

Perceptions of Syrians in Turkey

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ABSTRACT *This article is a summary of the study “Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration,” which was conducted by the Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Center-HUGO in six cities based on interviews with Syrians and locals and analysis of the media and NGOs. Over 1.8 million Syrians arrived in Turkey and accepted under “temporary protection” status between April 2011 and December 2014. The efforts of the Turkish government and society has spent 5-5,5 billion dollars on the crisis. Turkish society has been overwhelmingly accepting of Syrians. However, concerns and objections are increasing as the permanency of Syrians in Turkey becomes more visible. Therefore, it is essential to develop strategies on permanency with the support of Turkish society.*

Introduction

Following the harsh crackdown on demonstrations against the Assad regime, which began on March 15, 2011, Syria has fallen into a civil war. As a consequence, there has been a tremendous and dramatic flow of refugees into neighboring countries. Over 4 million Syrians have had to flee the country, which has had a population of 22.4 million; The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defined the event as “the biggest migration flow in late history.”¹

Turkey with its 911 km shared border

with Syria has become one of the largest host nations for displaced Syrians. The first inflow of Syrian refugees to Turkey consisted of only 252 people on April 29, 2011. However, by March 2015, almost in 4 years the number of migrants reached 1,858,000. The Turkish government stated, “The borders are open for the guests who flee from war and torture.” Syrians have been provided with “temporary protection” from the start of the conflict and despite of all internal pressure, social anxiety, security concerns and the financial burden, the government continued its policy. By January 2015, although the official numbers point out 1,8 million of Syrians, the

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Syrian refugees who fled the civil war in their country are seen at an urban renewal area where the buildings were demolished in the Süleymaniye neighborhood of İstanbul, Turkey.

AA / Arif Hüdaverdi
Yaman

estimated number is over 2 million of Syrians. Furthermore, as UNHCR warns, arrival of newcomers in massive numbers should be expected.²

The crisis affects Turkish society socially, politically, economically and psychologically, and especially security concerns prevail. Turkey's "open door" policy, which was implemented in accordance with international law, has resulted in a serious risk regarding the level and duration of the residence of Syrians. Although this has tested Turkish society, the process has been quite successful. C.Batchelor, the representative of the UNHCR in Turkey, states that "it is a great tribute to the humanitarian spirit, not only of the Turkish government but of the Turkish people."³ However, the protests and even attacks on Syrians in 2014 demonstrate that social toleration and acceptance cannot be sustained by itself. Thus, the sustainability of

acceptance is dependent on the improvement of delicate migration management with the support of Turkish society. The crisis should be evaluated not by its financial burden but by its social effects. The possibility that some proportion of the 1.8 million Syrians in Turkey will become permanent will also be a driving force for policies. One of the most important issues concerning Syrians in Turkey is "social acceptance and integration."⁴

Findings of the Survey⁵

The field research of "Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration" was conducted by HUGO during February-April 2014 in three border cities (Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis) and three non-border cities (İstanbul, İzmir, Mersin). 144 in-depths interviews (72 with Syrians and 72 with local people) were conducted in

non-camp settings. For a better understanding of the issue, analyses of national and local media and NGOs were also conducted. During the research on the refugees' living conditions, relations with Turkish society, future expectations of Syrians and the level of "social acceptance" in Turkey was examined.

The existence of 87 percent of Syrians outside the camps has led to the inevitable interaction with Turkish society and brought some anxiety. This not only gave rise to high levels of social, economical and political interactions but also reached what K. Kirişçi describes as "the limits of hospitality."

Syrian Refugees in Cities of Turkey December 2014						
Source: Disaster & Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, UNCHR						
City (with refugee camp)	Number of Syrian refugees in Cities (in Camp iC out of Camp oC)		City	Number of Syrian refugees in Cities	City	Number of Syrian refugees in Cities
Şanlıurfa		467.000	İstanbul	330.000	Çorum	250
	oC: 387.335		Şırnak	190.090	Burdur	250
	iC: 79.665		Mersin	45.000	Çanakkale	200
Gaziantep		253.328	Konya	45.000	Nevşehir	180
	oC: 220.000		Ankara	30.000	Uşak	173
	iC: 33.328		Bursa	20.000	Isparta	160
Hatay		204.735	Batman	20.000	Eskişehir	150
	oC: 190.000		Kocaeli	15.000	Düzce	150
	iC: 14.735		İzmir	13.000	Hakkari	150
Kilis		86.578	Antalya	10.000	Kırıkkale	150
	oC: 49.000		Kayseri	9.500	Sivas	150
	iC: 37.578		Diyarbakır	5.000	Zonguldak	140
Mardin		78.858	Samsun	1.230	Ağrı	100
	oC: 70.000		Niğde	1.100	Amasya	100
	iC: 2.858		Aydın	1.000	Erzurum	80
Adana		61.226	Elazığ	900	Ordu	80
	oC: 50.000		Denizli	800	Rize	77
	iC: 11.124		Yalova	780	Karaman	75
K.Maraş		61.215	Muğla	750	Kırşehir	70
	oC: 44.000		Siirt	700	Bilecik	50
	iC: 17.215		Muş	670	Bingöl	50
Adıyaman		33.354	Sakarya	670	Çankırı	50
	oC: 23.500		Van	600	Yozgat	50
	iC: 9.854		Manisa	550	Edirne	50
Osmaniye		21.597	Balıkesir	500	Kars	45
	oC: 12.000		Afyon	500	Artvin	40
	iC: 7.597		Tekirdağ	480	Aksaray	40
Malatya		8.343	Bitlis	400	Kütahya	33
	oC: 850		Trabzon	330	Kırklareli	30
	iC: 7.493		Tokat	320	Bartın	20
			Bolu	300	Karabük	10

Opinions, Feelings and Expectations of Syrians in Turkey⁶

The most remarkable findings from the interviews conducted with non-camp Syrians in Turkey are that Syrians feel safe in Turkey after the pressure and attacks in Syria and are thankful to the Turkish state and society. They also appreciate that Turkish society has shown them hospitality and helped them in this difficult situation, and emphasize that they are not discriminated. On the other hand, they feel restless, hopeless and have concerns regarding the future of their children, which they call the “lost generation.” The most common answer to the question of “which statement makes you feel uncomfortable?” is seen as “guests,” which is perceived as drawing limits and even as alienation, a situation that recalls acceptance issues of Turks abroad. Educated and qualified migrants in particular demand “refugee statue” from Turkey and then their transfer to a European country in order to live there permanently. They also repeatedly state that they have an issue with their ability to work. Most indicate that despite the granted work permits, they still face labor exploitation. Syrians who have trouble finding accommodations complain about rent levels, their financial difficulties and hard living conditions. The attitude of local people towards Syrians varies. While some offer their places free of charge, others charge high rents for poor quality accommodations (e.g., barns, stores, bake-houses, etc.). Most Syrians state that their living conditions have diminished in

Turkey. They also say that their houses in Syria are irreversibly damaged. Syrians also complain about the occasionally bad attitude of hospital personnel and local people in hospitals, although they are granted access to health care by the Turkish state.

Finally, most Syrians would like to return to their country if the war ends. However, there is little hope that the fighting will cease any time soon and thus they cannot return. Syrians report that they are trying to learn Turkish in order to integrate themselves in daily life and that they encourage their children to do so. Almost all Syrians stated during their interviews that if the Turkish state would grant them citizenship, they would gladly accept.

In general, Syrians prefer non-camp life because: (a) it offers more freedom, as they are not restricted by the rules and regulations of camps; (b) there is the possibility to work even if it is irregular; (c) the perceived threat of forced return that could be easily enforced from the camps; (d) concerns over political and ethnic actors in camps; and (e) the belief, particularly among conservatives and fathers of daughters, that camp life does not fit with their norms and ethics.

There are observable differences in the attitudes of people in border cities and non-border cities, as well as in urban and rural areas, with regards to social acceptance and integration of Syrians. Integration is less of a topic in border cities where local and oth-

er NGOs dynamically help Syrians. The presence of Arabic and Kurdish speaking people in border cities and the tradition of solidarity and cooperation in smaller places are factors which eases integration despite of all the difficulties. Yet, non-border cities are different in terms of priorities and problems.

Survey respondents complained about Syrian beggars, saying that there were also beggars in Syria and that they are Syrian “gypsies.” Syrians are disturbed that their humanitarian drama has become an object of Turkish politics and annoyed with the title of “people of government/President Erdoğan,” since Erdoğan accepted them to Turkey and this label allows opposition supporters to ignore their humanitarian situation. The survey also showed that Syrians creates their own “others” in Turkey. For instance, Syrians Arabs prefer the regions in which Arabs live and other groups also do so. Turkmens have found it easier to adapt due to their relatively small size in number and advantage of language and ethnicity.

Opinions, Feelings and Expectations of Local People

The most remarkable finding from the interviews with local people was that although there are similar attitudes and comments on some issues, there are important differences in opinion between people who live in the border cities (Gaziantep, Kilis, Hatay) and those in non-border

cities (Mersin, İstanbul and İzmir) towards the issue. All local Turkish people state that they evaluate the situation as humanitarian and argue that it is right to help the Syrians. The reasons given for their acceptance are “we should embrace the people flee-

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ing from war,” “we are brothers by religion” and “we are hospitable,” generally with humanitarian, emotional, religious and cultural emphasis.⁷

However, although the locals understand the humanitarian side of the crisis, nearly all of them say that they want Syrians to return to their country sooner rather than later. They do not want Turkey to take in any more Syrians and for the sake of control, they also demand that the refugees be placed in camps and far from cities. A frequent complaint is that the existence of “uncontrolled” Syrians is a threat to the economy, security and moral lives.

Political difference is another important issue for the evaluation of the situation. Since President Erdoğan played a special role in the acceptance of the Syrians to Turkey, people who are close to the AKP differ from those

who support other parties in terms of attitude. People who criticize the government's Syria policy argue that AKP invited Syrians into the country and will grant them citizenship in order to raise their votes.

People in border cities have a wide range of issues with Syrians, while the attitudes of people in non-border cities concentrate around the topics of "beggars," "security" and "inadaptability." In border cities, the various opinions of local people are observed especially with tradesmen. In some cities, tradesmen state that the existence of Syrians has prompted the recovery of local markets. However, tradesmen in other cities grumble about Syrians owning shops and the irregular or semi-irregular Syrian labor force.

In border cities, the most important grievance is about rent prices and scarcity of houses. Local people hesitate to rent their property to Syrians since they are associated with being unable to pay rent, overcrowding houses with 10-15 people, damaging the property and complaints from neighbors. Access to health services is another issue. Many local people say that "hospitals are full of Syrians, they have priorities, it is all free for them, we can't access even if our children are sick." Access to health services is a general problem in Turkey; however, it has been further aggravated due to the arrival of Syrians.⁸ Yet the interviews with Turkish authorities show that it is about perception.⁹ To clarify, the Syrian crowd in the emergency department of the hospitals seems as



A Syrian child has fled to Turkey from the civil war in Syria to Reyhanlı district in Turkey. Turkish aid organizations and non-governmental organizations distributed clothing to Syrian refugees.

AA / Cem Genco

if they were all the departments of the hospitals; in fact they are not.

The concern of losing one's job due to competition from the cheap labor offered by Syrians is another common objection. Since it is cheaper for tradesmen and other entrepreneurs to employ Syrians, unqualified workers feel threatened and angry. There are some findings about wealthy Syrians who own businesses and contribute to increasing trade in the region. TUIK's 2013 unemployment levels indicate that Kilis and Gaziantep have some of the lowest unemployment numbers of any Turkish city and point to newly emerging economic dynamics as a facilitator of

employment.¹⁰ Another frequently mentioned issue is the acceptance of Syrian university students in Turkish universities. They complain that “our children study for years for a Univer-

the authorities claiming that actually the opposite is the case do not convince the locals. Finally, local people also express fear of epidemics like poliomyelitis or meningitis.

However, the Syrian crisis confronted Turkey with the largest migration in its history in numerical terms and of its characteristics

In the region, rumors circulate that Syrian women “prostitute” themselves or become second, third or fourth wives. Yet such statements are not supported by examples and are based on mere rumors. Two sex workers explained that they had the same job in Syria. They say that there are no women in the hands of “prostitution mafias,” although most local people claim that they heard about such “immoral” incidences.

sity entrance exam, they [Syrians] are accepted to universities without an exam or other documents.”

Although Syrians have similar cultural identity as people in the border region; nevertheless, locals complain about the habits of Syrians, such as laziness, noisiness, rudeness and dirtiness. There has been an observable shift from positive to negative attitudes among local people towards Syrians as the conflict has become protracted. Local people also express concerns over security issues and a possible increase of ordinary and political crimes. Many people claim that crimes such as robbery and forgery have increased. Complaints like “we used to sleep with our doors open but we can’t do so any longer,” and “our children used to play on the streets until the morning but now they are afraid of Syrian gangs” are frequently noted. Statements to the contrary by

The concept of “guest” has been repeatedly challenged; for example, it is argued that “guests know their limits.” This indicates that locals perceive their stay to be limited, but it also carries a discriminatory connotation. Indeed, the concept transformed from an embracing idea to a “discriminating” one.¹¹ It is now commonly believed in both border and non-border cities that Syrians will not leave Turkey, while Turks firmly reject the idea of granting citizenship to Syrians. In Hatay, the issue of ethnicity dominates over all other issues; most notably, Alevis conceptualize the presence of large numbers of mostly Sunni Syrians as an expression of the ethnic politics of President Erdoğan and thus react negatively.¹² They generally label Syrians as “terrorists revolting against their state.” The bombing in Reyhanlı, which killed 53 people, is the cornerstone of this view for the people of Hatay.

By August 2014, 30,000 babies had been born in the camps. Taking account all the Syrians in Turkey, it is estimated that the number of Syrian babies born in Turkey is more than 60,000-70,000

Conclusion and Suggestions

Turkey has hosted massive influxes of migrants before. The most important feature of these was that they were ethnically and religiously preferred and controlled groups under a specific strategy.¹³ The migration flows in the 1980s from Iran, Iraq and Syria were temporary and caused by momentary troubles. However, the Syrian crisis confronted Turkey with the largest migration in its history in numerical terms and of its characteristics.

The field research underlying this study supports the idea that despite all the real or perceived problems cited above, Turkish society in general shows great social acceptance towards Syrians. However, it cannot be denied that as the conflict continues, this hospitality will reach its limits. Social acceptance has the propensity to diminish as the number of refugees and the duration of their stay increases while the opportunities for work and social welfare decreases. Furthermore, acceptance may trans-

form into discrimination, racism or even racial violence.

Statements like “Syrians must go, at least to the camps”¹⁴ has been expressed in some opinion polls and recent demonstrations and attacks against Syrians has already raised concerns. Nevertheless, it would be inappropriate to summarize the attitude of Turkish society with one-sided or pointed statements. Despite these incidences, the general positive attitude towards social acceptance remains valid. Still, Turkey should not be dependent on this positive attitude of Turkish people to the management of the process long-term.

Migration should be properly managed to avoid harm and bring benefits to Turkey and Syrians alike; this necessitates short, medium and long-term projections. One of the important issues is the question of “temporariness/permanency” of Syrians. So far, policies have been shaped around “temporariness.” It is well known that massive forced migration flows in cases where quick return is prevented have a tendency to become protracted. In such situations, as in the case with Syrians, social acceptance by society needs to be brought to the agenda. Short-term decisions and regulations of state institutions may be important and effective, but social acceptance and society’s attitude in the middle and long-term are the main determinants of the integration process. Therefore, the degree of social acceptance has a great effect on migra-

tion management and state policies toward it.¹⁵

The interviews with local people indicate that locals want Syrians to return to their country as soon as possible or to be relocated to the camps. Furthermore, some locals state that while they have embraced Syrians fleeing the war, the refugees should know their limitations and obey the rules of the region regarding the threshold of hospitality. All of these reactions are expected; in fact, there could be much harsher responses. At high-level meetings, Turkish authorities have announced that they will try to create the best strategy to address all such concerns, especially after the demonstrations and attacks against Syrians in 2014. During the management of the integration process, registration, reassuring society, briefing locals and even demanding solidarity are highly needed.

Although the high degree of social acceptance is an advantage, policies should be implemented delicately and the crisis should be managed in accordance with international law, social order and peace in order to maintain its sustainability. Turkish authorities should explain to society that the process is under control.

Registration was one of the main problems for managing the Syrian crisis. In September 2014, only 50 percent (780,000) of Syrians in Turkey were registered. However, over 90 percent of the Syrians in Turkey were registered by the end of 2014 thanks to the intensive efforts of of-

ficials in cooperation with UNHCR. The registration process (including qualifications of the Syrians) should be completed since it is of vital importance for both the management of the process and the refugees themselves.

The rights and opportunities of local people should not be damaged by the precautions taken for Syrians. For example, the negations that stem from Syrians' access to work permits, health services and education should be cleared and any economic activity or irregular labor, which causes unfair competition, should be prevented.

Local and foreign NGOs should take more initiative to facilitate social acceptance and integration and contribute to the daily lives of both Syrians and locals. Moreover, the limitations on these initiatives should be lifted.

The sincere efforts of city and county governors and the representatives of institutions such as AFAD and Kızılay should be appreciated. Their motivation should be promoted. Local governments should offer more projects in the spheres of education and placement of Syrians.

The qualifications of Syrians should be analyzed through research. It is urgent to conduct a survey and generate a list of qualified Syrian migrants.

The UN agencies state that there is over 2 million refugees in Turkey by the end of 2014. Furthermore, it is

generally accepted that the war will continue and a healthy environment for living will not be supplied in the short-term. Therefore, it is not a mistake to speak of the permanency of Syrians in Turkey. By August 2014, 30,000 babies had been born in the camps.¹⁶ Taking account all the Syrians in Turkey, it is estimated that the number of Syrian babies born in Turkey is more than 60,000-70,000. For these babies to thrive in Turkey, a new attitude is needed.

New studies should be conducted for the peaceful integration of Syrians into society. The attention given at the beginning is essential for the acceptance process, as has been learned from 50-years of experience of Turks abroad.¹⁷ Ideas of “guests” or “temporariness” have a discriminatory connotation. Therefore, precautions should be taken to prevent the rise of negative attitudes.

Our research implies that the Syrian war will continue and that re-establishing peace will be delayed. Turkey should assess the duration of the stay of Syrians. Taking into account the examples of global refugee crises, it could be assumed that a significant proportion of Syrians will remain in Turkey; some predictions imply that it could be up to 1,5 million or even more. Thus, the Turkish state should modify its policy, prepare for some potential permanency and develop a strategy that contains short, medium and long-term elements. This includes preparing society for these realities and introduces integration policies. ■

Endnotes

1. UNHCR-IDMC (The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre) press release: http://www.unhcr.org.tr/uploads/root/13_may_2014-idmc-unhcr_ortak_basin_a%C3%87iklamasi.pdf, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/>
2. <http://www.euractiv.com.tr/politika-000110/article/bm-turkiyede-400-bin-siginmaci-icin-hazirlik-yapiyoruz-030299>
3. “Turkey needs policy tailored for longer stay of Syrians: UNHCR representative,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, (September 15, 2014), retrieved from <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-needs-policy-tailored-for-longer-stay-of-syrians-unhcr-representative.aspx?pagerID=238&nID=71711&NewsCatID=33>
4. For “social acceptance” see: M. Fertig (2004) *Die gesellschaftliche Akzeptanz von Zuwanderern in Deutschland*, (<http://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Downloads/Infothek/Zuwanderungsrat/exp-fertig-zuwanderungsrat.html>) and R. Ralph-P. Stein (Eds.) (2001) *Migration Policy and the Economy: International Experiences*. Neuried: Ars&Unitas.
5. English and Turkish versions of the report is available on www.hugo.hacettepe.edu.tr address. The study is also published as a book by Bilgi University Printing House in March 2015 (ISBN: 978-605-399-369-8). The extensive survey research named as “Syrian Perception in Turkey” is placed in both the research and the book. The whole report of the comprehensive research of “Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration”, which is conducted by HUGO with a group of 11 researcher, will be published under the same name as a book. The research was conducted in cooperation with Hacettepe University, International Organization for Migration-IOM and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung-KAS. I sincerely thank to all the institutions, their representatives and researchers who contributed to this study namely, A. Akçiçek, İ. Akıncı, D. Aydın, S. Çakar, T. Çetinkaya, F.M. Gültekin, E. Sevinin, B. Teneke, Dr. E. Uzgören, Dr. A. Yıldız.
6. For the research of “Syrians in Turkey: Social Acceptance and Integration”, deep interviews were conducted with 24 people in each one of the 6 cities; with 72 non-camp Syrians who are over 18 years old and 72 local people in total. 36,1% of the Syrians interviewers and 32,6% of local people are women.

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9. In Kilis, City governor shared his study on hospitals in which the total share of Syrians in health services is 3%.
10. "Gaziantep, Adıyaman ve Kilis ekmek kapısı oldu," Anadolu Ajansı, March 8, 2014, retrieved from <http://www.aa.com.tr/tr/ekonomi/298239--gaziantep-adiyaman-ve-kilis-ekmek-kapisi-oldu>
11. There are many political expression and news paper coloumns which instigate there actions. To illustrate, please see: Ertuğrul Özkök, "Arkadaş, Misafirsen Misafirliğini Bil!", Hürriyet, July 27, 2012, retrieved from <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/yazarlar/21077508.asp>
12. In July 14, 2013, the statement of Erdoğan "53 Sunni citizens were martyred" after the bombing in Reyhanlı was criticized in Hatay.
13. A. İçduygu, S. Erder, Ö.F. Gençkaya, International Migration Policies of Turkey, (İstanbul: MiReKoç, 2014) pp. 99-170.
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16. <http://www.ajanshaber.com/turkiye-dogumlu-suriyeli-bebekler-haberi/117366>
17. An issue that is the particular expertise of HUGO.

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