Protecting the Most Vulnerable: Refugees in Turkey amidst COVID-19

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On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) defined the global novel coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic. As of April 25, over 2,833,778 cases have been reported worldwide in 210 countries, with the number of cases increasing every day.

The virus does not in principle discriminate between nation, age, gender, religion and class, although socio-economic factors do play a major role in who is most vulnerable, as well as how governments may have responded to the outbreak, which nevertheless poses a threat to all. There are basic hygiene and containment rules that one can follow to protect themselves from the virus. The level of access to local healthcare systems, hospitals, and treatment facilities, also factor in. Yet, not everyone has the same opportunity to protect themselves from the virus, or the same ability to access to medical treatment in case of contraction. Vulnerable groups such as refugees and migrants who live in camps or densely populated urban areas, depend on state services. They are may easily become a victim of such a virus, unless the hosting-states take necessary measures and protect refugees.

Various different states across the world have had differences in their approach towards vulnerable communities. For example, while the Portuguese government gives temporary citizenship to asylum seekers and migrants to enable them to access social security and health care, the US government has closed the US-Mexico border and has postponed all immigration court hearings for migrants who are waiting in Mexico for a decision on their asylum applications. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is delivering support to refugees in countries like Bangladesh and Syria. However, lack of global support for refugees risk them becoming a possible hotspot for the pandemic.

Turkey, which hosts the world’s largest refugee population with 3.6 million Syrians and 365,000 refugees of other nationalities, has taken measures to protect migrants and refugees from possible outbreaks in camps and among communities. Through personal interviews conducted with the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay), the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and NGOs currently working in the field, this info-pack aims to outline the measures taken by Turkey to protect refugees and migrants.

### Distribution of Syrians under temporary protection by top 10 cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Istanbul</td>
<td>496,561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bursa</td>
<td>175,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>İzmir</td>
<td>145,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adana</td>
<td>246,027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatay</td>
<td>436,708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kilis</td>
<td>111,608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaziantep</td>
<td>450,088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Şanlıurfa</td>
<td>423,109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mersin</td>
<td>210,904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K. Maras</td>
<td>423,088</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management
The first coronavirus case in Turkey was reported on 11 March. As of 4 May, the number of cases increased to 126,045, and the number of deaths to 3,397. The government took a number of measures before any cases were confirmed in Turkey. The country continues to employ basic containment tools and increases the measures to avoid an increase in the number of cases.

Currently, all public places in the country are closed. People over 65 and under 20 are banned from leaving their homes. Remote classes began on 23 March 2020 for primary, secondary and high schools. In-person classes are banned for universities as well for the spring semester. As of 11 April, a weekend curfew has been imposed in major cities. Five masks per week are being distributed to identity card holders, including Turkish citizens, refugees and migrants.

While protecting its citizens, Turkey is also carrying out a huge responsibility toward vulnerable communities such as refugees and asylum seekers living in the country. As of 3 April 2020, the number of people residing in Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs) is 63,627. This number accounts for less than 3 per cent of the refugees living in Turkey. The rest of the Syrians who are under temporary protection, as well as other refugees, live side by side with Turkish citizens, in the same neighbourhoods, towns and cities. According to a personal interview with an official from Kızılay, ‘Currently there is no positive case in the centres, yet we are prepared for the worst-case scenario’.

According to personal interviews with officials from DGMM and Kızılay, measures taken in the centres include the following:

Turkey’s Response to COVID-19 for the Protection of Refugees
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• All personnel in TACs and local migration management centres have been trained in protection against the coronavirus.

• All centres have been equipped with thermometers, disinfection and hygiene products. All staff have been obliged to wear masks and gloves.

• All risk groups, especially refugees aged 65 and over, have been prevented from leaving TACS and staff are assigned to meet the needs of these groups.

• Entrances and exits to the TACs are restricted. Visitors are not accepted at the centres in order to minimise the risk of infection for the inhabitants.

• In order to maintain social isolation and reduce crowded areas, common areas at the centres have been closed for use. Measures have been taken to ensure that restricted numbers of people can be present at markets at the same time.

• Hygiene kits and informative brochures have been distributed to people residing in centres.

• The facilities are regularly disinfected.

Access to health services for refugees residing in TACs is provided under the control and responsibility of the Ministry of Health. In this context, health service units work in all TACs. In all units there are health personnel and an ambulance. In the case that residents cannot be treated in the health service units, they are transferred to hospitals. All services in TAC units and hospital care are free for refugees.

Similar hygiene and containment practices are in place in Removal Centres across Turkey to protect asylum seekers whose applications for international protection have not been accepted.

• Pre-Registration Centres have been built to establish health controls for foreigners before they are allowed into Removal Centres.

• Newcomers are isolated for 14 days before interacting with other people.

• If there any symptoms, detainees are transferred to hospitals for health checks and treatment. In the case that they are COVID-19 negative, detainees return back to the Removal Centres.

• Except for lawyers and notary staff, no one is allowed to visit Removal Centres.

• Currently, detentions have been suspended nationwide and rejection for detention is still applicable for migrants through the courts.

As for the refugees and migrants who reside outside the camps, they all have access to hospitals for emergencies whether or not they are registered or carry identity cards. COVID-19 tests and treatment are free for anyone who goes to a hospital with symptoms of the virus. Refugees can also apply to Migrant Health Centres located in border cities and metropoles.

The Provincial Directorate of Migration Management offers limited services during the pandemic, but registration for a residence permit is available through online application. Registration for temporary protection continues for newborns. Some obligations for asylum seekers waiting for their cases to be closed have been eased, regular sign-in obligations have been postponed and the deadlines for documents have been extended.

Additionally, there are NGOs working in coordination with the DGMM and Kızılay to support refugees living in urban areas. According to a personal interview conducted with the NGO Support to Life, legal, psychological and case management consultancy services are continuing for all refugees living in cities. These services include informing people about the pandemic and providing the consultancy they need in this regard.

Kızılay distributes brochures in Arabic to inform people about the coronavirus precautions to prevent the spreading of the outbreak (Kızılay)
Stranded Migrants on the Turkey-Greece Border

On 27 February, 34 Turkish soldiers lost their lives and more than 30 soldiers were wounded in the air attack carried out by Russian-backed Syrian regime forces in the Idlib region of Syria. On the same day, an emergency meeting chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was held in Ankara. After the meeting, Presidential Communication Director Fahrettin Altun stated that the problem of immigration was not only Turkey’s problem, but was also the problem of the region, Europe and the world. Altun added that Turkey has not been receiving enough support and had no other choice but to loosen controls at the borders. This statement was supported on 29 February by President Erdogan, who stated that Turkey would no longer stop migrants and refugees who were seeking to go to Europe. He stated that the gates would be open for refugees coming to Turkey. However, he added that “[…] The EU has to keep its promises”.

After the announcement, thousands of refugees began to arrive in Edirne, the Turkish region bordering Greece and Bulgaria. Reportedly, 150,600 migrants and refugees have attempted to enter Greece by land or sea. Thousands have camped at the border since the Turkish state announced that it would no longer stop migrants seeking to travel to Europe. However, migrants were blocked by the Greek police and forced to return to Edirne. During a month-long timeframe, some of the migrants have voluntarily returned to the cities where they came from, losing hope of crossing to the other side of the border. Free buses to Istanbul have been provided for those who want to return.

Despite a month-long wait, Greece has not opened its gates and no agreement has been made between Turkey and the EU. During this period, Turkey announced its first coronavirus case on 11 March. Aware of the vulnerable position of the migrants, Turkish authorities began to transfer migrants waiting on the Greek border who wished to return to the cities where they had been staying. On 28 March, to prevent coronavirus infection among migrants, the Turkish government transferred the last 5,800 migrants on the field to reception centres and hostels for a 14-day quaran-
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While registered refugees and migrants were transferred to dormitories and reception centres in the cities where they were registered, unregistered refugees were transferred to Kilis and Gaziantep.

According to Kızılay, after remaining in quarantine for 14 days 5,600 thousand migrants have been placed in the Osmaniye camp. Others who have residency in Turkey have been allowed to return to their homes.

Those migrants who do not have any registration have been sent to satellite cities, provinces designated by the DGMM, where applicants for international protection are required to reside and obtain their registration. After registering, accommodation in camps has been provided for those in need. In addition, travel permits are available for those who wish to register, and they are allowed to go to the provinces which they request.

DGMM officials have also stated that when the measures taken for the coronavirus are over and life is back to normal, migrants who are willing to go to Europe will not be blocked, in accordance with Turkey’s current policy. This statement is also supported by Interior Affairs Minister Süleyman Soylu, who announced, “We were concerned that this contagion could spread across the area. We convinced the refugees of this possibility and settled all of them in repatriation centers. We have sent almost 5,800 people to repatriation centers across nine provinces. When this outbreak ends, they can return”.

After the refugee influx, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the President of the European Council Charles Michel and the Head of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen had a meeting on 8 March in Brussels. Following the summit in Brussels, a video conference was conducted between four parties on 16 March: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, French President Emmanuel Macron, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Negotiations on a revised EU-Turkey deal still continue.

Turkey’s demands are as follow: a revised deal with increased funding; a higher number of placements of asylum seekers within the EU; and EU support for the establishment of a safe zone in northern Syria for internally displaced refugees in Syria, as well as for those who would like to return from Turkey and neighbouring countries.
Internally Displaced Refugees in Idlib

According to the UNHCR, 6.6 million Syrians have been displaced since the beginning of the war in Syria. Today, there are almost a million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Idlib sheltering in camps and ruined buildings, in addition to the 3.5 million residents of the region. Due to the collapsed infrastructure and healthcare system in Idlib, the region is facing a great risk of becoming a hot spot for the pandemic.

Idlib is the last remaining de-escalation zone, one of the 4 original zones previously agreed to including that of Deraa, Eastern Ghouta, Northern Homs. However, the Syrian regime has violated the deal many times by launching frequent attacks in the region for the past several years. In 2019, more than one million people were displaced to Idlib and moved to camps or wrecked buildings near the Turkish border in northern Idlib.

Turkey has been providing cross-border humanitarian aid to Syria since the beginning of the civil war. When Operation Euphrates Shield was launched in September 2016, AFAD became the main organisation responsible for Turkey’s humanitarian activities inside northern Syria. Turkey’s relief operations continue in areas secured by Turkey’s previous Operations Euphrates Shield, Olive Branch, Peace Spring and Spring Shield.

AFAD is building camps and infrastructure, distributing food to the camps and building schools and hospitals. It is also training and giving salaries to local doctors. However, Turkey’s humanitarian activities remain limited in Idlib due to the existence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which is considered as a terrorist organisation by Turkey.

However, AFAD, Kızılay and Turkish NGOs continue to work with local partners in Idlib, providing basic humani-
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Concluding Remarks

This info-pack has outlined Turkey’s ongoing policies and practices to protect vulnerable groups. So far, the government has taken important measures in providing health, accommodation welfare services. Refugees are also being informed about ways to protect themselves against the virus.

The government’s efforts to give access to healthcare to everyone in Turkey with or without an identity card is important in distinguishing Turkey from other countries. There is an acknowledgment that the virus does not discriminate between citizens or asylum-seekers, or between regular or irregular migrants.

Of course, there is space for improvement to protect refugees and migrants from the effects of the coronavirus in all aspects of their lives. It has been reported that refugee and migrant children living in urban areas are having trouble accessing distance learning due to a lack of computer equipment. Some measures have been taken by the Ministry of Education, such as providing free internet and broadcasting the classes via television satellite. However, assistance with equipment should be provided for those in need to enable migrant and refugee children to access education.

The economic effect of the pandemic is also unavoidable for many people living in Turkey. Many businesses are closed due to the lockdown and many have had to dismiss their employees. Some regulations have been taken by the state to avoid unemployment, such as banning businesses from firing workers over the coming three months and allowing affected businesses to defer loan and tax payments. However, migrants who are working illegally cannot benefit from these regulations. Inspections for illegal labour should be increased to protect migrants and refugees from exploitation and employers should be encouraged to register their employees.

Finally, considering the dire situation in Idlib, Turkey’s cross-border aid services are vitally important for the survival of Syrians. However, under the shadow of the continuing war in Syria, Turkey’s help on its own is insufficient in addressing the challenges in Idlib. As an international responsibility, countries need to provide more support to protect Syrians and do their share in solving the crisis.

The measures taken in Idlib according to Turkey’s action plan against coronavirus are the following:

- Providing beds, blankets, surgical masks, medical equipment and thermometers to residents and staff working in the field.
- Distributing hygiene kits, including soap, cologne, detergent and bleach.
- Disinfecting the camps.
- Building quarantine tents to isolate patients with symptoms.
- Building more camps and houses for residents in Idlib.
- Conducting COVID-19 tests.
- Informing Syrians about the virus via Arabic information brochures.

Currently, there are no confirmed cases of coronavirus in Idlib. However, that is most probably linked to the lack of test kits. The situation in Idlib remains critical. As Mehmet Gülloğlu, the Head of AFAD, has stated in a teleconference conducted by the Turkish Heritage Organization in Washington, DC. “The main agenda for most of us is coronavirus, but when we look at Idlib, in fact, the main agenda is basic humanitarian needs.” Due to the ongoing war and regime attacks, there is a shortage of hospitals and shelters in Idlib. The crowded and closely situated camps do not allow for social distancing among the residents. The lack of basic hygiene equipment and lack of food is endangering the lives of the residents.

If international actors do not share the burden of Syrian IDPs and refugees by taking the necessary precautions and providing support, coronavirus can spread aggressively over the region and cause a high number of casualties.

Tarian aid as well as working as implementing agencies to distribute the aid funded by UN agencies.