rights for Syrians are not heard in Turkish mainstream media today, where diverse views have waned after the incarceration of journalists and crackdown on press freedom. The Syrians Barometer, published by the UNHCR in July 2020, also shows that the Turkish society’s previous strong support towards Syrians, has significantly eroded over the last years.

Some interviewees stressed that the Turkish media was stoking anti-Syrian sentiments. According to one source, “The discourse on the refugee in the media is getting harsher. If a Syrian does something bad to a Turk, they blow it up, but not vice versa”. On social media, anti-Syrian gossip is circulating, with unsubstantiated claims that Syrian students have entered university without a prior exam, or that Syrians have been exempt from paying rent. A sociologist stated

that “There has been an open anti-refugee, racist outbreak on social media.”⁸⁵

In Adana, young Syrian males shared experiences of condescending, anti-Syrian, anti-migration attitudes that they face in every-day life. They also mentioned a news item about a Syrian man who allegedly raped a Turkish girl in a local neighbourhood where many Syrians live. “This led to a reaction on the streets, with windows of Syrian shops being smashed. When it was discovered that this was a false rumour, the municipality promised to help Syrian shop-owners to repair their windows, but this did not materialize”. This story is an example of disturbances that may cause unrest.

In Sarıçam in Adana Province, members of the Citizens’ Assembly expressed concerns about a local park which had been vandalized, allegedly by Syrians. It was unclear if the matter had been properly dealt with via the legal system, but a pro-active and mitigating approach could have engaged civil society. The frustration around the table in Sarıçam illustrated the need for local Syrian associations and interlocutors to help alleviate tensions.

Experiences from both Adana and Hatay⁸⁶ in the Çukurova Region indicate that local ethnic Arabs who are Turkish citizens, rarely act as bridge-builders, due to sectarianism. Syrian newcomers are mostly Sunnis, whereas Arabic-speaking Turkish citizens in the south are mostly Alawites, i.e. they belong to the same sect as Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad.

In the current Turkish climate, no political leader is likely to speak out about the need for a long-term strategy for Syrians, or question Turkey’s exceptions to the Geneva Convention on Refugees.

One secular Turk probably spoke for many others when he said disapprovingly, after a visit to an impoverished neighbourhood where many Syrians live: “The Syrians cannot be part of Turkey – they have to return.” Nevertheless, there are contrary views, also among secular Turkish citizens, some of whom have themselves experienced the trauma of fleeing from war or persecution.

81 Interviews in Adana, October 2020

82 Interview, September 2020

83 Kirisci, Kemal & Kolasin, Gokce Uysal (2019), *Syrian Refugees in Turkey Need Jobs*, Brookings Institute, 19 September 2019

84 Assessment by the author, after years of reporting from Turkey

85 Interview, September 2020

86 Regarding Hatay, the researcher is referring to her earlier field studies as a journalist.

Others express empathy with the Syrian war refugees, and the need for social cohesion. This added to impressions from earlier field trips and encounters with Turks and Kurds who had tried to help Syrian refugees on an individual basis, long before municipalities had set up any facilities.

Some interlocutors such as Halil İbrahim Akıncı in Sultanbeyli, emphasized the need for legal change. “It would only take seconds to remove the geographical restraints regarding Turkey’s adherence to the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. Both refugees and local governments need a strategy. As things stand now, refugees can’t envisage their future, and those who can, thus take any chance to go to Europe.”

The defeat in the major metropolitan areas of President Erdoğan’s AKP in the 2019 local elections was to some extent explained by resentment against the Syrian migrants.⁸⁷ In his campaign to become the mayor of Istanbul Metropolis, the victorious CHP candidate, Ekrem İmamoğlu, accused the AKP of mishandling the refugee issue, claiming that AKP had acted emotionally, and consequently endangered Turkey.⁸⁸

According to İmamoğlu, there are probably close to one million Syrians residing in İstanbul, including the unregistered, as opposed to the official figure of 600,000 registered Syrians.⁸⁹ In his view, Europe is letting Turkey down by not giving as much support as the country deserves. This assessment was shared by his opponent, the former AKP premier Binali Yıldırım. Yıldırım emphasized that Syrian refugees in Turkey are registered and receive education and health services, and that those residing in İstanbul would be sent back to Syria if they were involved in illegal activities. He affirmed that the municipality would work with the Ministry of the Interior and immigration authority on these issues.⁹⁰

İmamoğlu, for his part, promised to establish a desk to serve Syrian refugees, and especially to protect women and children.

But among the CHP-led district municipalities in İstanbul, only Şişli has implemented this policy so far.⁹¹ İmamoğlu further stressed that many citizens of İstanbul believe that their jobs had been taken by Syrians, and that he would look into the issue.⁹²

87 Syria Direct (2019), *İstanbul mayoral election exposes hate, resentment for Syrians in Turkey*, 16 July 2019

88 Kirisci & Kolasin (2019)

89 The latter figure was reported by the Marmara Municipalities’ Union

90 TRT World (2019), *Five main takeaways from the İstanbul mayoral election debate*, 17 July 2019

91 Interview in Şişli, 14 October 2020

92 TRT World (2019), *Five main takeaways from the İstanbul mayoral election debate*, 17 July 2019

6. SYRIANS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL IN TURKEY

This chapter examines whether there are special patterns of discrimination against Syrian refugees, in particular in regions where SKL International has its partners.

6.1 Syrians tell their stories

Syrian women often keep a low profile in Turkey. However, a middle-aged woman from Damascus, now living in Istanbul, probably spoke for many Syrians, especially single mothers, when she shared her story:

“My husband went missing during the war. I came here as a single mother with five children. My eldest son works to support the whole family. He emigrated to the UK because it is so difficult to find a job here. My two daughters are married. Two of my other sons fled to Germany five years ago. I am living here with my 14-year old son, who is struggling with his online learning.”

“It has now been five years since I saw my other sons. They tried to come to Turkey for a visit, but they can’t get a visa. I myself have a university degree in economics and trade, but I can’t find a job here. In Turkey, we are not allowed to travel anywhere. Syrian families are dispersed all over the world due to the war. Here, we can’t see our immediate family members. This is why Syrians in Turkey want to go to Europe. Here we don’t have rights to anything.”

A meeting with a group of young male Syrians, selected from Adana Metropolitan and Sarıçam Municipality networks, showed that almost all had given up their hope of building a decent future in Turkey. The major problems they mentioned were the lack of permanent residence, of freedom of movement outside the province, of work permits and scholarships, and impediments to reuniting with their families in Turkey.

A young man who came to Turkey from Aleppo in 2013, and who has studied mechanical engineering, set an example. Canada or Europe

were his dream destinations for building a future. “I applied for Turkish citizenship, but it was rejected. In Turkey, I cannot get permanent residence, as I don’t have a Syrian passport. I have an ID but no passport.”

Another stated, “It takes too long to finish university here, as I have to work while studying. I wish there were scholarships for us. Here, our studies take 6 or 7 years to finish, while elsewhere, or with a scholarship, they would take 3 to 4 years. My wish is to move away from here, otherwise my studies will be delayed.”

Working shifts, these young Syrians earn a monthly salary of, at best, 2 500 Turkish lira (± \$325). “I really wish I could work fewer hours a day and have more time to study. Having my family in Syria also makes me nervous. I wish they were here to support me emotionally.”

Ahmed, 19, came to Turkey from Aleppo in 2014. He had graduated from high school and wishes to continue his studies, but like many others, he needed to work for a living. He had been a labourer in the Turkish textile industry, but was now working in Adana’s public kitchen, while trying to improve his Turkish with the aim of being admitted to a university. If he could, he would prefer to study abroad – “I’ve seen on social media that there are more opportunities abroad”.

Mohammed, 22, from Latakia, came to Turkey in 2015 and worked first as a carpenter, and now in the public kitchen. “I’m trying to find a job here so that I can support my family in Syria. Otherwise, I wish to move to Europe or the United States.”

The only one in the group who wanted to stay in Turkey was a 23-year old man from Idlib. He arrived in 2014 and had applied to Iskenderun Technical University, who said, “I wish to stay here so that I can support my family.”

However, many young Syrians have spent their formative years in Turkish schools and know no other country. As time passes, Turkey is likely to

see more of those who think like Ali, a 21-year old Syrian in Sultanbeyli. He has done his utmost to integrate in Turkey, and wishes to stay, since Turkey has become home to him:

“I came from Aleppo but have lived in Turkey for eight years. I am studying for my baccalaureate now. Ever since I came here at the age of twelve, I have been working besides going to school, first as a shepherd, then as a carpenter, and then as a waiter. I have learned Turkish, up to the highest level, C1. I have been offered a job as a translator in the Sultanbeyli Community Centre. I belong in Turkey, I love it here and feel more integrated here than in Syria. I can’t even remember what the streets of my hometown in Syria looked like. But I only have a temporary protection. When I finish my baccalaureate, I want to study social services, to help other families. My problem is that I need to work while studying. I wish that Syrian university students could get more help. The community centre provides some support, but not on issues that are a central government responsibility.”

6.2 Bleak prospects of a safe return

A question asked to the group of young Syrian males in Adana was, “Do any of you believe that you can move back to Syria within five years?”

Two responses were:

“No, there is no hope, or vision of a return to Syria. This is why we want our families to come here as well, or move to Europe. It is difficult to return to Syria, as we would have to join the army. It is better for us to look for family reunification in countries like Sweden or Canada.”

“In Syria, the economy is so bad that it will take more than ten years to rebuild the country.”

Asked what could improve their life in Turkey, responses were:

“If we could bring our families here from Syria. My dad is dead, but my brothers and sisters are still in Syria.”

“We have temporary residence but can’t get work permits, and have to apply for permission to travel to other provinces. With work permits we would not be confined to a certain province.”

Another problem that would make a return for these young men to Syria complicated is the fact that they have spent their formative years in Turkey, and thus lack education in Modern Standard

Arabic (MSA), which is not taught to Syrians in Turkish schools. MSA is the common language used throughout the Arab world, including in Syria, in formal situations. MSA is not anyone’s spoken language, and is distinctly different from spoken Arabic dialects, including the Levantine dialect that Syrians speak.

The overall assessment from this research, indicating a lack of faith among a Syrians for a safe return to their homeland, is further corroborated by data collected by the UNHCR sponsored Syrians Barometer 2019.⁹³

93 Erdoğan, Murat (2019), *Syrians Barometer 2019, A framework for achieving social cohesion with Syrians in Turkey*, UNHCR

7. WHAT CAN BE DONE LOCALLY FOR SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN TURKEY?

This section reflects local discussions on what can be done by the authorities and civil society to address the problems affecting Syrian migrants in Turkey.

A Turkish expert says that most municipalities gain new perspectives on refugee issues via participating in the RESLOG project: “In addressing diversity in the local population they gain a certain sensitivity, which is very important.” But two years into the project, relationships between their host communities and Syrian refugees appear to be mostly limited. Some in Sarıçam describe individual gestures of solidarity such as gifts given to Syrians who moved into apartment blocks where mostly Turks live, but others admit that structural connections need to be improved.

In the Marmara Region, the Sultanbeyli Municipality in Istanbul is a good practice example in terms of social mapping, external fundraising, and a service centre for refugees, and further plans. Halil İbrahim Akıncı, Head of the Social Support Services Department, explained:

“We plan social cohesion events. We plan to distribute free food to the neediest, both locals and Syrians. At the beginning, we made mistakes by organising events for refugees only. Now we realize that our real partner is the local community, so we also target local institutions. We provide seminars and awareness training for police officers, imams, teachers, and civil servants. If we can change their views, we will have a greater influence in society.”

According to Mr Akıncı, it is particularly important to reach local Turkish women: “If the mind-set of a woman changes, she will have an impact on men and children. It is important to listen to the language used by children, as they copy what they hear at home. There are cases of bullying in schools, e.g. when refugee children are not allowed to participate in games. Our idealistic

aim is to achieve cohesion in local communities via refugee and local women meeting and getting to know each other. But we have to overcome the language barrier with the help of translators, and we also offer Turkish language training.”

Due to the Covid Pandemic, no such meetings had taken place lately, but online technology helps. According to Mr Akıncı, Sultanbeyli Municipality uses social workers to reach Syrian women who are isolated in their houses: “We have a comprehensive database with phone numbers, and we assign a social worker to call each family, and to follow up, if necessary.”

In spite of being a pilot municipality with a pro-active approach, Sultanbeyli had only had four visiting delegations from other Turkish municipalities. It also sends delegations to EU countries. “Municipalities here are reluctant to engage with refugee issues. Mayors need to step in, but they may see this as a politic risk. But our mayor is different; he wants us to do this work.”

The Sultanbeyli Municipality Refugees Association, a local NGO, is funded by several sources in Europe, the UNHCR and the Ministry of Education. Its multi-story building offers space for a variety of activities. One employee explained:

“In Sultanbeyli, we have 4,000 school children from 33 different nationalities. At our centre we work with child protection, and to keep children in school. Here, children can get help with their homework, and learn how to read and write. We have children aged 7 to 10 who have never been to school before. We also have a psychologist, who tries to prevent early marriages, and offers vocational training and hobby courses.”

On a separate floor where men are not allowed, women can get support and shelter:

“It may be to protect them against domestic violence, to give shelter for sex workers, and help women whose husbands died in the war to support themselves. Many have lost their hope in life. In ordinary shelters in Turkey women can stay

a maximum of eight months. Here, women can stay as long as they want. We provide them with vocational training, textile classes and macramé skills, so they can make and sell things to earn income.”

A project manager proudly described how some women have moved out of the shelter to live independently, while still attending weekly support meetings with psychologists at the Centre, which also gives them food packages, funded by donations from Switzerland.

Mr Fatih Gökyıldız, Deputy Coordinator of the Refugee Centre, describes it as unique in Turkey, “as NGOs are considered less important in Turkish society.” Asked what the Centre’s biggest challenge was, he responded, “Our dependence on external funding, but there is no other solution. We have 24 task areas. Some critics say that we need to narrow this down, but we believe in a holistic approach because the problems are so complex.”

Asked how the Centre makes a difference, he responded: “We are good at protecting women and children. If a woman comes here to get food supplies, we ask her about child marriage; if she is looking for a job, we find out what other needs she has.”

In Adana Province, more than one concerned official underlined the importance of enhancing local cooperation with Syrians: “We can attend their activities, and they ours, in a peaceful atmosphere. Housewives can work together and communicate, and supporting Syrians to set up associations is important.”

A deputy mayor in Sarıçam stressed: “We need to set up workshops and vocational schools, managed by our public administration. We also need a therapy centre to address the psychological needs of Syrian refugees.”

Local inhabitants usually know best what they need improved in their neighbourhood. In a Syrian neighbourhood in Adana called ‘Little Aleppo’, inhabitants wanted better streetlights around playgrounds to enhance the safety of women and girls. Needs are communicated to the municipality by the mukhtar, the local elected headman, but more channels of communication could help to improve services, infrastructure and social climate.

Municipality officials stressed the need set up cooperatives where Syrian and Turkish women

work together, though, according to one official, “a Syrian woman cannot be the director due to a lack of legal status and the language gap”.

For Syrian-owned businesses affected by the pandemic, UNDP has recommended support to build online capacities, a stronger focus on e-commerce, and more partnerships with Turkish-owned companies.⁹⁴ There is also a need for more skilled translators and ‘bridge-builders’ who can assist Syrian-owned SMEs and micro-businesses to connect with government agencies, UN bodies, local NGOs, and financial institutions that support SMEs, plus training in digital competence.

Businesses, also Syrian-owned, need to be encouraged to hire more Syrian women, which might be acceptable to conservative families if vocational training and digital competence is provided.⁹⁵

94 United Nations Development Program (2020), *In Turkey, Covid-19 hits Syrian-owned businesses harder, study finds*, 10 August 2020

95 United Nations Development Program (2019), *Mapping of Syrian-owned enterprises in Turkey*

8. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE SCENARIOS

The conclusion includes a brief discussion of possible future scenarios and implications for further implementation of the RESLOG Project.

Most of the Syrians in Turkey are there to stay, but the government treats the issue on an ad hoc basis, labelling Syrians as ‘guests’ under Temporary Protection. However, Syrians have been seeking refuge in Turkey for nearly a decade, and currently number ± 3.7 million (2 million male, and 1.7 million females). Nearly half are children under 18. The birth rate among Syrians in Turkey is considered to be above the average, though official data appears to be lacking.

This is the new demographic reality, yet Syrians do not have any other prospect than continued temporary residence in Turkey. The government has repeatedly talked about plans to enable a mass relocation of Syrians to their homeland, i.e. the Turkish-controlled areas in northern Syria. However, interviews with Syrians of different ages and social backgrounds indicate that almost no one envisages the possibility of a safe return to Syria in the foreseeable future. Instead, there are tangible fears of forced returns, as there are many stories among Syrians of alleged deportations during the summer of 2019.

An additional feature of Turkey’s new geographic reality is a generation of Syrian children who have grown up in Turkey, attended Turkish schools, and have no experience of Syria. Integration is not easier, but probably less difficult than returning to Syria for most.

The majority of Syrian children are educated in the Turkish school system, learn Turkish, and not the formal Modern Standard Arabic, which is distinctly different from any spoken Arabic dialect, including in Syria. Learning Turkish is likely to strengthen Syrian children in considering Turkey as their home country, even though they

do not have equal rights. Due to poverty, hundreds of thousands of Syrian children drop out of school early, especially boys at high-school level, only to become child labourers instead. Municipalities lack statistics on child marriages among Syrians, but girls in poor refugee families face the risk of being forced to marry at an early age.

As long as Syrians in Turkey lack permanent legal residence, it is highly unlikely that they will assimilate like many other Muslim ethnicities before them (Albanians, Bosnians, Caucasian, Turkish Bulgarians, etc.). Turkey thus needs to prepare for a new type of multiculturalism with a large permanent Syrian (mostly Sunni Arab) component added to the big Kurdish community which for decades has resisted an enforced ‘becoming Turkish policy’.⁹⁶

Syrian women in Turkey often face the double dilemma of being ‘temporary guests’ and secluded in their homes, where patriarchal traditions prevail in poor migrant communities. Gender sensitivity training of law enforcement officers and other civil servants is needed to enable communication with Syrian women in traditional settings.

So far there are few initiatives that attract Syrian women to join associations or cooperatives where their safety is guaranteed. Yet Syrian women who see their children growing up in Turkey are aware that this has become their children’s home country.

For both Syrian men and women, getting a work permit is extremely difficult. This, together with the EU cash payment system, results in most Syrians remaining low-wage labourers in the informal sector, competing with, and causing resentment among Turkish workers. The lack of

⁹⁶ Ünlü, Barış (2016), *The Kurdish Struggle and the crisis of the Turkishness Contract*, Philosophy & Social Criticism, 12 January 2016

organized trade unions in the agricultural, service and textile industries exacerbates the problem.

As migrants under temporary protection, Syrians are restricted to stay in the provinces where they are registered, often preventing reunification with family members living in and outside of Turkey. This has become a push factor for further migration to Europe, and adds to the emotional and social burdens of refugees stranded in Turkey with no clear future.

Turkish women may also see the mass influx of low-skilled Syrians as a threat to their own cultural well-being, since they claim that polygamy is often practised among Syrian men in Turkey, though Turkish law prohibits it. One interviewee stated that “This stokes fears that Turkish men also may want a second wife.” Whereas Syrians have to abide by the Turkish Penal Code, family law is not enforced on them. A Turkish female official lamented that “Instead, we turn a blind eye”.

Turkish municipalities thus have to deal with a complex new reality, and complain about the lack of a national strategy regarding Syrians, and insufficient national budget allocations to municipalities, which do not take into account the number of Syrians they host. Another complaint is that national government does not share demographic data on the Syrian ‘guests’ with the municipalities hosting them.

Social contact between citizens and Syrian refugees appears to be limited, and that there are few, if any local Syrian NGOs that municipalities can work with to address issues of mutual concern, mitigate tensions and improve social cohesion.

At the same time, Syrian refugee communities in Turkey are suffering from a brain drain. Given their insecure situation, intellectuals and others who emerged as local leaders and role models have largely left Turkey and settled in the EU or other Western countries.

Nearly all the Syrians with university degrees that this researcher met in Turkey some years ago have moved to the West. Syrian émigrés who still have family members in Turkey strive to get them into their European host countries. Young Syrian interviewees who wished to acquire university degrees also intended to move to Europe, Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States or other Western countries.

“Turkey is not a very secure place for Syrians, as the government calls us ‘guests’. The fact that I can now visit my family members in different European countries – at least when there is no lockdown – was one reason why I left Turkey”, said a female Syrian engineer who fled together with her family to Turkey during the first years of the war in Syria, but who has now settled in an EU country.⁹⁷

The brain drain from Turkey of both Syrians and Turkish citizens has a negative economic impact, and the Covid-19 Pandemic further aggravates the decline. Many local officials and mayors are aware of the need for Migration Master Plans to mitigate the risk of increased social and ethnic tensions in this complex situation, but the lack of a national strategy and funding, combined with limited local municipal income, makes these efforts more difficult.

In addition, mayors often lament the fact that municipalities cannot get direct EU funding. One municipality, Sultanbeyli, has overcome this hurdle by creating an NGO for refugees, which receives funding from the EU. Sultanbeyli’s holistic approach to the on-going Syrian refugee crisis could serve as a role model for other municipalities. But in the leader-oriented Turkish system, mayors and municipalities do not seem to have much appetite for sharing experiences and lessons learned.

Politicians at both the national and local levels seem unwilling to talk about Syrians who are stranded in their country from a rights perspective, for fear of losing votes in the next election. Due to the crackdown on press freedom in Turkey, few media outlets are available for opinion-makers who wish to introduce an alternative narrative on migration. Instead, open discussion of the need to give Syrians a future based on equal rights, refugee status, permanent residence or Turkish citizenship, often takes place behind closed doors.

To conclude, the combined effects of a declining economy, mass unemployment, competition over low-skilled jobs and the Covid-19 Pandemic, are aggravating the problems of the new demographic reality in Turkey.

97 Interview, 29 October 2020

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