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*Talip Küçükcan\**

## **Türkiye’s Migration Experience and Policy Orientations: Integrating Syrians in Higher Education**

### **Abstract**

Türkiye has had multidimensional migration experience not only in its past, but also in its present that has led to the formation of a dynamic migration policy to govern such a dynamic process. Türkiye’s migration policy has been informed and shaped by its geopolitical location as a migrant receiving, labour migrant sending, and migrant transit country. Today, Türkiye hosts the largest number of migrants and refugees in the world with a far-reaching social, political, and economic impact on the country. This article aims to shed light on the multidimensional migration experience of Türkiye and analyse its migration policies to govern manifold challenges brought about by the presence of almost 6 million foreigners in the country. It is argued in this article that the integration of migrants in general and of Syrians in particular remains a major challenge for Türkiye. Therefore, this article recommends that Turkish decision makers should make short and long-term plans for the integration of Syrians as the current conditions indicate that it is unlikely that Syrians will return in any significant numbers any time soon even though the Turkish government has initiated a number of projects in parts of Northern Syria for the safe and voluntary return of its countrymen and women. One important area of integration in this context is higher education, which would enable Syrians to have access to employment and social mobility that would benefit both themselves and Türkiye.

**Keywords:** Migration, Irregular Migrants, Migration Policy, Türkiye, Syrians in Türkiye, Turkey

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## **Introduction**

Türkiye's geographical location, geopolitical position, political legacy, its increasing role in regional and international politics have had a long-lasting effect on the country's demography, population structure, and migration waves it has experienced over a number of decades. Globalisation, economic exchanges, the dissemination of information, and transportation facilities have enabled peoples to be on the move and, more recently, regional conflicts, civil wars, climate change, natural disasters, and increasing poverty as well as the search for security have all uprooted the masses and forced them to migrate cross borders. Modern Türkiye has found itself at the centre of such population movements both in the past and even in more frequently in the present. This article aims to shed light on how Türkiye has been governing patterns of migration to and from the country in its historical and contemporary manifestations both as a sending and receiving country. After analysing the historical milestones of migration to mainland Türkiye that began towards the end of the Ottoman State and which accelerated during the process of its disintegration, this article will go on to address the contemporary challenges that the Republic of Türkiye faces as far as migration movements to and from the country are concerned, and also to address how the country has developed various policies to govern the multiple dimensions of mass migration it has received in recent years. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNRA), Türkiye hosts the largest number of migrants and refugees today, with Syrians constituting the majority of that number, exceeding 3.6 million as at the end of July 2022 as reported by the Presidency of Migration Management at the Ministry of Interior.

Modern Türkiye was established on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire which ruled the entirety of Anatolia, parts of the Middle East, North Africa, and Southern Europe including the Balkans. When the Ottoman started to disintegrate, a sizeable number of people migrated to safer areas within the Empire and, following the total collapse of the Ottoman State, people of various ethnic and linguistic origins moved to Anatolia in even higher numbers. One could argue that this period constitutes the first major wave of migration to Turkish lands and to Türkiye itself, a country which pursued an open-arms policy to those groups who took refuge there as the former subjects of the Ottoman State. It should be noted here that such population movements to Anatolia took place when a new nation state was emerging on the ruins of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-linguistic Ottoman Empire. As the new nation state was inspired by the homogenising, secular, nationalist ideology of the time, policies

regarding the identity formation of modern Türkiye and its citizens focused on culture, language, ethnicity, and religion while evolving over the years in the face of new migration waves.

## **Migration Waves Towards Ottoman Lands and Türkiye**

The Ottoman Empire ruled over vast amount of territories, and its imperial borders were open for the purpose of trade and diplomatic relations, and were also open to people who sought political protection. The social and political structure of the Empire provided a sphere where migration is not necessarily linked to the security of state. One outstanding example of early migration to the Ottoman Empire is the movement of Jewish people from Spain after the Reconquista in the 15th century. Muslims and Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were forced to leave the country and, as a consequence, thousands migrated to the Ottoman territories. What enabled the easy acceptance of Jews in the Muslim-dominant state was the recognition of Jews and Christians as religious communities known as the Millet System which afforded these communities a legitimate legal status within the society. The Ottoman State had an open society which did not securitise religious, ethnic, and sectarian minorities, a policy that would largely continue under the Republic of Türkiye despite a clear demarcation of borders and identities as exemplified by the Jewish migration to Türkiye from Germany by those who fled the Nazi Regime in 1930s.

Military retreats and political turmoil in the late 18th century in the Ottoman territories sparked migration to areas still dominated by Turks and Muslims. In this context, sizeable migrations from Crimea, Caucasia, and the Balkans due to political tensions and military conflicts starting from the mid-18th century towards the late 19th century to the safe and secure Ottoman territory is well studied and documented. It is estimated that by the end of WW1, millions of people from former Ottoman territories migrated to central Ottoman and Turkish territories in search of security (Erdoğan, Kaya, 2015). The Balkan Wars triggered a major wave of migration toward Ottoman controlled areas just before WW1. Turks and Muslims of other ethnicities moved to Anatolia from Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Greece where there was a sizeable presence of Turkish and Muslim Ottoman subjects. WW1 caused a large-scale population movement in and around Anatolia during the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and following the founding of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923. The population exchange between

Türkiye and Greece is an example of rather noteworthy demographic engineering by both nation states, shaped by homogenising nationalist ideologies. Although there are varying claims as to the numbers of people during the exchange, it is estimated that between 1.2 to 1.3 million Greeks left for Greece while between 400,000 and 500,000 Muslims migrated to Türkiye based on an agreement between the two countries (Onur, 2013; Hirschon, 2003; Fortna et al., 2012) Türkiye continued to be a migrant-receiving country, especially from breakaway countries from the Ottoman State. A significant number of Turkish Muslims came to Türkiye from Bulgaria in the 1950s and 360,000 Turks came to Türkiye in 1989 alone (Kamusella, 2020). As these cases illustrate, Türkiye had an open-door policy towards refugees and immigrants produced by regional conflicts and wars in neighbouring countries. For example, following the 1979 revolution in Iran, almost one million Iranians came to Türkiye so as to escape the regime and stayed temporarily until they left for the USA, Canada, and Europe. Moreover, Türkiye had to deal with the Iraqi Kurdish refugee flows of 1988 and 1991, when more than one and a half million Iraqi Kurds came to the mountains bordering Türkiye, having been forced by the Iraqi regime to do so (Ihlamur-Öner, 2013). Türkiye hosted almost half a million Kurds from Iraq, the majority of whom returning home when the Gulf War ended. As these cases illustrate, Türkiye is and has been a migration destination as well as a transit country. Türkiye's experience with migration is not limited to the reception of immigrants and refugees in the past and present. Türkiye has also been a migrant-sending country most notably since the 1960s, with a large diaspora now mainly concentrated in Europe. As the following table shows, there are

**Table 1. Turks in Selected European Countries**

	1973	1984	1995	2020
Germany	615,827	1,552,328	1,965,577	3,000,000
France	33,892	144,790	254,000	700,000
The Netherlands	30,091	154,201	252,450	500,000
Austria	30,527	75,000	150,000	400,000
Belgium	14,029	63,587	90,425	250,000
Denmark	6,250	17,240	34,700	70,000
Britain	2,011	28,480	65,000	400,000
Norway	n.a	3,086	5,577	20,000
Sweden	5,061	20,900	36,001	150,000
Switzerland	19,710	48,485	76,662	120,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>777,727</b>	<b>2,108,097</b>	<b>2,930,392</b>	<b>5,610,000</b>

Source: Küçükcan, 2021.

more than 5.6 million Turks in Europe. If one considers Turks in the USA, Canada, Australia, and Middle Eastern countries, the populations of Turkish origin in the diaspora exceeds 6 million.

### **A Bigger Challenge: Syrians in Türkiye**

It has been 11 years since the first arrival of Syrians to Türkiye, and whose numbers have steadily increased through the fleeing of the atrocities of the Syrian regime as the civil war continues the displacement of civilians. The presence of Syrians in large volumes led to a wide range of political and legal discussions in Türkiye, and their move to Europe has brought Türkiye and the EU around the same table to address the challenges of displaced Syrians. On the 11th anniversary of their arrival, discussions and debates about Syrians in Türkiye revolve around their legal status, their integration into education and the economy, the provision of public services, and humanitarian assistance in relation to COVID-19 (Murphy, 2021; Mohyidin, 2021; Pekkendir, 2021).

Public opinion in Türkiye is predominantly occupied with following questions: Will Syrians remain in Türkiye or leave? How many will return if reasonable political and economic ground is prepared? If there is to be a voluntary wave of returns, how, when, and for how long this will take place? What are the social, political, and economic ramifications of the presence of almost 3.7 million Syrians with temporary-protection status in Türkiye? How has Türkiye been coping with the various dimensions of hosting the largest number of refugees in the world? How will Syrians integrate into the social, economic, and educational fabric of society? These are frequently asked questions in and outside of Türkiye as the civil war continues to ravage Syria, with the risk of a new wave of migration not completely eliminated. This study will not try to answer all of the above questions and its scope will be limited to providing evidence from the higher education sector into which Syrians are increasingly integrated so as to show how Türkiye has responded to the presence of a large number of displaced persons from Syria in education. Türkiye has, among other things, pursued an open-door policy to displaced Syrians since April 2011, established new institutions at national and local levels, introduced a new legal framework, and developed policies of inclusion over the years in cooperation with international agencies and organisations such as the UN and the EU. Broadly speaking, Türkiye had two options when the refugee flow began following the failure of finding a peaceful resolution to the conflict through a transition to a democratic political system in Syria. The first option was to close the borders to Syrian civilians – mostly wom-

en and children bombed by the regime forces – and to turn a blind eye to the unfolding humanitarian crisis along its borders. The second option was to open the gates so as to provide shelter for the those fleeing war and persecution. Türkiye went for the second option, a policy that reflects the traditional migration experience of the country which is informed by opening its borders to those seeking safety.

The presence of 3.7 million Syrians in Türkiye forced itself to the centre of political and public debate as the opposition parties instrumentalised populist sentiment against immigrants and refugees by promising that they would return Syrians back to their home country. Such political discourse encouraged anti-immigrant groups to propagate hate against Syrians in conventional forums and on social media especially. Despite the rise of anti-Syrian sentiment led by the opposition parties, the government continued to repeat its position, emphasising the fact that Syrians in Türkiye are guests and that they would be hosted until safe zones are established, a political solution to end the conflict achieved, and that there would be no forced return. In line with such political positions, the Turkish government designed and implemented numerous projects to integrate Syrians into education, the economy, and society. One important area of the inclusion of Syrians is education as a key strategic project for the inculcation of civic culture in addition to language learning and the improvement of their academic skills.

The Turkish higher-education sector and Turkish universities face numerous challenges as regards teaching quality, equal access, administrative issues, financing, relations with the industry, research funding and internationalisation etc. On top of these issues, Turkish universities have yet another common challenge today that requires both urgent attention and a policy-based response; the integration of Syrians and other displaced peoples into the higher-education system.

The world, as of today, is marked by social and political upheaval, natural disasters, armed conflicts, ethnic and sectarian tensions, economic inequalities, along with human rights violations which all contribute to forced migration and the displacement of people to varying degrees. In fact, the numbers are shocking. According to a Global Trends Forced Displacement 2017 Report published by UNHCR (The United Nations Refugee Agency), “Globally, the forcibly displaced population increased in 2017 by 2.9 million. By the end of the year, 68.5 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, or generalized violence. As a result, the world’s forcibly displaced population remained yet again at a record high” (UNHCR, 2017b).

According to the same report, Türkiye hosts the largest number of displaced people, migrants, and refugees in the world today (UNHCR, 2017b). It is reported that 5 million displaced persons from various countries and people under temporary protection from Syria live in Türkiye (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017). That amounts to almost 5.6% of the total population of present-day Türkiye. Syrians who would go on to escape armed conflict, ethnic and sectarian clashes and repression by the Syrian regime began to flee to Türkiye in April 2011 when Syria's political upheaval turned into civil war in the country following the Arab Spring.

Türkiye has been following a humanitarian policy towards those men, women, and children who are forcibly uprooted from their towns, cities, and countries. Türkiye has been a safe haven for displaced people from conflict ridden regions, following an open-door policy to such people regardless of their ethnic, sectarian, religious or national identities. As an example, almost half a million Kurds fled the bombs of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and found shelter in Türkiye. Since 2011, millions of Syrians including Arabs, Kurds, the Sunnis, the Shias, Nusayris, and Yazidis have all made their way to Türkiye.

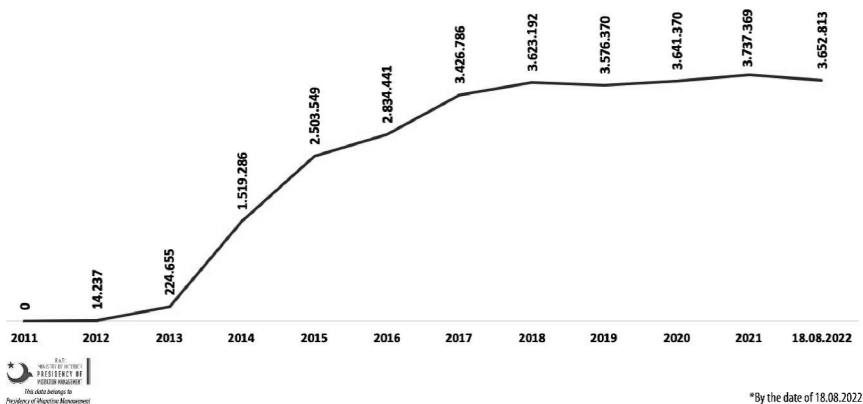
### **Syrians in Türkiye: Demography**

Before going into further detail about the integration of Syrians into the Turkish Higher Education System, it would be useful to share some demographic characteristics of the Syrians in Türkiye. Demographic data regarding total numbers, settlement patterns, age and gender distribution will help us too see what kind of challenge Türkiye is facing as far as governing and managing irregular migration is concerned. The sheer volume of irregular migrants and displaced persons living in Türkiye indicate that no other country in the world faces as many challenges as Türkiye today when it comes to providing services such as shelter, food, security, education, and social and cultural inclusion to people who are forced to leave their home countries.

According to the recent figures, more than 3.7 million Syrians live Türkiye. It is reported that if no solution is found for the Syrian crisis in the near future, this number could rise to 5 million by 2028 (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018). Since 2011, the number of Syrians in Türkiye has steadily increased from 14,000 in 2011, to 3,676,000 in 2019 (Operational Data Portal, 2022). As of August 2022, the Presidency of Migration Management reports that there are 3,652,813 Syrians in Türkiye of whom only a fraction have returned to Syria after two major security operations conducted by Türkiye. The Turkish Minister of Interior Foreign Affairs



stated that the number of Syrians who returned to their country after operations Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in 2018 is 340,000 (Hürriyet Daily News, 2019).



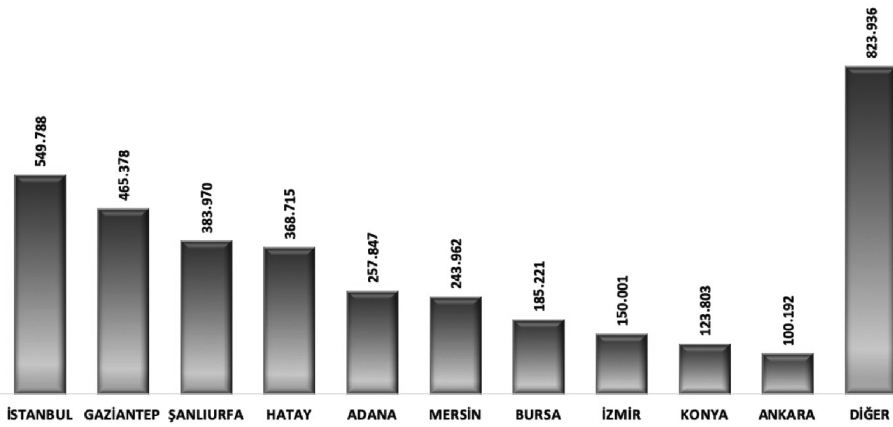
**Graph 1. Distribution of Syrians Under Temporary Protection by Year**

Source: Ministry Interior of Turkey.

Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye seem be concentrated in ten cities where they naturally put a lot of pressure on those cities' infrastructure, especially when it comes to housing, public transportation, and the health and education services. As seen in the following map, there are more than half a million Syrians in Istanbul. Almost 50% of all refugees in Türkiye are registered in four key provinces: Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, and Şanlıurfa (OCHA Services, 2018).

There is a unique situation in some cities where demographics regarding the Syrians in Türkiye inform us of what the central government as well local authorities (municipalities) are dealing with. In Kilis, for example, the Syrian population make up almost a half of the city's population today. In Hatay, 368,175 Syrians are living there, which amounts to 27% of the total population. There is a similar picture in Şanlıurfa where almost 22% of the city's population is now Syrian. In Adana, Mersin, and Osmaniye, 10 to 11% of the populations are from Syria. Most Syrians in Türkiye live outside the special camps and shelter centres which were established by the government. Only 48,399 Syrians out of 3.6 million live in seven shelter centres in five provinces.

More than 3.6 million Syrians are living away from those temporary shelters, exist side by side with Turks, and participate in daily life which enables many of them to interact with the members of the host society. It



\*By the date of 18.08.2022

**Graph 2. The Distribution of Syrians Under Temporary Protection Listed by the Top 10 Provinces**

Source: Ministry Interior of Turkey.

**Table 2. The Distribution of Syrian Refugees in the Scope of Temporary Protection According to Shelter Centres (7 Shelter Centres in 5 Provinces)**

PROVINCE	NAME OF TEMPORARY SHELTER CENTERS	TOTAL	GRAND TOTAL
ADANA (1)	Sarıçam	16.135	16.135
HATAY (3)	Altınözü	3.455	6.703
	Yayladağı	3.230	
	Apaydın	18	
KAHRAMANMARAŞ (1)	Merkez	9.809	9.809
KİLİS (1)	Elbeyli	8.146	8.146
OSMANIYE (1)	Cevdetiye	7.606	7.606
TOTAL		48.399	
NUMBER OF SYRIANS UNDER TEMPORARY PROTECTION THAT NOT IN THE SCOPE OF SHELTER CENTERS			3.604.414



\*By the date of 18.08.2022

Source: Ministry Interior of Turkey.

is argued that “Living in urban areas may be better for the longer-term integration, livelihood, self-reliance, and dignity of refugees, as well as the capacities of the countries to absorb new residents” (Culbertson, 2015, p. 6). Most Syrians in Türkiye are young. According to recent data, more

than a million Syrians living in Türkiye are young people between the ages 15 and 29. The number of children aged between 5 and 9 is more than half a million.

**Table 3. The Distribution by Age and Gender of Registered Syrian Refugees Recorded via and Based on Biometric Data**

AGE	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
TOTAL	1.977.150	1.667.192	3.644.342
0-4	252.618	235.764	488.382
5-9	260.887	245.186	506.073
10-14	202.904	188.072	390.976
15-18	149.356	123.695	273.051
19-24	321.032	229.901	550.933
25-29	209.538	148.373	357.911
30-34	173.594	126.713	300.307
35-39	123.113	96.492	219.605
40-44	81.370	71.406	152.776
45-49	60.291	57.298	117.589
50-54	48.949	46.521	95.470
55-59	34.135	34.267	68.402
60-64	24.006	24.505	48.511
65-69	15.934	16.390	32.324
70-74	9.056	9.649	18.705
75-79	5.098	6.289	11.387
80-84	2.838	3.544	6.382
85-89	1.585	2.057	3.642
90+	846	1.070	1.916

by the date of 07.02.2019



Source: Ministry Interior of Turkey.

The age distribution of the Syrians living in Türkiye illustrates very clearly that there is a significant number of children and young people of school age at various levels. Not only in the area of education, but also in the areas of vocational training, employment, welfare provisions, access to public services etc. do we find such numbers which pose great challenges for Türkiye. So far, one should acknowledge that Türkiye has handled the Syrian refugee crises remarkably well despite the lack of sufficient support from the international community. The UNHCR acknowledges this as follows, “The Government of Türkiye plays a firm leadership role in the refugee response in Türkiye” (UNHCR, 2019). Türkiye has spent more than \$30.2 billion on the well-being of Syrians under temporary protection (Haberler.com, 2019). This is in line with a humanitarian policy

that Türkiye has been following over the years. In 2018, as reported by the Development Initiative's (DI) Global Humanitarian Assistance Report, Türkiye spent more than \$8.1 billion on humanitarian purposes, more than any other country in the world. Developed countries with much bigger economies such the U.S., Germany, and the U.K. followed Türkiye's lead, albeit to a smaller degree, spending \$6.68 billion, \$2.98 billion and \$2.52 billion respectively (Development Initiatives, 2018, p. 9).

## **The Integration of Displaced Persons into Education**

The integration of displaced persons into the education, workforce, training, social, cultural, and economic sectors has been a challenge for all countries. European countries which have received legal immigrants for their labour markets, irregular migration, and asylum seekers, have all had similar experiences. There is still a lot of discussion on the failures and achievements of government policies past and present as far as the integration of migrants and refugees is concerned. Turn the Tide: Refugee Education in Crisis, a report published by the UNHCR, provides a global picture of the education of refugee children as follows: "Comparing the situation of refugee children and youth with their peers illustrates the gap between the two – and the manner in which that gap grows to a chasm as they get older. In 2017, 61% of refugee children were enrolled in primary school, compared to 92% globally. At secondary level the figure was 23%, compared with a global rate of 84%. This means nearly two thirds of refugee children who go to primary school do not make it to secondary school" (UNHCR, 2017a, p. 13). We should all be concerned with these disturbing findings. Moreover, data on access to higher education by refugee children is also alarming and disturbing. While 35% of the world's youth enrol at a university, only 1% of refugee youth can enter similar seats of education.

Türkiye has been a labour-force-sending country since the 1960s as mentioned earlier, but now the country is a recipient of irregular migrants and people under temporary protection. Türkiye's policy towards the integration of Syrians is well stated by the by the UNHCR in the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP) 2018–2019 as follows: "In Türkiye, social and economic inclusion is an integral part of the legal framework. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection refers to activities to facilitate harmonization between foreigners, applicants and international protection beneficiaries and the society, that is, an environment where foreigners and international protection beneficiaries can live in harmony with host communities (...) The concept of harmonization provides

a basis for service provision to refugees and asylum seekers in Türkiye and is a stepping stone towards inclusion” (UNHCR, 2019, p. 9).

In what follows, I will try to shed some light on the integration of Syrians into the education system. Firstly, let us underline two important developments. One is the fact that since 2011, 625,000 thousand Syrians were born in Türkiye by 2020 and this number exceeded 700,000 according to the Minister of Interior of Türkiye in 2022 (Erdoğan, 2020, p. 64), children who will, in addition, soon need schooling. The other fact is the steady increase in the schooling of Syrian children. It is reported that “(...) of the school-aged Syrian refugees, 610,278 were enrolled in either Turkish public school or temporary education centers. Of this figure, 36,548 were enrolled in pre-school education, 374,304 in primary school education, 137,613 in middle school education and 61,813 in high school education in 2017–2018 school term” (Kolcu, 2018). The Ministry of National Education confirmed the rise in the number of Syrian students in the education system on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. The Ministry reported that “35,707 students were enrolled in kindergarten, 442,817 in elementary school, 348,638 in middle school, and 110,976 in high school. In total, 771,428 children continue their educational life. There are 432,956 children of educational age who do not attend school (Refugees Association, 2021). A recent report by the Ministry of Education updated the data showing that there are over 1 million (1,124,353) Syrian school-aged children in Türkiye and 855,136 of them (67.55%) were schooled by January 2022” (Millî Eğitim Bakanlığı, 2022).

Given the high birth rate and the new arrivals, this figure has been gradually increasing over the years. Despite such a marked rise in the number of Syrians, “the Government of Türkiye continues to make progress towards its commitment to have all Syrian children under temporary protection in some form of education, including the facilitation of enrolment for those missing documentation (ID cards or previous school report cards)” (UNICEF, 2018, p. 23).

Despite meaningful and positive developments, some challenges need to be addressed due to the high demand to go to formal schools in the face of the limited availability of places. There are over 350,000 school-aged children and adolescents who are not enrolled in education or training programs at the moment and who represent the most disadvantaged and vulnerable group. In fact, 28,000 new classrooms are needed to accommodate these children in formal educational settings as the current level of demand for school enrolment, including higher education, exceeds the number of places available (UNHCR, 2019, p. 49). Meanwhile, 11,000 Syrian teachers are allowed to work for the education of Syrian children

in formal and informal settings. It is underlined that, “By allowing Syrian teachers to work with refugee children, the government of Türkiye is helping to reinforce the resilience of the Syrian refugee community in Türkiye, and encouraging its access to education. Syrian human capital is key to get refugee children back to school. Governments hosting refugees shall consider the steps taken by the Turkish authorities, and accordingly formulate policies towards encouraging the involvement of Syrian teachers in delivering education” (Nasser, 2018, p. 85).

### **The Integration of Syrians into the Turkish Higher Education System**

Türkiye makes a significant effort and allocates large funds in order to integrate Syrian children and youth at the age of schooling into the formal educational system. In other words, Türkiye invests in the future of displaced children from Syria and elsewhere. The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) and the Higher Education Council (YÖK) play a key role in facilitating access to higher education. Now let me provide a brief piece of context as regards higher education in Türkiye. There are 206 higher-education institutions in Türkiye, of which 129 are public universities, 72 are foundation universities and 5 are foundation vocational schools. More than 7.5 million students are registered at different levels at these universities.

Turkish universities are open to Syrian students, and there are special support programs and regulations to facilitate the integration of Syrian youth into the Turkish higher education system. According a report entitled “We Made a Promise”, the number of Syrian students in Turkish universities increased from over 14,000 in 2016 to more than 20,000 in 2018, out of 108,000 foreign students in total. This represented 4% of the Syrian youth of university age in Türkiye which is a much higher rate than the world average of refugee youth at the universities which is just 1% as noted earlier. Almost 6,000 students have participated in higher education preparation programs that enable them to meet the language proficiency requirements for admission to Turkish universities (UNHCR, 2018, p. 23). In fact, “The Turkish Government has supported higher education access through the waiving of tuition fees in state universities for Syrian students. YTB has provided 4,048 scholarships since the onset of the crisis and, with partners, it is increasing scholarship numbers. University preparation programs, focused on Turkish language acquisition, have also been introduced (UNHCR, 2017, p. 42) to support Syrians to overcome language barriers to enter the university. It is reported that more than

500,000 Syrian refugees were of university age (19–24) in 2021. This is the second largest age group, accounting for 13% of the total, with the 4–10 age group being the biggest. The higher education enrolment rate for this group rose to 3.8% in 2018, to 5% in 2019 and to 9.5% in 2021. This rate is higher than the global refugee enrolment rate” (Esen, 2022). The Ministry Education’s data indicate that the number of Syrians in Turkish universities reached 48,192, and are students who receive a free education in public universities (Refugees Association, 2021). If one adds Syrian students at the foundation universities, the total number would be higher than 50,000.

Entrance to a university for Turkish nationals is based on centrally-administered test scores. This is a highly competitive examination. “The admission process for international students at Turkish universities is complex and decentralised, and international students must apply at universities individually. Unlike other international students, however, since 2013/14, Syrians do not have to pay tuition fees at state universities as a result of the Turkish state’s recognition of their specific status as displaced persons. Each university sets its own admission criteria for international students” (Hohbergeri, 2018, p. 17).

Syrians can enrol at Turkish universities in three ways, the first way is that, in order to apply for an undergraduate degree, Syrian students need a valid high school diploma and a transcript as well as an equivalency certificate obtained by the Ministry of National Education or a Turkish embassy or consulate. The second option: “In case students fail to receive equivalency for their diploma or if they were enrolled at a Temporary Education Centre, Syrians can attend the ‘Temporary Education Centers High School Proficiency and Equivalency Examination’ and then take the Foreign Students Exam” (YÖS, Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı). They can be admitted to a university according to their test results. The third option: “Students who started their university studies in Syria and wish to transfer to a Turkish university may ask universities to recognise the credits that they have earned in Syria. The decision whether to recognise courses passed in Syria is made by each university and may differ from one department to another” (Hohbergeri, 2018, pp. 17–18). “To facilitate transfers and enrolment for Syrians, reacting to the exceptional circumstances of refugees, YÖK introduced a guest status called “special student” (özel öğrenci) status. As a result, Syrian students were allowed to register at seven universities close to the border and, later, also at other public universities across the country without needing to obtain an entire whole package of original documents” (Hohbergeri, 2018, pp. 17–18; Watenpaugh, Fricke, King, 2014, pp. 24–27).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Türkiye's operation in North East Syria which started on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2019 and paused 8 days later following talks with the U.S. (18<sup>th</sup> October 2019) and Russia (22<sup>nd</sup> October 2019) sparked a heated debate as to the intention and objectives of Türkiye, the future of Syria and Syrians living in Türkiye, Türkiye-US relations, and counter-terrorism operations against Daesh and the PKK linked PYD/YPG terrorist organisation that poses a national security threat to Türkiye in the region. Turkish officials have repeatedly stated that Operation Peace Spring will be limited to creating a safe-zone for the voluntary resettlement of Syrian refugees in their own country, the removal of PKK linked PYD/YPG armed groups from the immediate borderline of Türkiye, and to contributing to preserving the territorial integrity of Syria as any further disintegration of this country would follow an emergence of new, armed, non-state actors, a greater scale of the displacement of people, and broader human suffering and security threats that would threaten the entirety of the Middle East. Despite such clear cut statements, Türkiye has faced accusations that Syrians would be forced to return and that demographic engineering would take place. The evidence on the ground suggests that these claims are founded on false presumptions because there have been no demographic shifts following previous operations, namely Euphrates Shield in 2016 and Olive Branch in 2018. Moreover, Türkiye's policy towards Syrian refugees indicate that with its limited resources and little financial assistance from the international community, this huge problem has been managed successfully to date in all fronts. More importantly, the integration of Syrians into higher education provides significant evidence as to how Türkiye plans the future of displaced Syrians under temporary protection.

As pointed out earlier in this article, there is a growing number of displaced persons in the world that poses numerous challenges for modern societies. One of the major questions regarding refugees, migrants, and displaced persons is their integration into the various institutions of the host societies. The response of nation states to such crises depends on how they perceive displaced persons. If these people are seen as a burden, policy responses are mostly negative and exclusionary. If the displaced persons are regarded as an asset rather than a burden, the policy responses are positive and inclusionary. Türkiye's open-door policy towards displaced people reflects such an approach which is marked by humanitarian concerns. As per the abovementioned rules, the practices and policies outlined in this paper illustrate that, "unlike the other countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees, the Government of Türkiye has consist-



ently taken proactive measures to grant Syrian university students with opportunities to continue their studies in Türkiye” (Watenpaugh, et al., 2014, p. 26). Türkiye has been doing its best to integrate its Syrian guests under temporary protection not only into the higher education system, but also into all walks of life despite financial constraints, security concerns, and the lack of sufficient international assistance. In order to address the problems related to Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye and its neighbouring countries, especially to facilitate their integration into the higher education system, the following steps should be considered:

- Engaging in capacity-building, and increasing existing facilities’ funding, and their number of teachers and classrooms so as to accommodate the steadily-growing number of displaced Syrians.
- Facilitating access to all levels of education for displaced children and youth including higher education.
- Providing more language courses to enable displaced Syrians to overcome linguistic barriers in order to enter university.
- Organising more outreach activities and inform displaced youth that there are opportunities to enrol in universities.
- Providing more scholarship to encourage young Syrians to partake in further-education-preparation training and university education.
- Better international co-operation and engaging in closer dialogue to address educational needs of displaced Syrians as no single country can overcome current challenges on its own.
- Sharing best practices and institutionalize exchange of innovative ideas, methods and policies to increase the quality of higher education for the displaced people.

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