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Growing Anti-Syrian Sentiment in Turkey

by [Soner Cagaptay](#)

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Brief Analysis

Refugees are being blamed for the country's economic and social troubles, resulting in online hate speech, vigilante violence, and further pressure on the government to change the status quo in north Syria.

On June 22, the office of provincial governor Ali Yerlikaya announced that Syrian nationals who are not registered in Istanbul would have to leave the city by August 20. The area is now closed to further registration of such nationals, half a million of whom reside in Istanbul city alone. Coming from the office of an official appointed by the central government, the announcement highlights the country's growing political tensions over the refugee issue.

MAJORITY OPPOSITION TO SYRIAN PRESENCE

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Turkey currently hosts 3,614,108 Syrians. This figure constitutes nearly two-thirds of the entire Syrian refugee community worldwide, and a 4.4% addition to Turkey's population of 82 million citizens as of 2018. For the most part, the government has cared for these refugees using its own resources, with some assistance from the European Union.

The Istanbul governor's decision comes at a time of increasing public resentment toward these Syrians, whom the central government does not formally recognize as refugees, classifying them as "under temporary protection status" instead. In a poll conducted earlier this year, 68% of Turkish respondents expressed discontent with the Syrian presence, compared to 58% in 2016.

Turks are sharply divided on many issues, with one bloc tending to oppose President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's policies and an equal-size bloc ardently supporting him. Yet dissatisfaction with the decision to welcome Syrian refugees since 2011 is a rare exception to that rule, garnering majority criticism across party lines. Around 60% of those who back Erdogan's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) express discontent with the Syrian presence, together with 64% from the AKP-allied Nationalist Action Party (MHP); on the opposition side, the figures are 62% from the IYI Party, 71% from the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), and 83% from the Republican People's Party (CHP).

DEMOGRAPHIC IMPACT

The arrival of Syrian refugees is Turkey's most significant demographic shift since its "population exchange" with Greece in the 1920s. According to official Turkish figures, only around 100,000 of them remain sheltered in camps; the vast majority have settled in cities and towns among the broader population. Most of them (3.2 million, or 88%) are concentrated in fourteen of Turkey's eighty-one provinces: namely, the Syrian border provinces of Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis, Mardin, and Sanliurfa; the nearby southern provinces of Adana, Mersin, and Kahramanmaras; and the demographically and economically larger provinces of Ankara, Bursa, Istanbul, Izmir, Kayseri, and Konya.

Istanbul has the largest number—547,479, or nearly 4% of the province's 2018 population. Yet the demographic impact on the country's smaller southern provinces is even more significant. Syrians equal 27% of the population in Hatay, 22% in Gaziantep, 21% in Sanliurfa, and a whopping 81% in Kilis.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES TO INTEGRATION

Although these "protected" Syrians enjoy basic public services like healthcare and education, their temporary status does not allow them to work legally in Turkey. Ankara has long hoped that they will one day go back to Syria and has therefore shied away from taking steps that might help them become permanent residents. Syrians are encouraged to apply for residency permits to obtain legal employment, but the accompanying bureaucratic requirements and restrictions make this very difficult. So far, only around 200,000 refugees have been granted citizenship, residency, or work permits allowing them legal employment.

Consequently, many of the 2.1 million working-age refugees have resorted to informal and irregular employment, usually for scant pay far below Turkey's minimum wage. According to a July study by the Brookings Institution, between 500,000 and one million Syrians continue to provide informal labor despite poor working conditions and rampant exploitation, mostly in the textile, services, construction, and education sectors.

Last year, the Germany-based Institute of Labor Economics found that this influx of Syrian workers did not drive down wages outside Turkey's informal and part-time labor sectors. Nevertheless, many citizens believe that Syrians are to blame for rising unemployment and low wages across all sectors. Unemployment was at 14% as of March, up from 9% in 2011. Put another way, the number of jobless Turks has nearly doubled to 4.5 million since the government first began admitting Syrian refugees.

Meanwhile, sharp increases in consumer prices have dramatically increased the cost of living for the average citizen. Inflation held just under 20% in March after reaching a record 25% last year, and wage boosts have not compensated for the price spike. For at least some citizens whose earnings have been hit hard, the meager 120 lira (\$20) per month in aid given to registered Syrian families looks increasingly like unfair treatment, especially for those who wrongly believe that this and other EU-financed programs are funded by Turkish taxpayers. According to a July report by Al-Monitor, some locals also claim that Syrians have unfair economic advantages because they can open unlicensed businesses, and because they are not subject to the tax requirements imposed on citizens.

RISING TENSIONS

The Syrian presence is also being blamed for many of Turkey's social troubles. Emerging opinion leaders with large online followings have been especially important in normalizing anti-Syrian attitudes. Dismissed MHP parliamentarian Sinan Ogan, who boasts over a million Twitter followers, attracted thousands of interactions with a July post claiming that Syrian and Afghan refugees rape women and boys, and that "chopping heads" is a part of Syrian culture. Similarly, a recent article by popular opposition journalist Yilmaz Ozdil alleged that Syrians are "invading" Istanbul "street by street," causing disturbances and forcing Turks to move out of their neighborhoods. He also accused them of setting up illegal businesses, forming gangs, and stockpiling prescription drugs, claiming that "Syrians are free to commit crimes."

Yet official statistics cited by Euronews indicate that Syrians were involved in only 853 of 32,553 criminal incidents in Istanbul last year. In other words, the city suffered 153 incidents per 100,000 Syrians, significantly less than the 210 incidents that occurred per 100,000 Turks.

Despite these numbers, widespread incitement has produced a dangerous cycle of online hate leading to violence offline. Popular accounts often disseminate such statements with the hashtag "#SuriyelilerDefoluyor" ("Syrians get out"). And accounts owned by public figures or anonymous individuals frequently spread false stories about Syrians harassing, raping, and even murdering Turkish citizens.

Some consumers of this content have used social media to organize and carry out violence against Syrians, with attacks against individual refugees increasingly erupting into mass violence. This February, for example, an argument between residents and refugees in Istanbul transformed into large-scale clashes. And on June 29, dozens of vigilantes attacked Syrian businesses in Istanbul's Kucukcekmece district after a Syrian man was falsely accused of molesting a young girl.

CONCLUSION

Turkey's growing anti-Syrian sentiment appears to be one of several factors eroding public support for President Erdogan, even to the point of bringing the pro- and anti-Erdogan blocs together. Well aware of this trend, Erdogan is doing whatever he can to repatriate as many refugees as possible back to Syria. The government has already transferred hundreds of thousands of refugees to Turkish-controlled enclaves in northwest Syria. Attempting to further this model, Erdogan has been pushing Washington to create a joint "safe zone" in northeast Syria and repatriate more refugees there. He may even be willing to strike a grand bargain with the Assad regime, recognizing it as Syria's legitimate government in return for Damascus allowing refugees to return to their homes. At the very least, he would likely demand that Turkey retain control over its enclaves in north Syria in order to facilitate the return of more refugees.

Soner Cagaptay is the Beyer Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of the forthcoming book [Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East](#). Deniz Yuksel is a research assistant at the Institute. They would like to thank Institute intern Yagiz Sullu for his help in researching this PolicyWatch. ❖



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