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Turkey's Policy toward Syrian Refugees

Domestic Repercussions and the Need for International Support

Souad Ahmadoun

Turkey's humanitarian activities toward Syrian refugees are part and parcel of its overall policy in the Syria conflict. Yet, it has become increasingly clear that the Turkish government has overestimated its capacities, and thus failed to deliver sufficient assistance to Syrian refugees on its territory. At the same time the government's handling of the refugee issue has led to stark tensions among Turkey's political and societal forces, as Turkey's border regions contend with increasing security and economic challenges. Germany and its European partners should support Turkey in maintaining and improving services to Syrian refugees in Turkey, and in delivering aid more effectively to internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Syria. They should also push Turkey to adopt a long-term strategy for dealing with Syrian refugees.

The recent flow of Syrian-Kurdish refugees from the region of Ayn al-Arab (in Kurdish: Kobanê) to Turkey is just one of many episodes in which Turkey has been affected by the Syrian refugee crisis. Indeed, ever since the militarization of the Syrian uprising in mid-2011 Turkey has seen an influx of refugees from its neighboring country. In early 2011, after the Turkish government failed to convince Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to engage in profound reforms that could have contained the crisis, Ankara took a clear stance against the Assad regime: it sought the international isolation of the regime; it hosted, supported and overtly influenced the armed and unarmed opposition; it tried to shape the international coalition through the so-called "Group of Friends of the Syrian People"; and it wel-

comed refugees and provided humanitarian assistance to civilians and IDPs inside Syria.

Turkey's Handling of the Crisis

While Turkey has hosted refugees before (for example from Iraq), since April 2011 it has for the first time followed an unconditional "open door policy" toward Syrian civilians fleeing from the conflict. At the beginning of the conflict, Syrian refugees were considered guests rather than legal refugees, but since late October 2011 Turkey has afforded them "temporary protection" status, ensuring no forced return and imposing no limit on their duration of stay. In April 2014, a new migration law entered into force granting them "condi-

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SWP Comments 47
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tional refugee status”, or temporary asylum, under the newly established General Directorate of Migration Management (GDMM).

From April 2011 to September 2014 an estimated total of 1,350,000 Syrians fled to Turkey – around 77 percent of them women and children – according to the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the main governmental body managing the Syrian refugee issue. Some 220,000 are hosted in 22 relatively well-equipped camps, including 13 tent cities and two container sites located in ten provinces of southern and south-eastern Turkey: Adiyaman, Adana, Hatay, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Malatya, Mardin, Osmaniye and Sanliurfa. Some 630,000 refugees are registered outside the camps by the AFAD and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), but the others (an estimated 500,000) have remained unregistered.

While conditions in the camps managed by the AFAD in collaboration with the UNHCR and other UN agencies are extremely good, the large numbers of refugees living outside the camps (also called “urban refugees”) are more vulnerable, as most of them do not benefit from services provided by the Turkish government or international agencies. The exception is health care: under a January 2013 governmental decree, all Syrian refugees can benefit from free primary health care.

Like many other governments, Ankara assumed that the Assad regime would soon collapse and refugees would return to Syria quickly. Yet, by mid-2014 Turkey had already spent about \$4 billion on humanitarian aid for Syrians, and with no end in sight as the refugee influx is not about to abate. Consequently, Turkey has recently made the admission of Syrians at official border crossings conditional on the availability of places within the camps, or on specific humanitarian circumstances (e.g. if emergency medical treatment is required). It has also temporarily closed border crossings such as the one close to Kobanê/Ayn al-Arab.

At the beginning of the crisis Turkey rejected any international assistance for its humanitarian effort, as it wanted to prove that it could deal with matters on its own. By mid-2012, however, Ankara started to ask the international community to share the burden. In October 2014 the Turkish government announced that it had received only \$250 million from international donors in the four years since the beginning of the crisis. It also blamed the international community for failure to fulfill refugee quotas requested by the UN, and for failure to provide even half of the funds requested to help Turkey in its humanitarian effort.

Key Actors and Domestic Dynamics

Aid to Syrian refugees has been affected – and sometimes exploited – in political struggles between Turkey’s governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its former ally, the Hizmet movement (also known as the Gulen movement), on the one hand, and between the AKP and the main opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), on the other. The influential religious scholar and leader of the Gulen Movement, Fethullah Gulen, voiced his opposition toward any Turkish involvement in the Syrian uprising, calling instead for gradual support for economic development and reform.

In early January 2014 police raided offices of the government-backed charity organization IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation in six provinces, and detained at least 23 people on suspicion of links with the terrorist group Jabhat al-Nusra (an al-Qaida offshoot in Syria) and of smuggling weapons to the Syrian rebellion under the pretext of humanitarian work. IHH, an NGO with Islamist orientation, has been one of the main organizations active in supporting Syrian refugees and IDPs, and has also played a role in mediation efforts between Turkey and rebels who kidnapped Turkish journalists. IHH officials denied the accusations of terrorist links, and portrayed the raid as a “dirty plot” by police loyal to

the Gulen Movement, claiming it was just another element in the latter's conflict with the government. For its part, the government accused the "parallel entity" of the Gulen Movement of disrupting its humanitarian efforts toward the Syrian population, using its infiltration of the state's bureaucracy, media, judiciary and police.

The AKP has also had to deal with criticism from the main opposition party, the CHP. The latter has called for a diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict, arguing that support for the armed Syrian opposition represents a threat to Turkey's national security, and that the refugee issue has polarized the Turkish population. Its leadership has also claimed that the Apyadin refugee camp was used as a training base for fighters from the Free Syrian Army and other Syrian groups. In August 2012, the government refused to allow a CHP delegation to visit the camp to investigate these claims. In turn, the AKP has accused the CHP of supporting the Assad regime, for example with visits to Damascus in early 2012 and March 2013.

Tensions with refugees

The Syrian conflict has sparked sectarian tensions in Turkey. This has especially been the case in Turkey's southern provinces, first and foremost Hatay. Hatay province was part of Syria until 1939 and has a mixed demographic – including Turks, Kurds, Circassians, Armenians, Arab Christians, Sunni and Alawite Arabs – which reflects the confessional and ethnic composition on the other side of the border. Yet, the vast majority of Syrian refugees in Turkey have been Sunni Arabs.

Arab Alawites (not to be confused with Turkish Alevis) are mostly secular Muslims and, with a population of some 1.5 million, are the largest Arab minority inhabiting Turkey's border region with Syria. They have largely supported the Assad regime and have sharply opposed Ankara's recent policies toward Syria. They consider Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition to

be a sectarian choice aimed at empowering the Syrian Sunni majority. Indeed, tensions have been recorded between mainly Sunni refugees and Arab Alawite locals. For example, some Syrian refugees have been refused medical treatment by Alawite doctors; others have boycotted local Alawite shopkeepers, while the latter have questioned Syrian clients about their sectarian identity before serving them. In September 2012, as a response to growing tensions, the Turkish government adopted measures to avoid further sectarian escalation, such as transferring some Sunni refugees from Hatay to other provinces after clashes with locals, and calling for "more patience and hospitality for the brothers who will soon be going back to Syria".

The economic and social burden of the refugee presence has also led to mounting anti-refugee sentiments, as it is seen as the cause of higher unemployment and living costs for Turkish citizens, and of rising crime and prostitution. For instance, while the practice of polygamy is considered a crime by the Turkish Civil Code, Syrian refugee women have agreed to become second wives of Turkish citizens, or to get married early (under 18 years of age) as this seems preferable to refugee existence, especially in the south-eastern provinces of Mardin and Şanlıurfa. A non-governmental organization, the so-called Kilis Platform, has reported at least 4,000 cases of marriage since 2012 in Kilis (a province of some 125,000 people), with Syrian women or girls becoming second or third wives of Turkish men through religious marriage, which is not recognized under Turkish law.

Since late 2012, growing anti-refugee sentiments have led to sporadic clashes between Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees. Also, Turkish citizens have repeatedly protested against the presence of Syrian refugees, mainly but not exclusively in southern and south-eastern Turkey, where most of the refugees are concentrated. To date, tensions are still running high.

Insecure Borders

In early 2012, the Turkish government – in cooperation with Turkish NGOs involved in humanitarian assistance within Syria – created a system known as “zero point delivery”. This method avoided infringing on Syria’s national sovereignty by delivering aid shipments to a border crossing, from where they were picked up by Syrian humanitarian workers (from local councils or NGOs) and taken to frontier camps within Syria, especially Atmeh camp. This approach also sought to reduce the influx of refugees into Turkey, but had to be scaled back in November 2012, when the Syrian regime army bombed the area of Atmeh camp. This was due to radical groups assuming control over border crossings, thus increasing the risk of kidnapping for aid workers.

At the same time Turkish public opinion has been increasingly wary of attacks emanating from the border region. In February 2012, a bomb killed 17 Turks at the Cilvegozu border crossing. In May 2012, two car bombs exploded in Reyhanli town center, only 5 km from the Cilvegozu border crossing with Syria, leaving 46 dead and more than 100 injured. In June 2012, a Turkish fighter jet was shot down by the Syrian regime army over the Mediterranean, near the land border between the two countries. And in late September 2014, three Turks were injured when mortar shells landed in Suruç in the province of Şanlıurfa, as Islamic State (IS) fighters clashed with Kurdish forces on the other side of the border.

In addition, Turkish civilians have been worried about the amount of freedom their government has granted to fighters who have used the camps for recruitment and recovery, and many others carrying weapons outside the camps. Many think their government is also turning a blind eye to infiltration by fighters, and arms smuggling to the Syrian opposition. They fear that this could soon backfire, as Jihadist groups could turn against Ankara.

International Burden Sharing

So far, Turkey has managed the Syrian refugee influx with considerable hospitality; but given the gravity, scale and duration of the humanitarian crisis in Syria, more international humanitarian support is needed. European countries in particular should offer to share the burden rather than hide behind Ankara’s earlier rejection of foreign support. The main challenges will be to better provide for refugees outside the camps, and to plan for the long-term residence and integration of refugees. Cooperation between the EU, Turkey and the wider international community should address an array of issues. In particular, European countries should:

- ▶ Pressure Turkey to open the door for international humanitarian NGOs (INGOs) to work on its soil, allowing them to register more easily so that they can assume a more effective role in relief efforts. According to the UNHCR, ten INGOs have been registered in Turkey to date but only two have been allowed to operate in southern Turkey, while officials have turned a blind eye to unregistered INGOs working there informally.
- ▶ Share the burden of the refugee crisis by hosting more refugees themselves, as well as bearing some of the financial costs incurred by host states, especially Turkey.
- ▶ Support the Turkish government in devising a long-term policy toward Syrian refugees. Along with other assistance, they should offer technical support to adapt Turkey’s legal framework accordingly. They should also encourage Ankara to devise policies aimed at reducing sectarian tensions in the southern region.
- ▶ Improve coordination with Turkey (government and NGOs alike) and with UN bodies to ensure that cross-border aid is effective and serves civilians in Syria, rather than being captured by militant groups.

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