



Policy Analysis /
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Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Brief Analysis

The continued difficulty of integrating so many displaced people could make Ankara more amenable to a political solution that ends the war and allows large numbers of them to return home.

Syrians make up nearly one-third of all refugees in the world, and Turkey hosts 63.4% of them, or 3,570,352 people. This figure—culled last month from [periodically updated statistics](#) released by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)—constitutes a 4.2% increase in Turkey's 2017 population of 81,745,000. Such a large, sudden addition warrants deeper analysis of the demographic, economic, social, and political effects that displaced Syrians are having on Turkish society.

DEMOGRAPHIC IMPACT

The influx of Syrian refugees between 2011 and 2017 is Turkey's most significant demographic shift since the 1923-4 "population exchange" with Greece. The government opened the doors to people escaping the Assad regime's brutality in April 2011, and one million had fled across the border by September 2014. A year later, the number doubled to two million, then reached three million in 2017. According to the UN, 1,926,987 of these Syrians are male, 1,627,085 are female, and more than a million are under the age of ten.

The vast majority of the refugees (3,554,072) are now mixed with the Turkish population, while 212,816 are sheltered in camps. Approximately 2.8 million of them are concentrated in twelve of Turkey's eighty-one provinces: Adana, Bursa, Gaziantep, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Konya, Mardin, Mersin, and Sanliurfa.

Istanbul has the largest number: 563,015 refugees, representing 3.6% of the province's 2017 population. Yet eight southern provinces together host around 57% of them, and the demographic impact there is especially significant. Fleeing Syrians constitute 19.3% of the population in Sanliurfa (474,077 refugees), 21.2% in Hatay (443,871), 16.1% in Gaziantep (385,541), 10.4% in Mersin (208,687), and a whopping 49% in the small province of Kilis (131,261).

Elsewhere, three industrial provinces—Konya and Kayseri in central Turkey, and Izmir along the western coast—also host large numbers of refugees, but the local demographic impact is much smaller in percentage terms. In Izmir, 137,612 refugees represent 3.1% of the province's population, while Konya has 104,431 (4.6%), and Kayseri has 74,601 (5.4%). Taken together, Turkey's three largest provinces—Ankara (73,016 refugees, or 1.3% of its population), Istanbul, and Izmir—host approximately 22% of the refugees.

ETHNIC IMPACT

Although many of these numbers may seem small when placed against Turkey's total population, refugees are having an outsize effect on the ethnic composition of certain provinces, particularly the mixed Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab areas near the Syrian border. These provinces are hardly marginal in demographic terms—Gaziantep, Hatay, Kahramanmaras, Kilis, Mardin, and Sanliurfa are home to more than 10.6% of the country's population, and the capital of Gaziantep is Turkey's eighth-largest city.

The government has not collected data on citizens' ethnic origins since the 1960 census. At that time, ethnic Arabs (defined as those whose mother tongue was Arabic) constituted only 1.25% of the total population, but three southern provinces reported much large proportions: Hatay (34%), Mardin (21%), and Sanliurfa (13%). Other data indicates that the national figure has not changed much over the decades; for instance, a 2007 national poll by KONDA found that 1.38% of respondents declared their mother tongue to be Arabic. Yet the influx of overwhelmingly Sunni Arab refugees from next door has brought dramatic changes to southern provinces with larger Arab populations.

Today, Arabic-speaking refugees and citizens constitute 56% of Hatay's population, making it Turkey's first Arab-majority province. And while Alawites dominated Hatay's Arab community before the war, the refugee influx has made the Sunni Arab and Alawite communities nearly equal in size. Similarly, Kilis once had an Arab community of less than 1% but is now poised to become Turkey's second Arab-majority province. Arabs have also reportedly made big population leaps in Mardin (21% to 31.2%) and Sanliurfa (13% to 32.3%).

INTEGRATION OBSTACLES

From 2011 to 2016, Ankara maintained its open-door policy by legally accepting Syrian refugees under "temporary protection status." The Temporary Protection Regulation, established in November 2014 by the Directorate General of Migration Management (GIGM), is based on three principles: Turkey will keep its borders open to those seeking safety; no individuals from Syria will be sent home against their will; and the basic humanitarian needs of persons fleeing the war will be met.

While temporary protection is a nonpolitical, humanitarian measure, GIGM does impose various bureaucratic requirements and restrictions. Refugees have a time limit for obtaining temporary protection identification cards, and these cards are neither residency permits nor work permits. Moreover, in a 2015 article published by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, Omar Yusuf wrote that Syrians must apply for a temporary residence permit in order to travel freely in Turkey, but obtaining this permit requires a valid passport (which many refugees no longer

have), Turkish health insurance (which costs at least \$300 per year) and a bank account containing at least \$6,000 (a prohibitive amount for most of them). These restrictions apply to any illegal immigrant, not just Syrians.

Today, only 712,218 refugees have Turkish residency permits, 347,297 of whom reside in Istanbul. According to journalist Mohammad Baroudi, the government initially “turned a blind eye” to unregistered refugees staying beyond the three-month limit established by law in January 2015, which many Syrians flouted by leaving and reentering Turkey. Yet the huge increase in arrivals eventually prompted the government to enforce the deadline as a means of both pushing Syrians to register for residency permits and addressing potential security concerns.

As for work permits, only 56,024 Syrians were able to obtain them as of 2017. Turkey introduced a permit system in early 2016 to help refugees become self-reliant and relieve Ankara from the financial burden of housing them, but legal barriers have kept employers from recruiting them in large numbers. For instance, before hiring a Syrian, employers are subject to a four-week waiting period during which they must document that no Turkish citizen of equal skillset can be hired to fill the position. The law also mandates that Syrians under temporary protection cannot exceed 10% of the workforce at any company. Moreover, refugees can only apply for jobs in provinces where they are registered—a provision that creates tough competition for formal work because approximately 78% of them are concentrated in a dozen provinces.

Some employers in agriculture and animal husbandry are permitted to hire Syrians under temporary protection as seasonal laborers without applying for work permits. Yet numerous other occupations are entirely closed to Syrians, such as dentistry, pharmaceuticals, veterinary medicine, legal work, notarial work, security, and customs brokerage. Given all of these restrictions, less than 1% of working-age Syrians currently take part in Turkey’s formal labor market. The vast majority “prefer the informal economy due to the costs associated with getting the work permit,” as one Labor Ministry official revealed during a recent meeting in Hatay.

In July 2017, Omar Kadkoy of the Istanbul-based think tank TEPAV described how this labor market “supply shock” has hit southeast Turkey particularly hard, generating “intense competition in low-skilled jobs.” For local citizens, unemployment has increased, especially among women and youths. And for the refugees, employers tend to restrict them to informal “flexible labor,” citing concerns about their “poor language skills, lack of occupational skills, and incompatible work culture.” As a result, those Syrian asylum seekers who manage to find jobs usually receive less than minimum wage for working longer shifts under indecent conditions, while their employers avoid social security premiums and work permit fees.

NATURALIZATION PROSPECTS

In April 2013, Turkey approved a comprehensive UNHCR-inspired “Law on Foreigners and International Protection,” which reinstated the country’s obligation to provide refugees with basic humanitarian needs and created a new governmental body for asylum procedures, the aforementioned GIGM. Yet a registration process for the exponentially growing number of Syrians was not initiated until 2014, and even then the system was not thorough or effective enough to keep up with the fast-growing influx. Consequently, the majority of the dispersed non-camp refugees still remain unregistered and unidentified.

Meanwhile, the government adopted a new Turkish Nationality Law in May 2009 allowing refugees to petition for citizenship if they have lived in the country for “five years uninterruptedly” (the law has other requirements, but in practice the process boils down to the five-year criterion). In order to prove they have met this requirement, refugees must provide an appropriately dated legal domicile or work permit. Legal domicile status can be obtained by applying to a provincial governor’s office within the first ten days of entry into Turkey.

Many refugees who applied for such documentation upon arrival have met the five-year requirement and are now eligible to become Turkish citizens. Since 2011, 55,583 Syrians have officially gained citizenship, approximately

25,000 of them under age eighteen. Yet this is a small figure when one considers that 276,158 children were born to refugee parents in Turkey between April 2011 and the end of 2017 (unlike in the United States, Turkey does not automatically grant citizenship to children born on its soil; at least one of their parents must be a citizen first). The lag in numbers suggests that the Turkish government may be unwilling to fast-track naturalization applications for Syrians; it could also signal that many Syrians are hesitant to pursue Turkish citizenship because they believe it may imperil their goal of going home someday.

CONCLUSION

While Ankara has done a good job of welcoming nearly 3.6 million Syrians and meeting their basic needs, efforts to integrate them into the local population have lagged, indicating that Turkey still aims to return them to Syria. The government has already transferred nearly 150,000 refugees to the Turkish-held safe zone in northern Syria. Going forward, Ankara may be willing to tacitly approve a political solution that ends the war and paves the way for more Syrians to go home, essentially tolerating the Assad regime's hold on power even as Turkish officials say otherwise in public. Yet large numbers of these refugees opposed the Assad regime themselves, so it remains to be seen how many of them Damascus would allow back in.

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