

Syrian refugees in Turkey: challenges to and opportunities for longer-term integration

Workshop summary

Introduction

The Syrian conflict and humanitarian crisis, entering its fifth year, has driven a large influx of refugees into Turkey. The official number has already reached almost 2.6million,¹ making the country the largest host of Syrian refugees. Turkey has faced large migration flows from across the Middle East region in the past—Iraqi Kurds, Bosnian Muslims, and Afghans, for example—but never before in these numbers, or for this extended period of time.

The well-equipped refugee camps Turkey constructed as an immediate response were intended to be a solution for a short-term problem. However, the longevity of the war in Syria rapidly raised the number of Syrians entering Turkey after the first refugee flow in April 2011. Around ninety percent of them remain outside camp settings, living in urban areas mostly in the South Eastern part of the country, as well as other cities like Ankara or Istanbul.²

Once it became clear that Syrians in Turkey were not just temporary ‘guests’, the need for broader adaptation to the growing refugee crisis became apparent. In response, Turkey began to develop and build institutional and infrastructural capacities to deal with ‘permanent refugees’ who want to secure their presence in the country. Long-term integration and settlement of the refugees, especially given the large scale of the crisis, calls for a comprehensive, unified, and rigorous approach. It also necessitates greater cooperation between policy makers, practitioners, and civil society organisations in different areas such as health, education, and employment. In addition, it requires robust international cooperation and support.

In the framework of the European Union-funded *Capacities for Peace* project, Saferworld in partnership with PODEM (Center for Public Policy

and Democracy Studies), ORSAM (Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies), and Baytna Syria convened two workshops, in Gaziantep and Ankara in December 2015. The Gaziantep workshop provided a platform for local Syrian organisations and community actors to exchange perspectives regarding the Syrian presence in Turkey, including relations with host communities, the problems they face on the ground, and possible solutions for their integration. The Ankara workshop brought together policy makers, practitioners, experts, and academics active in the refugee issue as well as civil society representatives from southeast Turkey to discuss the measures taken to date, risks, opportunities, and areas for cooperation.

The first section of this workshop report analyses the main challenges emphasised by Syrian community members as well as Turkish practitioners and experts: the lack of clarity and communication regarding the refugees’ status and future; the perceived lack of coordination and inefficiency by the bureaucracy; unemployment and poor living conditions; and finally, the potential for social tension between the two communities. The second section proposes measures for social integration in the realms of education, business, and employment, and the role of civil society therein. The third section evaluates the current state of international support.

1. Main challenges emphasised in the workshops

- Lack of clarity and communication on refugees’ status

Syrian refugees in Turkey are becoming increasingly disillusioned by the lack of clarity regarding their legal status in Turkey and consequently their future prospects. Five years ago, when they fled the destruction of war, most Syrians felt ‘grateful’ for the open-door policy of the Turkish government. Five years on, they are still grateful to the Turkish state and society, but seek clarity as to what the future holds for them in Turkey.

¹ The official number in Turkey as of 13 January 2016 is 2,523,544 according to the Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management.

² See regularly updated data from UNHCR on: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

“There is a lack of clarity as to how Turkey will continue to host Syrians. Those who can afford it just want to leave for the Promised Land (Western Europe).”

Syrian workshop participant, Gaziantep

In legal terms, Syrian refugees are currently under “temporary protection status”,³ which grants them access to health, education, and social and legal assistance through a provisional identity card. This ad hoc status, which applies to Syrian refugees only, does not however grant them internationally recognised refugee status and will not lead to citizenship rights.

Workshop participants stressed how the current legal arrangements make it difficult for the refugees to envisage any mid to longer-term prospects in Turkey. Whether in camps or out in urban areas, most feel trapped in a situation in which it is uncertain whether they will be able to work legally or claim citizenship rights in the future.

These problems are compounded by the perceived lack of available and clearly defined channels of communication between Syrian refugees and official bodies, from local authorities to the central government. Syrian community leaders point out that over the course of the past four years, only four meetings were organised by the Turkish authorities — the last two only recently (October – November 2015). Syrian refugees claim that they are aware of their rights and opportunities mostly through word-on-the-street or social media. Growing increasingly disillusioned, better-off Syrian refugees begin seeking opportunities in Europe, often referred to as the “Promised Land” during the workshop.

While communications with Turkish authorities are difficult, the Syrian refugees are also a mixture of different communities (urban and rural, male and female, younger and older, as well as having political and sectarian divisions) with differing needs. The existence of multiple voices and viewpoints is neither surprising nor inherently negative. Efforts to improve communications and relations should consider this diversity as much as possible in order to ensure all needs and expectations are taken into account and addressed.

The establishment of the Directorate General for Migration Management under the Turkish Ministry of Interior in April 2013 was seen as a positive development. The goal of this Directorate is to become the core source for information on refugee-

related matters. So far, however, there has been limited progress, and there are concerns from the Syrian community that it will take some time before it reaches full-capacity in its operations. The refugees are losing their patience as their day-to-day survival conditions become more difficult.

- Attitude of bureaucracy – Lack of coordination, inefficiency, hurdles

Syrian refugees view Turkish bureaucracy as a roadblock. For example, there were contradictions when opening a bank account and obtaining a residence permit: a bank account was required to obtain a residence permit, while a residence permit was required to open a bank account. Government authorities, however, point out that new arrangements to open a bank account with provisional identity cards are now in place. While this is one positive development, workshop participants shared how some Syrian refugees currently feel that other bureaucratic hurdles fail to ease their unclear situation.

Syrian participants in the workshops observed numerous times that the bureaucracy is overly rigid and not properly designed to coordinate the different offices involved with aspects of refugee needs. Different institutions in different provinces offer different services; even within the same institution there may not be a unified approach. Syrian refugees find it increasingly difficult to cooperate with the bureaucratic institutions due to, what seem to them, insurmountable hurdles.

At the same time, Syrian refugees are hesitant to voice their demands through bureaucratic channels, as they do not want to appear too demanding, which they think would jeopardise their presence in Turkey, where conditions are considered to be better than those in other countries that host Syrian refugees, such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq. They thus tend to seek advice through personal connections rather than official ones.

The lack of coordination between bureaucratic institutions to date was also admitted by the participants at the Ankara workshop. This shows that the need for institutionalising a comprehensive, well thought-out action plan has not gone unnoticed by policy circles. Recently, a positive move was made with the appointment of an Advisor for Migration and Humanitarian Aid to the Prime Ministry, which is responsible for coordinating refugee-related desks currently scattered under multiple ministries. The office encompasses seven working groups which look at education, health and sanitation, economy and workforce, social support and integration, religious education and services, humanitarian aid, local governance and infrastructure services.

The education working group, for instance, is led by the Ministry of Education, and encompasses representatives from Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), Ministry of

³ According to “Temporary Protection Regulation” Art.7, temporary protection status is “granted to foreigners who were forced to leave their countries and are unable to return to the countries they left and arrived at or crossed our borders in masses to seek urgent and temporary protection and whose international protection requests cannot be taken under individual assessment (...) Persons benefiting from temporary protection shall not be deemed as having directly acquired one of the international protection statuses as defined in the Law.” Available at www.goc.gov.tr/files/_dokuman28.pdf

Development, civil society organisations, and is currently looking at short to medium-term education issues. A new unit under the Ministry of Family and Social Policies is currently being considered. These are all happening with a growing awareness that the lack of a coordinated, multi-dimensional action plan to address the Syrian refugee issue will lead to greater challenges that threaten the social fabric of the society.

- Unemployment and poor living conditions

One of the biggest impediments to the social integration of Syrian refugees into Turkey has been the inability to get work permits. A new legislation to grant refugees work permits was adopted in January 2016,⁴ but its actual implementation may take further time. Up until then, lacking the ability to work legally, the only alternative has been (and continues to be) to work illegally for low wages, without any entitlements or social benefits. This makes Syrian refugees vulnerable to exploitation. There is speculation that child labour, already a problem in Turkey, has been magnified with the influx of Syrian refugees.

Besides being a problem itself, the expansion of the illegal workforce also affects the employment prospects of the host communities, creating increasing friction between the two. This is on policy makers' radar as a potential risk area for which immediate measures must be taken.

Due to the poor living conditions they face, the primary topic of discussion among Syrian youth in Turkey is the Western world and its advantages. Syrian youth largely see Turkey as a transit zone and frequently discuss moving on to Europe, to the point that it is romanticised as a land of promises. Better living conditions and opportunities in Europe, pitted against the lack of clarity regarding their status and future in Turkey, are the main factors why they risk their lives and take the dangerous boat journey to Europe.

- Risks of social tension and radicalisation

International experience shows that in communities already facing economic or social hardships of their own, a tendency to scapegoat the foreigners emerges. There is a high risk that Syrian refugees may be targeted in Turkey due to the reduction in wages that has come along with the rise of illegal workers. As the war in Syria continues, and Turkey welcomes more and more refugees, a certain fatigue can also be felt. Workshop participants in Ankara stressed that while there have not been any major tensions or clashes, locals have grown more outspoken about their discomfort regarding the influx of Syrians to their towns over the last few years.

In Gaziantep, for example, attacks against the Syrian community were reported in 2014, which caused tension even during simple daily exchanges, wreaking

havoc on the trust between the two communities. This, among other sporadic examples, is partly due to the locals' perception of Syrian refugees as burdensome, "overstaying guests". Practitioners argue that this is because "seeking refuge as a human right" is a new concept to Turkish society, and is not yet well understood.

There is also a risk that Syrian refugees, feeling physically threatened by the local community, may resort to self-defense. There are also worries that this, coupled with economic hardships, would open the door to criminal activities as a means to physical and economic protection. Currently, there is no dramatic upsurge in the rate of criminality in areas with high numbers of Syrian refugees. However, there is the potential for ghettoisation, criminality, and even radicalisation to increase in the future if social integration efforts fall short of providing refugees with a sense of belonging and purpose.

Indeed, it was highlighted at the Gaziantep workshop that feelings of purposelessness among Syrian youth, at risk of becoming a 'lost generation', on top of economic insecurity, are among the main reasons which may lure Syrian youth to extremist organisations. Currently there is no such trend, but it is one of the possibilities available to Syrian youth. Community members argue that policy makers need to devise instruments for social and economic integration in order to pre-emptively drain the recruitment pool of the extremist groups and organisations before it becomes a serious threat.

2. Routes for social integration: issues and opportunities

With the extending presence of Syrian refugees on Turkish soil, perspectives have shifted from short-term protection and humanitarian assistance to longer-term presence and social and economic integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey. How immigration (and other) policies accommodate this new reality is a huge challenge for Turkey and its decision makers. Long-term accommodation of Syrian refugees or their integration would typically occur through education, business, and/or civil society channels. The following sections will discuss the issues and proposals raised in these three realms.

- Education opportunities

There are approximately 700,000 school-age children among the refugees in Turkey,⁵ out of which less than half of the total number are enrolled in schools.⁶ A continuing lack of available data means that it is difficult to say how many exactly are enrolled and, out of those enrolled, how many are actually attending

⁵ Aged between 5 and 17, according to UNHCR, as of October 2015. See Human Rights Watch: *When I Picture My Future, I See Nothing, Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Turkey*: November 2015.

⁶ 315,000 according to workshop participants. According to Human Rights Watch (ibid), enrolment of Syrian children in temporary education centres and public schools outside the camps is estimated at 25%.

⁴ "Regulation on Work Permit of Refugees Under Temporary Protection", Official Journal No. 2016/8375, 15 January 2016

classes. According to the present arrangement, Syrian children can enrol in public schools and temporary education centers (TECs), which are under the supervision of Ministry of Education. However, there are too few TECs to satisfy the demand. According to one workshop participant, in central Adana, where there are 40,000 school-age Syrian children, only about 10,000 regularly attend TECs. The situation is more drastic in rural areas. Even though the right to education is granted, there are logistical problems (such as transportation costs) and Syrian parents' preferences and concerns that limit the number of Syrian children going to school.

These numbers show the hard task Turkey needs to shoulder. Policy makers are aware that if a 'lost generation' of Syrian youth is going to be prevented, there is a pressing need to integrate children into the Turkish education system. According to the Prime Minister Office's representative in the Ankara workshop, a total of 450,000 Syrian children should have been enrolled in schools by February 2016, as 26 new schools with Syrian tutors should have been ready for operation by then.

The education working group of the refugee unit under the Prime Minister is also beginning to explore the ways to enrol Syrian children into regular Turkish schools in the national education system. It is envisioned that the TECs, tutoring in both Arabic and Turkish, will allow for a smooth transition to the public schools that teach the national curriculum.

Following primary education, Turkish young adults sit for higher education entrance exams, which is a necessary step for any student to further their education. The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities, which oversees the *Turkey Scholarships* programme, is responsible for higher education opportunities for Syrian youth, and they have provided many scholarship opportunities, including through interviews conducted in Ankara, Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Adana, as well as Amman and Beirut to allow for broader access to the Syrian refugees. Syrian students are also eligible to apply to Turkish universities if they present relevant documents and they pass entrance exams. However, discussions during the workshop indicated a confusion as to how and where Syrians could apply for scholarships or pass entrance exams, another example of the lack of clear communication, even though a service is available and within reach.

▪ Employment and business opportunities

As mentioned, there is great demand for work permits by Syrian refugees, which is increasingly being recognised by policy circles. The Turkish Labor Agency (İŞKUR) has started to work on a comprehensive plan to identify the sectors in need of additional work force and map the abilities of the Syrians all over Turkey, in order to plan an employment strategy. There is also a plan to make vocational training available to Syrian refugees once

sectors lacking adequate workforce are identified. Further efforts by the Turkish Labor Agency in this realm are laying the groundwork for the right to work permits for Syrian refugees.

For a more comprehensive economic integration strategy, however, further steps to empower Syrian refugees' economic capability and integration must follow. Below is a short summary of the main proposals made in this regard.

- Syrian refugees are not a homogenous social bloc, neither are they a homogenous economic bloc; they are multi-layered in terms of economic wellbeing, training and capability. Therefore, attention should not only concentrate on the skills of a so-called 'Syrian workforce' and how it can meet Turkish labour market needs, but also on Syrian entrepreneurs who should be encouraged to re-establish their businesses or invest in Turkey.
- While there were 60 Syrian firms registered to the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce in the pre-war period, the number of registered companies has reached 209 as of October 2014.⁷ Syrian business community members argue that there should be greater recognition of the potential value Syrian firms could bring into the market.
- Further encouragement of Syrian entrepreneurs would not only boost the recruitment of Syrian workforce but also contribute to the local economy in border areas. Local semi-official organisations (Chambers of Trade and Commerce, Development Agencies, etc.), especially in provinces with higher numbers of Syrian refugees, have been playing an important role and must be empowered to act as local authorities on the integration of Syrian businesses into local economic life.
- Field research⁸ in border towns in Turkey has shown how Syrian women and men adapt and react in different ways to their post-war and refugee conditions. When the father cannot earn a living, the task is usually left to the female members of the family who provide the income. This family-support role that women play should be empowered through micro-credit opportunities.
- Even if work permits are granted, the language barrier could still prevent

⁷ ORSAM – TESEV research (2015) www.orsam.org.tr/tr/trUploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/201518_rapor195tur.pdf

⁸ See "Refugee Women in Gaziantep and Adaptation of Families Research Report" (2015) by Mozaik Women and Family Association. Available in Turkish on <http://bulbulzade.org/mozaikder-rapor.pdf>

recruitment. In fact, Syrian community members at the workshop mentioned that refugees see this as grave an issue than the unavailability of work permits for refugees. To address this, Turkish language courses should be made more available to post school-age Syrian refugees.

- Civil society efforts to ease social tensions

It is largely accepted that the enrolment of Syrian youth in the education system and the active participation of Syrian refugees in economic life is essential to their social integration. Civil society organisations can play a significant role in helping the Syrian community to communicate better among its own components, help them articulate messages and needs, and coordinate the delivery of those messages – and perhaps most importantly, ease any social tensions that may arise in the process of social integration.

The articulation of counter-narratives to address negative perceptions and prejudices is a critical building block to the peaceful integration of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Workshop participants mentioned how media can also play a significant role in challenging the negative perception towards Syrians as “overstaying guests” by highlighting the positive outcomes of Syrians refugees’ social integration. Far from being constructive, media channels to date have often added to the social tension by using a hostile language. A few examples of news communicating Syrian success stories have emerged only very recently though.⁹

Workshop participants noted that there were few efforts to bring together Syrian refugees and their host communities. Currently there are many barriers that prevent the interaction of the two communities, the most visible one being refugee camps. The TECs catering specifically to Syrian children also prevent interaction between children from the two communities, so the transition to the national education system should be made as soon as possible. The Syrian community members at the workshop argued that for refugees outside camps, local community centres are appropriate venues for social interaction. In short, innovative ways of bridging the gaps between the two communities and increasing interactions should be pursued more proactively. Civil society organisations (both Turkish and Syrians) are well placed to act as the conveners or facilitators of these efforts.

3. Next steps? International support

In the face of the ever-growing challenge, the need for enhanced and effective international cooperation has become more pressing.

According to one Turkish national authority official taking part in the Ankara workshop, the country will require 7 billion Euros to support its needs in healthcare, education, and vocational training for Syrian refugees in 2016. The recent EU–Turkey summit in November 2015 and the decision to provide 3 billion Euros of assistance were seen as a positive step towards increased future cooperation.

Assessing needs is a critical step towards designing and implementing effective programmes, and assistance to Turkish actors, from the state and civil society. Data collection on refugee population size, characteristics, and geographical dispersal were a weak area when the influx of refugees first began in April 2011. The authorities at the time could not foresee that the number would reach current levels (let alone the projected future levels), so a robust registration system was not put in place. The registrations done by AFAD and the Turkish Red Crescent were separate, and a central authority did not aggregate the data. In 2013, central authorities took the decision to gather the data in a single database (GÖÇNET), which only became available to use in late November 2015 after two years of rigorous data processing.

The importance of data usage in project implementation has recently come to the fore. For example, population density has radically increased in some border towns, which call for better municipality services (e.g. new water pipelines, better waste-treatment facilities, and more frequent urban transportation services).

During the workshop, international donors present stressed that, beyond refugees registration, needs assessment processes are critical to inform the design of their respective programmes and improve the maintenance and sustainable funding of authorities from municipal to national level, including with regards to addressing some of the social cohesion issues identified above. External support to Turkish actors, including addressing these dimensions, raised some questions in light of political priorities and developments for European Union Member States. For example, workshop participants expressed concerns that the funds will not be used towards effective integration but rather for “walling off” the refugees through more camps and security measures if not carefully spent.

Conclusion and way forward

The Gaziantep and Ankara workshops, which took place consecutively, gave the opportunity to Syrians themselves to express their perspectives on the first day, and then stakeholders from all spectrums to exchange views about challenges and opportunities on the second day. The Syrian participants were grateful for such an opportunity as the workshop was one of the very few occasions they have had to discuss how they perceive their own presence in

⁹ See for example, “Syrian pianist brings in rewards to Turkey”, (28.01.2016) available on www.aljazeera.com.tr/haber/suriyeli-piyaniist-turkiyeye-derece-getirdi

Turkey. The Ankara workshop was useful in understanding how the shortcomings perceived by the Syrians were interpreted and addressed by policy makers and practitioners.

"In this room we have Syrians and Turkish organisations, which hardly happens."

Syrian workshop participant, Gaziantep

The workshops were also particularly useful to highlight a number of challenges that should be addressed in order to develop more effective assistance to Syrian refugees in Turkey and prevent risks of tensions.

First, the challenge of the lack of clarity around Syrian refugees' status, as well as the communications problems which have made it difficult for Syrians to fully grasp the opportunities at hand and envisage mid to longer-term perspectives in Turkey. A more effective communications campaign would be useful to inform the Syrian refugee communities of ongoing developments, opportunities, provide guidance to access services, and help dispel rumors or misinterpretations.

Second, there has been a perceived lack of communication and coordination between the different actors engaged in dealing with Syrian refugees: local and national authorities, civil society and public institutions, and among civil society organisations themselves. The government's new approach to coordinate the response through the Prime Minister's office is a welcome development and has already generated positive momentum. Coordination efforts should seek to build on the expertise and experience of Syrian and Turkish civil society organisations, practitioners, and think tanks, who know local dynamics and could make valuable contributions to the definition of priorities and the design of effective programmes.

"I have to say we didn't do enough in the field of Syrians – Turkish relations. I'm very grateful to the organisers for providing this opportunity to discuss this issue."

Syrian workshop participant, Gaziantep

Finally, just as Turkish authorities have taken a number of institutional measures to respond to the lasting presence of Syrian refugees, and as international partners mobilise to support these efforts, more attention and efforts should be focused on the question of their social and economic integration in Turkey. This also requires a change in approach from international actors towards longer-term planning and funding opportunities. While this is now increasingly being recognised at the policy level, practical translation through funding schemes and opportunities, especially for social cohesion types of activities, is often still driven by a short-term approach. As one Turkish official emphasised,

Turkey's public policies are increasingly reflecting the acknowledgement that Syrians have become "permanent-temporary" parts of Turkish society. In that respect, providing space for Syrian and Turkish actors to exchange and inform the design and implementation of these programmes is critical for their effectiveness.

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