

Syrian Refugees in Turkey:

A Decade of Care

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(Kerem Kocalar - Anadolu Agency)

A decade has passed since the Syrian Civil War started, leading to the deaths and displacement of millions of Syrians, with almost 4 million refugees escaping to Turkey. As the war continued and Syrian refugees' safe return to their country became more and more distant a possibility, the Turkish government allowed for policymaking that aimed at community building and societal integration to reduce friction between Syrian refugees and their host communities. While there have been multiple successes when it comes to Turkey hosting Syrian refugees, it has not come without challenges, both internal as well as external. One of the major ones was that the majority of the burden of hosting Syrian refugees was shouldered by Turkey alone, despite many assurances of support as a result of the UN Regional Response Plan in 2012 and the EU-Turkey refugee deal in 2016. Despite that, Turkey has remained resolute when it comes to both the wellbeing of Syrian refugees as well as upholding its international commitments.

A decade has passed since the Syrian Civil War started, leading to the deaths and displacement of millions of Syrians. As the violence began, many of them fled to Turkey, fearing for their safety. The Turkish government had to reconfigure and update refugee laws and regulations. Even though Turkey was a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, related geographical limitations as to who is considered a refugee in Turkey made the management of the Syrian refugee crisis technically complicated, with the term 'guest' being used to describe them instead. Regardless, Syrian refugees were provided rights related to employment, education and healthcare.

As the war has continued, the Syrian refugees' safe return to their country has become a more and more distant possibility. Therefore, the Turkish government allowed for policymaking that aimed at community building and societal integration to reduce friction between Syrian refugees and their host communities. This move was also related to ensuring that Syrian refugees, many of them having been in Turkey for years, become self-sufficient and productive members of Turkish society. It must be noted that the majority of the burden of hosting almost 4 million Syrian refugees was shouldered by Turkey alone. Despite many assurances of support, such as from the United Nations (UN) Regional Response Plan in 2012 and the European Union (EU)-Turkey refugee deal in 2016, Turkey continued to lift

most of the burden alone.

While there have been multiple successes when it comes to Turkey hosting Syrian refugees, it has not come without challenges, both internal and external. The [Turkish opposition-affiliated media](#) often represents Syrian refugees utilizing public funds, which leads Turks to view it as resources (public funding on education or health, for example) no longer available to them. The perceived negative economic consequences of hosting Syrian refugees have peppered the political discourse in Turkey, with opportunistic opposition parties willing to wager electoral victories on the vilification of vulnerable refugees. Additionally, all refugees, including Syrian ones, continued to be provided with free access to healthcare in Turkey even after the arrival of Covid-19 to the country in March 2020. Finally, Turkey, being a transit country for refugees en route to the EU, has had multiple border standoffs with Greece in recent years amidst multiple reports of refugees being illegally pushed back to prevent them from seeking asylum in Greece.

Considering that Syrian refugees may not return to Syria for a long time, it is important to focus on community building and integration efforts. To ensure sustainability, this can be done by recognising and prioritising the needs of both the Syrian refugees and the Turkish host communities.



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History of Syrians in Turkey

The first group of 252 Syrians came to Turkey in April 2011 when anti-regime protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad turned violent. Against the backdrop of the 'Arab Spring' that resulted in pro-democracy protests in the region, protests started in Syria in March 2011. The Syrian government responded by using deadly force to quell the protests. At this time, Syrians did not require a visa to enter Turkey. Observing the protests, Ankara announced an open-door policy, allowing any Syrians safe refuge to Turkey via any route (sea, air or over the land border).

It must be noted that, at the time, Turkey was undergoing significant changes with regards to refugee laws and asylum regulations. Since the founding of the Turkish Republic, Turkey has not had an immigration policy bound by specific legislation. The current settlement law known as 'Iskan Kanunu' was the primary reference that policymakers used to manage immigrant inflows. However, this law was to ensure the settlement of immigrants that had Turkish ancestry and were thus of Turkish origin. Additionally, Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Geneva Convention that defined what a 'refugee' is. The convention asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom. However, the country maintains a geographical limitation that limits



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the granting of refugee status to those originating from Europe. In other words, according to this limitation, Turkey will grant refugee status to refugees originating from Europe only. Thus, it retains resettlement to a third country as the most preferred durable solution for refugees arriving from outside of Europe. The Geneva Convention affords refugees rights such as access to the labour market, legal documents, funds, etc. Considering the situation temporary and the numbers limited, the Turkish government granted Syrian refugees' temporary protection status' in October 2011, with Turkish officials referring to them strictly as "guests" and not "refugees" with Geneva Convention rights. Indeed, it seemed to be the case as Turkey was only hosting 8,000 registered Syrian refugees by the end of 2011. Several thousand had even returned home as the conflict briefly subsided.

However, by mid-2012, thousands of refugees flowed into Turkey as ceasefire efforts collapsed and violence erupted once more. As the flow of Syrian refugees remained unabated, Turkey developed its first asylum law in 2013: the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP). Though much better aligned with international standards, the new law still maintained the geographical restriction but provided Syrian refugees access to some social services. Even though Turkey limited the number of Syrian refugees it could host to 100,000, newly registered Syrian refugees (including both arrivals and births) had surged to almost 900,000 by the end of 2015. This development put pressure on Turkish municipalities in major cities that hosted a large number of Syrian refugees.

Initially, Turkey put constraints on the activities of international NGOs related to refugee rehabilitation in the country due to what the government perceived to be [security threats](#). However, the Turkish government could not continue to finance the entire operation on its own and ultimately received financial assistance from the UN as part of the UN Regional Response Plan in April 2012. However, even though Turkey was promised \$497 million in relief, the country only received [28 per cent](#) of it by October 2014. Thus, much of the burden of hosting Syrian refugees was borne by Turkey alone.

It did not help that the European Union (EU) took a more security-oriented approach (as opposed to a humanitarian approach) to the conflict, resulting in the signing of the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement to curb the flow of Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU. In any case, Turkey successfully achieved this objective, as evidenced by a rapid decline in numbers of refugees entering the EU illegally from Turkey. Similar to the UN Regional Response Plan, however, Turkey only received some of the promised [6 billion EUR](#) in refugee rehabilitative assistance.

According to the UNHCR, 6.6 million Syrians have been displaced since the beginning of the war, with more than 4 million Syrians dispersed in Turkey – constituting almost 3.5 per cent of the host country's total population and 15 per cent of Syria's pre-2011 population. Of these 4 million Syrian refugees, almost half (1.6 million) are children under the age of 18.



Syrian refugees are seen at the Elbeyli accommodation facility in Kilis, Turkey on January 29, 2016. (Kerem Kocalar - Anadolu Agency)

Turkey: A New Home

Turkey's open-door policy for Syrian refugees has earned Turkey the title of the world's largest refugee-hosting country (Esen & Binatli, 2017). Even though Turkish refugee camps for Syrians were praised for being among the most well-equipped refugee camps ever, they were not meant to be a long-term solution. This situation has been exacerbated by the continuation of the Syrian Civil War, leading to high numbers of Syrian refugees coming into Turkey. Given that, hosting Syrian refugees in camps became prohibitively expensive. Responding to the need for a long-term and sustainable solution that fosters integration and facilitates economic self-empowerment for Syrian refugees, the Turkish government allowed them to live outside refugee camps. By January 2016, the authorities granted them the right to work and earn a living for themselves. By February 2021, a significant majority of Syrian refugees (98.4 per cent) were residing [outside of refugee camps](#).

Besides the fact that it became very expensive to keep refugee camps open, the decision to close them down was heavily influenced by the fact that many refugees could manage well outside of the camps. Not only were they able to support themselves, but they were also contributing to the Turkish economy. According to a 2019 study by the Economic Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV), 2.2 million Syrian refugees were of working age. Out of these, approximately [1 million were employed in the informal economy](#). Similarly, more than 10,000 Syrian refugees owned businesses registered in Turkey (there are likely thousands of unregistered Syrian-owned businesses) that employed both Syrians and Turks. Moreover, by 2017, [Syrian refugees](#)

[had invested \\$334 million in Turkey](#), with Syrians having started more companies in the country than any other foreign nationality.

Additionally, Syrian refugees have improved the demographic 'window of opportunity' for Turkey. That they have tended to be predominantly of working age has improved the proportion of workers to dependents (e.g., retired or unable to work). [Research](#) shows that countries with ageing populations face the prospect of enormous future costs that cannot be met with current budget allocations. Migration tends to ease the pressure in such cases. Due to the influx of Syrian refugees, Turkey has been said to have gained an entire decade in its [demographic window of opportunity](#) not only because 60 per cent of Syrian migrants (2.2 million) are working-age (18-64), but also because only 2 per cent of the migrants are above retirement age. Moreover, Syrian refugees tend to have a [high employment rate](#), as noted above. Also, more than a million Syrian refugees are under the age of 10. This age group is likely to contribute to the Turkish economy well into the future.

Syrian refugee children's future has always been prioritised by Turkey. Even when they were considered a temporary presence in the country, such as in September 2014 when Turkey opened Temporary Education Centres (TEC) that taught a modified Syrian curriculum in Arabic. 404 TECs catered to the Syrian refugee population by August 2017. However, these had been designed keeping the temporary nature of Syrian refugees in Turkey in mind. As the chances of refugee children's return to Syria looked bleaker and bleaker, the Turkish government decided to [transfer](#) all Syrian refugee children to the Turkish public education

system to facilitate integration into the wider Turkish society. Beginning to phase out the TECs, the Turkish government also began to provide cash assistance in 2017 - with the help of the EU - to encourage Syrian refugee families to enrol their children into Turkish public schools. Turkish efforts to improve education provisions among Syrian refugee children were likely linked to ensuring that they do not become a permanent, disenfranchised underclass within Turkish society. In the 2014-15 school year, which was the first year of organised education for refugees, only 30 per cent of school-age Syrians attended school at all, with only 17 per cent of those going to school attending Turkish public schools. However, with the [Turkish initiative to educate Syrians bearing fruit](#), by the 2017-18 school year, 63 per cent of school-age Syrians were in school, with a majority attending Turkish public schools rather than TECs.

When it comes to higher education, the Turkish government has ensured policies and regulations that allow it to be utilised as a tool for social integration. Unlike other international students, [Syrian refugees do not have to pay tuition fees](#) in Turkish universities or higher education institutes. This step has led to an increase in higher education enrolment and, with that, student experiences of [social integration and normalisation](#).

In terms of healthcare provision, several regulations by the Turkish government have enabled Syrian refugees to benefit from access to [free primary health care](#) such as family health care centres, mental health counselling centres etc. Along with that, many secondary and tertiary health services are also available free of charge to refugees in the cities they registered in across Turkey. The financial costs are covered by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). Syrian refugees also have the right to have private health insurance. To help Syrian refugees overcome significant language and cultural barriers when it comes to access to healthcare, the Turkish government has allowed Syrian medical professionals to practice in the country and serve the Syrian community.

Challenges Faced

While there have been multiple successes when it comes to Turkey hosting Syrian refugees, it has not come without challenges, both internal and external. In terms of internal challenges, there has been a perception, fuelled by opposition parties, that Syrian refugees harmed the Turkish economy, particularly employment opportunities for Turks. Additionally, as noted above, the Turkish media often represents Syrian refugees as being a strain on public funds.

It has been asserted that the majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey are employed by the country's already large informal economy (there are 2.2 million working-age Syrian refugees, of which roughly 1 million are said to be employed in the informal economy). There is, however, no way to determine whether Syrian refugees displaced Turkish citizens working in the informal economy, who may or may

not have been seeking the same jobs. There is, however, research suggesting that because of Syrian refugees lowering labour costs for Turkish employers, more Turkish workers – who may have been offered informal jobs before – have become formally employed. When it comes to the formal sector, similar job supplanting by Syrian refugees has not been conclusively evidenced.

Moreover, Syrian refugees have been meeting the demand for cheap labour in Turkey, contributing to Turkish industry. Previous research also conclusively suggests that there was no change in wages for those employed in formal jobs. In fact, there is research that points towards an increase in wages for Turkish citizens in the informal sector post-Syrian refugee influx. There is also evidence that the benefits of accommodating refugees will accrue over time as Syrian refugees create demand for goods and services, generate local jobs and industries, establish companies and continue to engage in trade.

However, even though the evidence says otherwise, the perceived negative economic consequences of hosting Syrian refugees have peppered the political discourse of various political parties in Turkey. Both the government and the opposition camps' political discourse emphasized the resources spent on Syrian refugees, and the consequences, benefits and motivation behind the government's policy, albeit from contrasting perspectives. Vitriolic rhetoric became increasingly loud [during the March 2019 local election campaigns](#): İlay Aksoy, the İYİ Party mayoral candidate for the Fatih district of Istanbul, where many Syrian refugees live, used election banners that read, 'I will not leave Fatih at the hands of Syrians'. The banners eventually had to be [taken down](#) due to criticism from both politicians and citizens.

Additionally, with the acceleration of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020, all refugees in Turkey were provided with access to testing. The Turkish government is leading the response in the fight against Covid-19 in the country, supported by local governments that play a key role in ensuring refugees' access to critical information. Considering that language has been one of the biggest barriers to healthcare for refugees, as noted above, health information in Arabic distributed through [leaflets, media, and mobile phone](#) communication have been key measures undertaken by the Turkish government to overcome it.

Research conducted recently showed that [Syrian refugees had high levels of trust in Turkish healthcare](#) and the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic. The research study also showed that communication efforts undertaken by the Turkish government when it comes to hygienic practices related to Covid-19 prevention measures were effective amongst refugee populations.

Another challenge faced is illegal immigration and related international disputes. Due to its geographical position, Turkey, connecting continents, is a transit country

particularly for those who want to go to immigrate to the EU. As noted above, even though the EU-Turkey agreement signed in 2016 successfully curbed the numbers of refugees entering the EU illegally from Turkey, the [sharp increase](#) in the number of refugee crossings in 2019 led to tensions between Turkey and Greece. In response to increasing refugee arrivals, the [Greek government was quick to pass a new asylum law in October 2019](#) to facilitate the return of more people to Turkey under the terms of the EU-Turkey migration agreement. It also closed the Ministry of Migration and transferred responsibility to the Ministry of Civil Protection, i.e. the Greek police. There have been multiple reports of [refugees being pushed back to Turkish waters](#) to prevent them from seeking asylum in Greece. The asylum seekers have testified that, after being detained by Greek officials, their personal belongings were confiscated without any official procedure, and they were subjected to abuse. The abuse included beatings with hands and batons, kicking, and the use of stun guns. Despite the Greek authorities' denials, findings of NGOs, intergovernmental agencies and media reports have been consistent. The Council of Europe has registered Greece's push back practices as violations of international law. By October 2020, Greece began to extend a border wall along the Turkish border to deter migrants from trying to enter the country, after [multiple border standoffs in early 2020](#) over the same issue "[helped drive Greek-Turkish relations to a dangerously low ebb](#)".

Looking to the Future

Even though Syrian refugees were only expected to have a temporary presence in Turkey, they have been a part of Turkish life for the last decade. With ongoing violence and

conflict in their country, Syrians may not be able to return anytime soon, leading to the need for sustainable community development and social integration efforts. This issue is compounded by the fact that a majority (almost 95 per cent) of Syrian refugees live in or close to urban areas. While Syrian refugees are currently provided with access to employment, healthcare, education, Turkish language training and other facilities to become self-sufficient and productive members of Turkish society, integration must become central to policymaking related to Syrian refugees. Importantly, municipalities must be provided with funding that "reflects their actual population, both Turkish and Syrian, so that local authorities can [address the needs of refugees without sacrificing](#)" services available to citizens.

[Integration efforts focused on the host communities](#) have to respond to local grievances about the influx of Syrian refugees in a proactive way. These efforts need to acknowledge the legitimate grievances while addressing misinformation. Engaging grassroots-level civil society organisations and local government is paramount to promoting social cohesion and providing vocational training to Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens. Such steps will encourage joint ventures between the two communities.

Turkey has faced significant challenges while hosting Syrian refugees over the past decade. However, it has remained resolute when it comes to both ensuring the well-being of Syrian refugees and upholding its international commitments. Multilateral organisations such as the EU and the UN should expand their current level of support to the country, particularly prioritising integration and social cohesion for improved regional outcomes.



Syrian refugee boy Hani Nachi (5) poses in front of wall paintings at a kindergarten in a refugee camp in Kilis, Turkey on January 29, 2016. (Kerem Kocalar - Anadolu Agency)