Fragile Coexistence in Turkey: Addressing the Gaps in the Implementation of Refugee Integration Policies

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Abstract

This opinion article invites the reader to scrutinize the process that brought Syrian refugees in Turkey into precarious conditions. We argue that the imbalance between \textit{de jure} policies and \textit{de facto} practices creates structural challenges for Syrian refugees, especially on their access to and benefits from the education services and labor market. We further argue that the overlooking of the already existing tension between local and refugee communities hinders the integration of refugees into Turkish society. By utilizing public attitude surveys, civil society reports, and anecdotal evidence attained during the authors’ civil society works, we underline the efforts of local municipalities, civil society, and academia in alleviating the public tension, which has been downplayed by the government. The opinion piece concludes by addressing key policy guidelines for state and civil society actors to bridge their policies and to overcome challenges derived from the gap between legal policies and actual reality.

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Integration, Precarity, Urban Tension, Turkey

Introduction

Should both the feasible and unfeasible nature of refugee integration be discussed in Turkey, one must talk about the Temporary Protection Regulation of 2014. It has brought some certainties and improvements in the living conditions of Syrians with educational and healthcare services granted. However, such certainties were not completely reflective of the Turkish state response. Lack of certainty was first evident at the early phases of inflows when Turkey acted on the assumption that Syrians would go back soon. Refugee emergency response seemed adequate, but provisions were only quasi-integrative with some patchwork solutions on education, residency, and healthcare services. It was only after the adoption of temporary protection regulation in 2014 that

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access to basic provisions together with the rights and responsibilities of temporary protection beneficiaries were legally qualified. While such legalization has expedited improvements in the services provided to refugees, the underlying precarity originates from the legal possibility that the temporary protection can be limited, suspended or terminated anytime she considers. Also, the precarity has increased twofold with lack of administrative checks and inefficient control mechanisms which, thus, exposes Syrians to exploitation and exclusion across Turkey. Having emphasized Turkey’s undeniable efforts taken for Syrian refugees, even praised by Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, we tend to scrutinize this framed concept of hospitality. This opinion piece aims to point out how the lack of government control has created a discrepancy between granting of basic provisions (legal ground) and reality (practice) and how the existence of such provisions is overestimated by the Turkish society that leads to the rise of urban tensions. To analyze the discrepancy, we concentrate on educational rights and work permit which are two main pillars of integration and are thought to be among the reasons for the increasing urban tension in Turkey. Additionally, we examine how migration researchers and civil society initiatives in Turkey critically faces with the gaps downplayed by the government. We make use of our civil society experiences and qualitative data attained from semi-structured interviews conducted with seventy Syrian respondents and twenty Turkish citizens, whom we reach with a snowball sampling, living in the same neighborhood with Syrians in Ankara. We have made an in-depth analysis of these interviews in which we measured people’s perceptions on education and employment.

**The Snapshot of Access to Education for Syrian Children**

Education is a crucial pillar of the Turkish response towards Syrian refugees. Starting with ad-hoc education facilities in tent cities in between 2011-2013, Turkey has gradually improved education services from access to enrollment, and to Turkish language courses. Based on Ministry of National Education Circular No. 2014/21, Temporary Education Centers were established with a structure of education in line with the Syrian curriculum, again reflecting the expectation that Syrians would return soon. In 2015, all Syrian children were obliged to enroll in schools. Taking five to fifteen hours of Turkish language courses per week, Syrian children are expected to keep up with their Turkish peers. As of December 2019, there are 1,082,172 school-aged Syrian children living in Turkey. The schooling rate of this group is 63.23 percent, meaning that there are almost 400.000 Syrian children who have still no access to education. Most of these children work rather than attending schools either because they need money or have no desire to further continue their education. Yet, we have also discovered some other reasons of not attending the school in our field research. Some kids are voluntarily stay away from school due to peer pressure. Being expelled from the community, these children found themselves in very precarious conditions.

For some other cases, families are reluctant to send their children to schools due to fear

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of assimilation. For example, a Syrian father said: “I don’t want my boy to be like the children of Turkish families who migrated to Germany in 1970s. I don’t want my boy to lose his identity.” Such fears also made some families send their children only to mosques in order to make them learn the precepts of the Quran. It is noteworthy to see such informal practices although access to education is free of charge. Another fact is related to poverty. When we asked a Syrian mother the reason why her children work instead of going to school, she replied: “Why wouldn’t I want to send my children to school? I am in a deep sorrow whenever I see kids going to school with their bags [...] but, we have nobody here. We have to work to pay the rent and utilities.” These are some nuanced portrayals of the mismatch between the right to education and reality in which Syrians find themselves. It is important to note that Turkey made some attempts to eliminate such disparities. Turkey, together with the European Union, initiated the Accelerated Learning Program as of January 2018 to keep Syrian children attending to school and encouraged families to make efforts for children regarding education. In late 2017, with the joint action of Turkey and KfW (German Development Bank), Social and Economic Cohesion through Vocational Education program also started. Beyond the technical assistance, the program aims to raise awareness about the opportunities that vocational education can offer through planned home visits to more than 2,000 Syrian families. However, there are serious doubts on the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of such initiatives. What is needed is a solid approach to inclusive education prioritizing “social and emotional inclusion” to schools while giving importance to curricula, learning materials, school facilities, and staff. Everyday practices are shaped not only by the existence of provisions or projects of development but by the instincts of survival, prioritizing basic needs (money, food, shelter) over higher exigencies. The desire to fulfill basic needs seems more important than fulfilling future aspirations. This prioritization fuels the trends of child labor and informality among Syrian refugees. This serves as a double-edged sword for them. Not only do they experience precarious work conditions with no job security at low wages, but they also struggle with exploitation, xenophobia and discrimination triggered by fierce labor market competition.

Labor Market Competition and Fragile Coexistence

The work permit issue for Syrians in the Turkish labor market requires close attention in order to observe the aforementioned precarity. The Regulation on Work Permit for Foreigners under Temporary Protection was adopted on January 15, 2016. It is now the sine qua non to be able to legally work in Turkey. In order for a work permit application to be lodged, a six-month period

5 Fieldwork is conducted in 2016 in Ankara, Turkey. Researchers consider gender diversity and age distribution, making interviews in the range of 10 to 55 years old. Sample is representative of those who benefit and do not benefit from education facilities and those who are issued work permits and those who are not. Interviewees are provided a consent form and their names are kept anonymous. – Syrian father aged 42.
6 Ibid. see note 5. – Syrian mother aged 39
needs to pass since the applicant was first granted the temporary protection status.\textsuperscript{10} The application could, then, be made by the employer or by the beneficiary in case of self-employment. Seasonal agricultural or livestock works are exempted from work permit.\textsuperscript{11} Between January 2016 and April 2019, 31,185 Syrians were granted a work permit.\textsuperscript{12} It only corresponds to 1.24 percent of all registered Syrians who are eighteen years and older in Turkey. The small percentage of refugees who obtained a work permit directs our attention to learn more on how Syrian families earn their livelihoods. What we have derived from our field research is twofold: (1) there is informal employment under substandard working conditions, and (2) Syrians are preferred over Turkish workers, which has resulted in a situation that we call the fragile co-existence denoting a situation laden with tension between the two sides. Syrians work mostly in the sectors characterized by informality such as agriculture, construction and textile. Textile is referred as the main driver of the informal economy in Turkey.\textsuperscript{13} In unlicensed textile workshops, thousands of Syrians work with low wages. Wages vary between four hundred TL to twelve hundred TL ($75-$225) per month.\textsuperscript{14} Most of them earn below the minimum wage which is 2020 TL ($385). Child workers are also an important source of cheap labor in areas which are densely populated by refugees. A child working in a refrigerator repair store said he earned fifty TL ($9) per week. Another child working in a textile atelier for seventy-two hours per week earns the same.\textsuperscript{15} In the field, we observed some children collecting scraps of plastic and cardboard in exchange for six to eight liras ($1.5) per day.\textsuperscript{16} Not only low wages but also long working hours are a crucial problem and an indicator of exploitation. Working twelve hours per day and six days per week, Syrian children have become breadwinners in their families. They try to support the family income with the little amount of money they earn. A Syrian child proudly told us that he would like to be a welder in the future.\textsuperscript{17} For now, he only makes seventy to eighty TL ($13-$15) per week by working eleven to twelve hours per day. Another teenager, who is an ironer in a shopping mall, told us that he was the top student in his school back in Syria.\textsuperscript{18} Yet, his father hurt his back and is unable to work, making him to carry the burden of his family. He works more than ten hours per day. The fact that these children are working at such precarious conditions is a multi-faceted problem which puts them in a cycle of poverty. Employers prefer them because they are cheap sources of labor while some others claim that they provide money to these children to prevent them from begging in the streets or from getting involved with drug selling or smuggling. Irrespective of the reasons why they employ these people, the situation reflects a precarity with tough economic conditions in the short-run. Also, Turkish workers competing for these jobs have started to develop a negative perception of Syrians as they are replaced by them.

\textsuperscript{10} Article 5(1) Regulation on Work Permit for Foreigners under Temporary Protection
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., article 5(4).
\textsuperscript{15} Laura Pitel. “A day on the factory floor with a young Syrian refugee,” last updated September 2017, https://www.ft.com/content/abd615a4-76d7-11e7-a3e8-60495fe6ca71, accessed 10 January, 2019.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. See note 5. – Syrian child aged 10
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. See note 5. – Syrian child aged 14
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. See note 5. – Syrian child aged 17
With the inflow of Syrians, Turkish labor market has witnessed an increase in the informality of low-skilled labor. Syrians have started to replace Turkish workers in some sectors as they primarily work for lower wages. Some studies even claim that “for every 100 Syrian refugees in the region, twenty fewer people are formally employed.”19 For the purpose of this paper, what matters is the demonstrated increase of Syrian workers as part of the informal economy where most Turkish low-skilled workers once made money from. A Turkish woman told us in anger that Syrians stole their jobs.20 Her husband also thinks that the increase in market prices was due to no one but Syrians.21 Additionally, the more Syrians find jobs at low wages, the more Turkish workers dislike them. Although Turkish workers tend to show hospitality towards refugees since they understand poverty, hospitality cannot not be sustained when it comes to being out of a job. They endeavor to coexist in the same neighborhoods but the assumption that they are jobless due to Syrians and the fact that Syrians drive down the wages by working for less certainly create fragility between communities. This fragile coexistence is a triggering factor for the rise of urban tensions in Turkey.

**Urban Tension in a Nutshell**

More than 90 percent of Syrian refugees live outside the camps in close interaction with Turkish citizens in urban centers.22 This, as might be expected, combined with the situation discussed above creates many challenges for refugees’ integration and constitutes tensions between the local and refugee communities. Several studies show that there is a strong public disfavor against Syrian refugees.23 For example, Murat Erdogan’s (2018) study shows that Turkish citizens think of Syrian refugees as being a “liability to us” (43 percent), “dangerous people who will cause trouble in the future” (39 percent) and “beggars/living on aids” (24.4 percent).24 Another study on polarization in Turkey reported similar results in which 86.2 percent of the survey participants who voted for major parties in Turkey found the largest common ground in agreeing with the following statement “Syrians should be sent back to their country once the war in Syria has ended.”25 Finally, the incidents of intercommunal violence between local and refugee communities in Turkey increased threefold in 2017 compared to the same period of 2016.26

Our fieldwork and civil society experiences show that one of the most important pillars of public disfavor against Syrians is centered around economic explanations. Considering labor market competition and seeing refugees as an economic burden to the state and society give rise

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20 See note 5. – Turkish woman aged 51
21 See note 5. – Turkish man aged 55
22 For more information, see the website of Directorate General of Migration Management, available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik
to negative perceptions, xenophobic attitudes, and occasional violent behaviors towards them. For example, more than 70 percent of Turkish people “strongly agree” or “agree” with the statement that refugees threaten the national economy and more than 40 percent of them describe refugees as a burden on Turkish citizens. There are also other factors such as cultural and ethnic threats and ambiguous state policy that form up the public opposition and negative attitudes toward the refugees. While the incumbent government utilizes the traditional narrative of “guests” to promote hospitality between local and refugee communities, it turns a blind eye on the public disfavor and the existing tensions. The underlying causes of urban discontent between communities are strongly affected by the ambiguous political agenda including inconsistent statements declared simultaneously such as citizenship and repatriation instead of solution-based agendas to minimize public disfavor. Herein, this opinion piece emphasizes the efforts made by local municipalities, the civil society and academia to show how they address and provide solutions for this public tension actually downplayed and cannot be addressed by the central government.

**#NoToAntiImmigrationPolicies and #IStandWithRefugees: Counter Movements against the Anti-Refugee Discourse**

Civil society organizations have been vocal against the rising xenophobia and anti-refugee rhetoric in addition to their strong commitment in providing humanitarian aid and social services to the displaced people. During the campaign period for the parliamentary and presidential elections of June 24, 2018, the debate on refugees had taken over the political arena and anti-refugee rhetoric had gained salience. Presidential candidates Meral Aksener and Muharrem Ince promised to send refugees back to their countries during their political campaigns. They often made references to the economic cost of hosting refugees in Turkey. To respond to the uneasiness among voters, President Erdogan made similar statements emphasizing that the incumbent government would facilitate the return of all Syrians. To respond this suffocating political environment, Migrant Solidarity Kitchen, Migrant Solidarity Network and Hamisch-Istanbul Syrian Cultural House released a public statement to “invite everyone who is against hate and discrimination to participate in a twitter action using the hashtag of #notoantiimmigrationpolicies.”

Another example of civil how society organizations speaking up against discriminatory attitudes and discourses towards refugees and promoting solidarity with refugees comes from Goc Arastirmacilari Dernegi (The Association of Migration Research). They created the hashtag #mültecilerinyaninda (We Stand With Refugees) after the discriminatory hashtag

28 Erdogan, 2018.
29 See note 4.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
#ülkemdesuriyelisitemiyorum (I don’t want Syrians in my country) became a trending topic on Twitter aiming a group of Syrians who had celebrated the New Year at Taksim Square in Istanbul. The Association also made a public statement that called to end the perception that refugees create challenges for local citizens. They also criticized opposition parties for using anti-refugee discourse to get votes from their constituents and the incumbent government for not taking full responsibility for refugee integration and for sending mixed signals of brotherhood and forced repatriation.

**False Facts about Syrian Refugees**

Negative perceptions and xenophobic attitudes towards Syrian refugees are also increased by inaccurate information disseminated within the public, such as locals’ overestimation of the refugee population and of the rights and provisions refugees are granted, as well as their misrepresentation and criminalization in the media. Herein, more clear and transparent official policies are needed to raise public awareness of the vulnerabilities and the situation of refugee experiences in Turkey. Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association (RASAS) published a list of false facts about Syrian refugees. The misinformation about them includes the following: they are not supposed to wait in lines in public hospitals, they do not pay the bills, they receive free houses from the incumbent government, Syrian students receive more than thousand Turkish liras from the government, and so on. Teyit.org, an independent fact-checking organization based in Turkey, also released a list of false information about Syrians living in Turkey. The allegations include false provisions such as Syrians entering universities without examinations, getting salaries from the government, or criminal stories such as Syrians kidnapping children or raping women. These stories along with the overestimation of rights and provisions granted to refugees pave the way for rising public opposition against them. Especially when the rumors spread in the social media, they sometimes end up with violent attacks to houses and restaurants owned by Syrians.

**Conclusion**

It is worth acknowledging the role of Turkey in hosting the highest number of refugees in the world and providing fundamental integration provisions to them, and of course facing challenges by doing so. Policies in education, health, employment and citizenship are significant indicators

35 Ibid.
36 Suriyelilerle ilgili doğru bilinen yanlışlar,” for more information, see: https://multeciler.org.tr/suriyeli-multecilerle-ilgili-dogru-bilinen-yanlislar/
38 Ibid.
of this argument. However, these services have not been fully supplemented and properly monitored by the central government, which has caused a discrepancy between policies and practices. Meanwhile, these provisions are not very welcomed by the local societies and even overestimated to some extent. Since the return of Syrian refugees is not a viable option in near future, these two issues, as we argue, trigger urban tensions and creates a situation of fragile coexistence in Turkey. In particular, we concentrate on the labor market to demonstrate how the increasing number of Syrians in the informal market actually fuels tensions. We also dug deep in education since Syrian children are one of the main and potential sources of informal labor irrespective of school attendance. Both the ones who have and those who don’t have access to education have been obliged to work due to poverty. Both the ones who don’t have access to education and the ones who have to work informally are obliged to work due to poverty. At this point the lack of government control on the implementation of basic provisions deteriorates the situation, resulting in two fundamental problems: (1) causing more Syrians to work in unlicensed workshops, while at the same time (2) making Turkish low-skilled workers to think that Syrians are replacing them which thus fuels urban tensions. For the former, we underline the necessity of transparent and clear official frameworks constantly checked by administrative authorities. Lack of transparency in regulations creates a precarity status in which Syrians are used as informal and cheap labor by the employers. For the latter, we highlight the importance and the need for increasing counter movements and informative activities by the civil society. We argue that civil society can play the role to point out and/or fulfill the gap between policies and practice in Turkey. To respond the discrepancy caused by the lack of government control, civil society organizations initiated projects to improve the image of Syrian refugees in the eyes of the Turkish society. Their activities help ease the tensions between local and refugee communities, which could, indeed, prompt the Turkish government to adopt a more efficient and a more comprehensive refugee response framework. Drawing from these observations, we finally indicate that urban tensions should not be downplayed but treated as crucial realities in Turkey with refugees and local communities, keeping in mind that they are important actors in social cohesion. It could only be possible with integration policies built on this approach that fragility of co-existence can be eliminated.

References


