

How Displaced Syrians Navigate Their Status in Turkey

by [Omar Kush \(/experts/omar-kush\)](#)

May 31, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-yjtaz-alnazhwn-alswrywn-wdhm-fy-trkya\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omar Kush \(/experts/omar-kush\)](#)

Omar Kush is a Syrian journalist and researcher based in Turkey. He writes regularly in several Arab sites and periodicals, and has published a number of books, researches, and articles.



Brief Analysis

While Syrian refugees in Turkey often enjoy far better conditions than their compatriots in Arab countries, the majority of Syrians in Turkey—both within and outside of the country’s refugee camps—face difficulties when it comes to employment, residency rights, integration, and movement between Turkish provinces. Despite these challenges, the prospect of granting citizenship to Syrians has stirred an uproar in Turkish political circles and sparked a national debate over the future of Syrian refugees in the country. However, even outside of the widespread objection within Turkey to the naturalization of Syrian refugees there, simply granting refugees Turkish citizenship is not an adequate solution to the challenges they face on a daily basis.

According to the Turkish Immigration Department, at the end of 2018 there were **3.623 million Syrian refugees**

(<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/2019/1/30/%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%AF%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A9-4-5-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%A6%D8%A9>) living in Turkey. Only 143,068 Syrians were living in camps, indicating that 96 percent of the total refugee population was living in Turkish towns and cities, making up 4.5 percent of the country's entire 81 million population.

Only 143,068 Syrians were living in camps, indicating that 96 percent of the total refugee population was living in Turkish towns and cities, making up 4.5 percent of the country's entire 81 million population.

However, Turkish law does not classify Syrians living in Turkey as refugees, complicating their legal status. While Turkey has been a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention of the United Nations since 1962, Ankara was only willing to join the convention on the condition that the Convention applies exclusively to refugees fleeing Europe. When Syrians began flowing into Turkey in 2011, the country recognized them as a group rather than as individual refugees and passed specific laws relating to a special ‘Syrian’ status.

The Turkish government initially classified Syrians as “guests,” a category with no recognition either in domestic nor international law. The Turkish interior ministry later announced that Syrians would benefit from temporary protection status, issuing an administrative order in March 2012 that brought in a policy of open borders, outlawed forcible repatriation of Syrians, and allowed for the provision of humanitarian aid to Syrians living in camps. Finally, in 2014, the Turkish government introduced a “temporary protection” law that protects Syrian refugees from forcible repatriation, allowing Syrian them reside in Turkey indefinitely and enjoy reception services and provisions

for basic and immediate needs.

As recipients of temporary group protection, Syrians are eligible for Kimlik, a type of temporary residency card. In addition to Syrian nationals, a kimlik will also be provided to Palestinian refugees from Syria and even stateless persons who entered Turkey from its border with Syria. Although Kimlik holders have the right to work in Turkey, their opportunities are nevertheless limited. Furthermore, while the Syrian inhabitants of Turkey's refugee camps receive regular aid, assistance is limited for the large majority of Syrians who live outside these camps. The terms of assistance depend on an individual's status, with the exception of the general health care that is provided to anyone who holds a kimlik.

For Syrians living in Turkey without a Kimlik, there are three other types of residency permits for which they could potentially be eligible: tourist, worker, and investor visas. To obtain a tourist visa, there are several stipulations to qualify and, unlike a kimlik, this visa does not grant the holder the right to work in Turkey. Most importantly, one must possess an official passport that he or she must have used to enter the country through legal channels. The holder must also have a valid one-year residential rental agreement certified by municipal authorities. On the other hand, to acquire a worker's residency permit, one must secure an employment contract with an organization or company working on Turkish soil. The final category, designed for investors, grants residency to Syrian businessman who invest in Turkey.

While all Syrians in Turkey have one of these forms of documentation, obtaining Turkish citizenship is much more complicated. Under Turkish law, a person seeking to obtain Turkish citizenship must live in Turkey for five consecutive years legally and without break. Their stay cannot be for the purpose of study, and the applicant may not spend more than six months total outside of Turkey during this period. Moreover, while being of Turkish descent could provide Syrian refugees with a path for Turkish citizenship, the vast majority of Syrians living in Turkey do not have the right to claim Turkish nationality due to their residency status. To make such a claim, Syrians would have to first obtain a worker's or investor's residency permit.

Despite these complications, many argue that the large Syrian presence in Turkey has had a net-positive effect on the country's economy as a whole. Indeed, Turkish economists recognize the major contribution that Syrians have made to the economy over the past seven years. While Syrians' humanitarian needs did place an economic burden on Turkey, this has been outweighed by their economic contribution in terms of investment, expertise, and labor. Syrians have brought many skills to the Turkish labor market by working in Turkish factories, workshops, restaurants and other establishments, as well as providing a cheap source of labor.

In 2015, Syrian capital and Syrian-run firms topped the foreign investment rankings in Turkey, accounting for around **22.3 percent**

(https://syrianobserver.com/EN/news/27850/syrian_businesses_top_turkey_foreign_investment_list.html) of foreign investment, according to the Turkish interior ministry's Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD). And during the past year, Syrian businessman set up **1,595 companies**

([https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1551075334-](https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/files/1551075334-6.TEPAV_Suriye_Sermayeli_Sirketler_Bulteni_Aralik_2018.pdf)

6.TEPAV Suriye Sermayeli Sirketler Bulteni Aralik 2018.pdf), and while there are no exact figures on the scale of Syrian investment in Turkey, economic experts estimate it at 46.5 million dollars or more.

Nevertheless, the Turkish opposition views apparent moves to grant Turkish nationality to Syrians as an attempt by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to gain an extra 1.5 million voters. Some senior figures in the Republican People's Party (CHP), the AKP's main rival, believe the president and his party want to nationalize Syrian refugees in Kurdish- and Alevi-majority provinces in a bid to change the demography of those regions. CHP head Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has on more than one occasion vowed to send Syrian refugees back to their country.

Adding to the controversy the question has caused in Turkish political circles, during Turkey's contentious elections cycle Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu announced that 53,000 Syrians had been granted citizenship and could vote in last March's local elections. He said a total of 79,820 Syrians had been granted Turkish citizenship.

The Turkish opposition's discourse has contributed to growing Turkish anger towards Syrians. Rather than seeking ways to integrate Syrians into Turkish society, the opposition has consistently talked of the need to return Syrians to their country, which has further stoked animosity towards Syrian refugees in Turkish society.

Thus, the future of Syrian refugees has become a tool for scoring political points in Turkey, pitting Erdogan's ruling AKP against opposition parties in a dynamic that was particularly evident during elections. The aftermath has negatively affected Syrians in Turkey and triggered animosity towards them. Some Turkish media outlets have blamed Syrians for the country's deteriorating economy and living standards, while Turkish citizens have also directed their anger towards Syrian refugees, blaming them for growing unemployment and rising prices, especially noticeable in residential renting prices. The attitudes of Turkish citizens, which were generally welcoming of Syrian refugees at first, have since soured, in part due to growing hate speech by politicians.

There is no doubt that the issue of Syrian refugees is fundamentally linked to any political solution for the Syrian conflict, which, judging by current conditions, remains a long way off. Furthermore, the controversy around Syrian refugees in Turkey should not be expected to die down: indeed, it is likely to intensify. Therefore, the situation of Syrians in Turkey will not change for the better until a solution is found for the violence that pushed them to seek refuge there. And even if Turkey were to grant citizenship to some of its Syrian residents, this step by itself will not solve the problem, nor will it end the suffering of the millions of Syrians in Turkey. If a solution can be found, it will be a political solution that provides Syrians a safe environment to return to their country and take part in building a new Syria, open to all, according to the principle of equal citizenship, and with no space for oppression by the Syrian regime, which has systematically sought to dispossess them and push them into exile. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)