

A Decade in the Balance: The Status of Syrian Refugees in Turkey 10 Years On

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Introduction

April 29th, 2011 marks the day the first Syrian men, women, and children fled their war-torn home to seek refuge across their northern border. A decade later, 3.6 million Syrian nationals— the largest number in the world — live in Turkey, residing primarily in either the south-eastern part of the country or the capital city of Istanbul. The conflict in Syria is far from reaching any feasible resolution, and over the course of the 10 years, many Syrians have fought to adjust to life in Turkey, with many putting down roots. Unfortunately, for most, life is now characterised by low education enrolment, challenges in accessing the job market, and an overarching uncertainty on the potential of returning home. This sentiment is echoed by the legal status of the 3.6 million Syrians in the country: in 2014, Turkey

announced a blanket measure of protective rights for the rapidly increasing Syrian population. While not officially designated as refugees, all “Syrians under Temporary Protection” (SuTP) were given rights of access to health services, education, and the job market. Crucially, Turkey also committed to the UNHCR right of non-refoulement for all SuTP. Now, in 2021, the status of millions of Syrians remains in question. This info-pack examines the status of Syrian nationals under Temporary Protection in Turkey a decade after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War. It will outline the successes spearheaded by Turkey and facilitated by the United Nations, European Union, and other agencies. The info-pack will also address the greatest challenges SuTP face and how Turkey and its allies may best address these obstacles in the context of an uncertain future.



Refugees gather in the town of Mytilene to protest the treatment of people in the Moria Detention Centre following the explosion that killed 3 people in Lesbos, Greece on November 26, 2016. (Claire Thomas - Anadolu Agency)

Background

The Turkish Grand National Assembly passed The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013. When the LFIP became operational in April of 2014, it represented the [legal framework](#) through which Syrian nationals entering Turkey were granted rights to access key services. Upon registration with the newly formed Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) — operating within the Ministry of Interior — Syrians received protective status and a commitment from the government that they would not be returned to Syria until it was safe. As mentioned, throughout this info-pack, Syrians in Turkey will be referred to as Syrians Under Temporary Protection (SuTP), and not “refugees” [per](#) the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention established a geographic limitation in conveying the official refugee status to a designated group, which does not include Syria, and as a signatory, and Turkey has continued to adhere to this framework. The DGMM was created as a temporary operation that aligned with UNHCR goals. It also reflected the reality that Turkey, with the financial and logistical support of various international agencies, would lead operations relating to SuTP for the indefinite future.

From 2011 onwards, the number of Syrians entering Turkey primarily through its southern border continued to rise. As hundreds of thousands became millions, it was clear that Turkey could not act alone. International aid was streamlined through the United Nations. In 2015, the UN budget — spearheaded by the UNHCR and in cooperation with over 40 UN agencies and NGO-UN partnerships — allocated approximately [336 million dollars](#) to the growing crisis. Since 2015, the budget has remained largely consistent, with a 2021 [budget](#) estimate of 349 million dollars. Aid consistently prioritised basic needs and essential services, including funding for education, as the largest portion of the budget. Community empowerment and self-reliance as well as fair protection processes and documentation were also allocated significant funds. These categories were created and updated annually in the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP). The 3RP reflects the intended strategic framework for the UN and supporting agencies. An extensive document, the plan is a key overview of the broad goals of the UN’s efforts as well as a detailed breakdown of funding. The 3RP operational goals, which strive to reflect the reality on the ground, have largely remained consistent over the years, with a gradual shift in focus towards community building and self-reliance as the number of years SuTP have lived in Turkey grows longer.

In addition to Turkey’s legal framework and the contributions of international aid, the core of the refugee response plan has been what is known as the “EU-Turkey Statement”. On March 18, 2016, representatives from the EU and Turkey announced an [agreement](#) simply known as the “EU-Turkey Statement” or “Plan”. Per the agreement, Turkey would accept refugees who had made “irregular crossings” into the EU (primarily Greece) and commit to registering and hosting Syrian nationals within their own borders in accordance with the aforementioned LFIP. Turkey would also increase its Coast Guard presence in the Aegean Sea to prevent future attempted crossings. In exchange, the EU committed [six billion Euros](#) in aid over approximately nine years to support Turkey and the SuTP. The aid was managed through the EU Facility for Refugees in Turkey and the first allocation of funds primarily focused on building temporary refugee centres. According to the [EU](#), the joint plan resulted in a 97% drop in “irregular arrivals” in one year, from a staggering 10,000 people attempting to cross the Aegean each day in 2015, to 43 in 2016. Furthermore, the EU launched two programmes in financial assistance for SuTP. The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) aimed to give 1.8 million refugees direct cash assistance for basic needs and services. The Conditional Cash Transfers for Education (CCTE) also provided funds for families with children who were attending school, in order to fund education costs and raise enrolment numbers. Both programs worked in close partnership with NGOs, and under the operational leadership of the Turkish Red Crescent.



A general view of the new Kara Tepe Refugee Camp on Lesbos island, Greece on September 13, 2020. (Aggelos Barai - Anadolu Agency)



A general view of the Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Turkey session at the European Parliament in Brussels, in Brussels, Belgium on November 06, 2019. (Dursun Aydemir - Anadolu Agency)

Status update

EU and UN aid has sought to help alleviate the burden carried by Turkey as not only the host of millions of new temporary residents but also as the operational head of all relief efforts. However, Turkey continues to bear most of the managerial and financial burden, having spent, according to some [reports](#), an estimated 30 billion dollars on SuTP in the last ten years. As the Syrian war continues and the millions of temporary residents in Turkey face poverty, illness, cultural conflict, and uncertainty, the situation remains dire. Since the first SuTP began to arrive in Turkey — and since the initial EU and UN plans and partnerships — however, much has also changed.

According to the DGMM's data, there has been a consistent dispersal of the SuTP population away from temporary shelters and into urban, semi-urban, and rural environments across the country. For [example](#), in 2016 roughly 250,000 Syrians lived in 25 housing centres, with 2.4 million residing independently. [Today](#), only 57,000 SuTP are currently housed in shelters, while almost all of the 3.6 million live independently in various provinces. Moreover, the temporary housing centres continue to close, with only 7 shelters currently in operation. Overall, this statistic is considered to be positive; the fact that almost all SuTP are residing in Turkish cities suggests a level of autonomy not possible in the past. Other [key](#) numbers include population concentration: the highest percentage of SuTP are located in Kilis, Hatay, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa, with significant numbers also living in Istanbul. In some [provinces](#), SuTP make up 25% of the total population, a reality that has drastically changed the demography in these areas. The Syrian population, in addition to being primarily concentrated in the southeast, is remarkably young. On average, SuTP are much younger than the Turkish population. In 2016, [roughly half](#) of the SuTP were between the ages of 0

and 18. The numbers of Syrian youth are expected to stay at this level, if not rise in the future.

Additionally, between 2014 and 2021, approximately 45,000 Syrian nationals have been [relocated](#) to a 3rd country. 16,924 SuTP were resettled as refugees in Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway. 28,447 Syrians were also resettled in the EU as part of the ["1 to 1 policy"](#) established within the EU-Turkey agreement in 2016, 10,338 of whom went to Germany.

International aid has continued to be a crucial part of the refugee response plan. As mentioned, the UNHCR and supporting agencies continue to [allocate](#) roughly 350 million dollars each year to relief efforts. Indicative of the ongoing severity of the situation, meeting basic needs continues to make up the largest portion of the budget with over 160 million dollars of the funds allocated. Support in "fair protection" and the filing of legal rights and services — a crucial step in registering people within the Turkish legal framework — has been allocated \$55 million annually. Community empowerment, including efforts to promote co-existence with Turkish host communities and self-reliance, make up \$72 million of the \$350 million in annual aid, a testament to the growing push to promote integration between Syrians and Turks. This effort is of particularly importance given the reality that most SuTP live in Turkish cities and the ongoing nature of the conflict in Syria prolonging any feasible timeline of return for the displaced. Furthermore, on December 17, 2020, the EU reported that the final contracts of their 6 billion Euro commitment in aid had been signed. While the exact future of funding plans from the EU is uncertain, the ESSN and CCTE — two of the core financial commitments from the EU-Turkey Plan — continue to be active initiatives for the time being.

Immediate challenges: Education

With international support, Turkey has accomplished much in adjusting to this unprecedented challenge. However, several immediate challenges are apparent. First, because of the young age of the Syrian demographic, education has been at the core of existing relief policies. However, it continues to be one of the most pressing challenges faced by Turkey in 2021. The Ministry of National Education (MoNE) and Higher Education Council (YÖK) are primarily [responsible](#) for providing access to schooling for all SuTP. Education opportunities for SuTP have come from either GEMs (Temporary Education Centres) or Turkish public schools. In 2014, the Ministry of National Education established [GEMs](#) in and around temporary housing centres. School instruction was in Arabic and adhered to the Syrian curriculum, while also including Turkish language instruction. GEMs were staffed with Syrian and Turkish teachers and were created on a temporary basis in order to keep students in the Syrian education system in anticipation of their return home. Initial enrolment rates were higher in GEMs, particularly in the earlier stages of education. However, alongside the temporary housing centres, GEMs have slowly shut down across the country, with the intention to fully close operations in the immediate future. As GEMs were located close to housing and taught both in Arabic and in accordance with the Syrian curriculum, they were believed to be the preferred method of education by most Syrian families. However, as they continue to close and some SuTP mark a decade since their arrival in Turkey, both Turkey and supporting entities have pushed for enrolment in Turkish public schools. Per Turkey's legal framework, all SuTP have a right to access public education. However, Syrian children face many barriers, the most pressing of which being language. The Arabic-Turkish language barrier continues to pose a serious challenge to enrolment numbers. This obstacle is compounded by a lack of resources, particularly with regards to [teachers](#), language instructors, and reportedly low salaries.¹ The UNHCR, UNDP, and a variety of NGOs have launched several programs to boost teacher salaries, indicating that low wages have been identified as a key obstacle in achieving education goals. However, these programmes have been limited in scope and [insufficient](#) in bridging the gap in necessary resources.

The numbers embody these challenges. According to the [3RP](#), around 680,000 children were enrolled in schooling, either through Turkish public schools or GEMs, for the

2019/2020 school year. These numbers roughly translate to a 27% enrolment in pre-primary, 89% in primary, 71% in lower secondary, and 33% in upper secondary schools. Moreover, around 37% of children under temporary protection do not attend school at all. These worrying statistics are at the forefront of efforts from both Turkey and outside parties. The EU and UN have launched several [programmes](#) with Turkish language trainers, tutors, and educational personnel intended to combat low enrolment numbers. However, these initiatives are insufficient, with both further language classes and specific training for teachers on instructing Syrian children – and their language and curriculum background – needed desperately. Moreover, the particularly low rates of upper secondary education enrolment can be [attributed](#) to many boys dropping out of school in order to financially support their families, while girls often leave school in order to marry. Both of these realities also reflect the economic challenges faced by many SuTP. Finally, it should be noted that the number of Syrian students enrolled in Turkish universities is gradually increasing. While the [number](#) remains low – approximately 20,000 in total as of 2018 – it is similar to global levels of refugee enrolment in higher education. Approximately one [third](#) of these students have received scholarships from the Turkish state, with multiple international NGOs also offering select funding programmes.



A teacher is seen with Syrian students at a classroom at the Saricam Refugee Camp - Temporary Housing Facility which hosted 30,600 Syrians, in Saricam district of Adana, Turkey on November 21, 2019. (Ibrahim Erikan - Anadolu Agency)

¹ Dorman, Stephanie. "Educational Needs Assessment for Urban Syrian Refugees in Turkey". UNHCR, 2014.

Immediate challenges: Employment and social mobility

According to [data](#) from 2018, approximately 1.6 million Syrians in Turkey are of working age. Of the 1.6 million, approximately 20,000 have official work permits. As a separate [study](#) puts it, among a surveyed population, 84% of refugee households had someone working, but only 3% of said workers held a work permit, with most of the permit holders residing in central Turkey. Put simply, the Syrian labour force is chiefly characterised by its participation in the informal economy. Within the informal [market](#), construction, textiles, agriculture, and artisanship make up the most common jobs, with the distribution of jobs among Syrians almost evenly divided across these sectors. In terms of [wages](#), the average monthly salary is estimated at around 1058 liras; this is significantly lower than the estimated average wage for Turkish nationals across the country. While the informal economy has been crucial for many Syrians in being able to provide for their families upon their initial arrival in Turkey, a decade on, it represents one of the greatest obstacles to financial and social mobility. The dominance of the informal labour force means that most Syrians do not have job security, reliable hours or wages, or easy access to health services. Furthermore, despite the fact that all SuTP have a right to access the job market, most are unable to move to the formal sector as they often lack the necessary education, training, and language skills.

The influx of informal workers has also had a societal impact across Turkey. The rapid rise in Syrian workers has produced mass [displacement](#) in the informal sector, equating to roughly six Turkish natives for every SuTP. [Wages](#) have also been driven down in informal work in accordance with this change. Based on this challenge, a variety of vocational training programmes have been initiated by the UN, EU, and Turkish government, but they have been limited in scope and thin in results. As is the case with education, Syrians across the board suffer from inadequate Turkish language instruction, as well as soft skills training. These obstacles pose major challenges to not only the immediate security of the 3.6 million SuTP, but also prevent further any form of substantial development of wealth or comfort. As one study put it, there is also a notable lack of regional specificity: as time has gone on, the Syrian population has spread out to urban, semi-urban, and rural areas across the country. As a result, the educational and work needs of the population have changed and diversified. Current initiatives appear to not only lack scope, but also fail to meet the evolving status of this demographic in 2021. As the numbers of years SuTP live in Turkey increases, the education and job-based needs of the population will only increase in intensity. This pressing challenge will need to be prioritised and addressed in order to prevent a generational gap in education and employment. This potential gap could irreparably harm millions of people's quality of life.

Long-term challenges

While education and employment represent two pressing challenges faced by the refugee response plans, there are also several long-term concerns. As mentioned earlier, the 2016 EU-Turkey Plan represents a crucial framework of response with regards to Syrians under Temporary Protection. However, despite the magnitude of the initiative, its [nature](#) as a political agreement, and not a law or binding contract, means that its survival depends on the bilateral relations between the two entities. In 2021, the status of this partnership is particularly in question, as while the EU has committed all of the funds initially agreed upon, the status of Syrian nationals in Turkey remains in question, with Turkey continuing to carry the burden of hosting the 3.6 million residents. The EU has announced smaller-scale

plans to contribute aid, particularly through the continuation of its ESSN and CCTE initiatives. However, there is a serious and pressing need for an updated commitment between the two parties. This is particularly pressing given other recent challenges to the EU-Turkey relationship that threaten to derail plans for a comprehensive policy update.

Underlying almost all long-term challenges to Turkey's efforts to support SuTP is the greater uncertainty of the future. All initiatives launched both within Turkey and through international actors were done so on a temporary basis. Most notably, the legal framework through which most Syrian nationals reside in Turkey is fundamentally based on temporality. As many Syrians experience more

than a decade of displacement, with the prospect of return still not a feasible possibility, legal understandings of Syrians' place in Turkish society will need to be updated to reflect present reality. This change will also need to reflect the greater support needed with respect to education and job access, as well as the fact that this demographic is increasingly tied to its host country in crucial ways.

Additionally, while many SuTP still require immediate and basic services as their primary form of support from the UN, future aid policies will need to be updated and extended to accurately reflect long-term planning for a population that has now put down roots in Turkey. In theory, a significant portion of this ideological framework should come from the guidance of the UN and 3RP reports. While these reports have previously been successful in indicating a need for increased self-reliance and community adjustment, the overarching approach of the UN has not changed to accurately reflect the extent of time passed, nor expansion of aid needed. A decade after the first Syrians arrived in Turkey, support for Syrians' future must be characterised by long-term initiatives to support the population as residents, not only refugees. As the duration of the at-risk populations' residency in the host country has far surpassed the parameters of the UN's initial assessment, the UN must establish a new framework through which to approach aid. This challenge is undoubtedly complex, but it must be prioritised as it not only determines UN policy but also establishes the framework through which most humanitarian work is organised and understood both in Turkey and throughout the world.

It should be noted that the UNHCR, in its 2021 annual [reporting](#), has included plans for applications for voluntary return to Syria for 20,000 individuals. While this number is relatively low, its inclusion reflects the possibility, or hope, that the situation in Syria will become safe enough for a small portion of Syrian nationals to return. It is impossible

to predict the feasibility of this, but nonetheless, this portion of the UNHCR agenda should be monitored closely. In fact, this number is symbolic of a more extensive need for long-term planning. Any future efforts to create a long-term effort for resettlement must be spearheaded by the UN and international community. As mentioned, reports like the 3RP provide an ideological framework through which actors allocate resources and assign goals. However, while Turkey has led the response to the mass displacement — and carried much of the financial burden — it is the responsibility of international agencies and actors to lead long-term planning with respect to the ultimate fate of the millions of Syrians worldwide. In other words, while Turkey has assumed a leading role thus far out of geography-based necessity, it should not be obligated to take ownership of long-term policies for settlement and stability in Syria.

Finally, it should be noted that the domestic political climate in Turkey has created additional obstacles in response efforts. The politicisation of the Syrian population — including both anti-refugee sentiment and the threatening of resource restriction as a political tool — threatens to undermine the successes of the Turkish government in its response to the crisis thus far. Turkey has been uniquely burdened by the mass population influx, and its responses have required immense financial and operational commitments. The nurturing of anti-refugee sentiment only creates an additional burden on agencies to successfully integrate SuTP into society, which in turn creates a need for more resources to support these communities. Additionally, threats to cut off funding — as demonstrated, for example, by the CHP [mayor](#) of Bolu Tanju Özcan — politicises and falsely simplifies the complex aid framework that has not only saved millions of lives, but also generated access to education, employment, and community for some of the most vulnerable population in the world.

Conclusion

At the core of every financial, policy, and logistical decision about the Syrian refugee crisis has been the question of who carries the primary burden of support with respect to the 3.6 million displaced individuals who now reside in Turkey. Through legal and operational leadership, Turkey has carried the weight of much of that burden, supported by the UN and EU in its endeavours. Now, ten years after the first refugees arrived in the country, many challenges remain, with the lives and livelihoods of millions in ques-

tion. While there have been several notable successes in providing support for the Syrians under Temporary Protection in Turkey, their levels of education enrolment and employment reflect a worrying reality that must be addressed. In the long term, Turkey faces a greater uncertainty with respect to the legal status of the Syrian nationals now living in communities across the country as well as the future of UN and EU aid.

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