

The Impact of Syrian Refugees on Turkey

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Brief Analysis

The ongoing influx of Syrians could tilt future elections in Erdogan and the AKP's favor, though the long-term demographic and social repercussions will be felt regardless of political outcomes.

In the sixth year of the Syrian civil war, the number of people displaced by the fighting has surpassed 13.5 million, and Turkey remains a crucial haven for many of them. Now harboring at least 2.5 million Syrians, Turkey has become the number-one destination for refugees fleeing the conflict, followed by Lebanon at over one million. This influx is transforming Turkey's ethnic and sectarian makeup, particularly in the southern provinces bordering Syria. On July 2, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan promised to "open pathways to citizenship for Syrian refugees." What impact would such naturalization efforts have on Turkey's demographic structure and sociopolitical landscape?

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY SINCE 2011

As of late 2015, Turkey had a population of 78.7 million, with Syrian refugees accounting for 3.1% of that figure based on conservative estimates. Demographic trends indicate that the country already had as many as 1.5 million Arab-origin citizens before the war, so Turkey's Arab constituency now numbers anywhere from 4.5 to 5.1% of the population. Put another way, with nearly 4 million Arab inhabitants, Turkey has more Arabs than some Arab-majority countries, including Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar.

Gauging ethnic composition in Turkey is difficult because the government has not collected comprehensive data on ethnicity since 1960. At that time, individuals who declared their mother tongue to be Arabic accounted for 1.25% of the population. This figure appeared to remain more or less constant prior to the Syria war -- in a 2007 national poll by KONDA, 1.38% of Turkish respondents declared their mother tongue to be Arabic.

Beyond Turkey's overall increase in Arabs since 2011, the concentration of Syrian refugees in the south has altered demographic balances in multiple provinces. According to the Interior Ministry's Directorate General of Migration Management (AFAD), the five border provinces of Kilis, Hatay, Mardin, Sanliurfa, and Gaziantep have received over half of the refugees. The prewar population of Kilis (130,000) has doubled over the past few years, and its Arab population has exploded: in the 1960 census, Kilis was less than 1% Arab, but that number is now 49.2%. In Hatay, the refugee influx has increased the Arab population from 34% to 47%. Hatay's transformation also highlights the war's sectarian impact, since the refugees are almost exclusively Sunni Arab. Previously, most Arabs in Hatay belonged to the Alawite branch of Islam (the same sect as the Assad regime in Syria), but they are now almost equally split between Sunnis and Alawites.

Sectarian and ethnic shifts have occurred in Mardin and Sanliurfa as well. These provinces previously had Kurdish majorities or pluralities, but they have witnessed a rise in their Arab populations during the war -- Mardin's from 21 to 29%, and Sanliurfa's from 13 to 28%. In Gaziantep, the region's economic hub, Arabs originally accounted for less than 1% of the population, but that number jumped to 18% following the arrival of over 325,000 refugees.

Beyond the border, four surrounding provinces -- Adana, Mersin, Kahramanmaras, and Osmaniye -- have received almost 15% of Turkey's Syrian refugees, who now constitute at least 5% of the population in all four provinces. Continued migration and disparate reproduction levels will further shift the balance between Turks, Kurds, and Arabs in these areas, and between Alawites and Sunnis.

Outside the southern provinces, a quarter of the refugees have settled in Turkey's metropolitan areas. Many have migrated to Istanbul, which now hosts almost 360,000 Syrians, or 2.4% of the city's population. Izmir, Turkey's third-largest city, has a little over 83,000 refugees, or nearly 2% of the population. Midsize cities such as Bursa, Konya, and Kayseri have tens of thousands of Syrian inhabitants, indicating that refugees are also dispersed across western and central Anatolia.

POLITICAL IMPACT

These demographic changes could soon translate to political shifts. Turkish naturalization law allows foreign nationals who have lived in the country for five years to apply for citizenship. The first wave of refugees arrived in April 2011, so some migrants have already fulfilled the time requirement for beginning the naturalization process. As many as 2.5 million Syrians could therefore obtain citizenship in the next five years if the government demonstrates the political will to naturalize them. And given their likely gratitude for President Erdogan's role in providing them with refuge, social aid, and a pathway to citizenship, most of these potential new citizens can be expected to vote for his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in future elections.

Currently, the Turkish political landscape is polarized between the AKP and the opposition parties, which have nearly equal support. In the past two elections, the AKP has maxed out at 49.5% of the vote, so Erdogan has sought to hold a popular referendum on changing the constitution to make himself an executive-style, partisan president (although he has continued to guide the AKP since his days as prime minister, he is technically prohibited from serving as the party's official leader as president). In addition to favorable views of Erdogan himself, many of the refugees come from Syria's northern countryside and already have a conservative tilt, making them potential AKP voters once they obtain citizenship.

Such a development could gift Erdogan with a referendum victory and a potential supermajority in the next

parliamentary elections, to be held in 2019. While it is unlikely that all of the refugees will be granted citizenship right away, even opening the path to naturalization could seriously alter the AKP's leverage over the three opposition parties: the leftist-secularist Republican People's Party (CHP), the right-wing Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP).

The political impact could be even greater if the Syrian refugee influx increases, which may well happen if the ongoing Assad regime offensive in Aleppo succeeds. At the same time, the recent Turkish incursion into the Syrian border town of Jarabulus apparently serves Ankara's plans to prevent another refugee influx, among other goals. Should this operation to establish a bridgehead in northern Syria succeed, it would give Turkey a sliver of territory on the other side of the border in which to house future refugees, potentially curbing further flows into Turkey. Nevertheless, Erdogan has hinted at his willingness to take in more refugees should circumstances dictate; in an August 8 interview with *Le Monde*, he stated, "Turkey, which has already taken in 3 million Syrian refugees, is ready to take another million."

CONCLUSION

Regardless of when and how many Syrians acquire Turkish citizenship, the refugee crisis will have a lasting effect on the country's demographic, political, and social landscape. The citizenship process will no doubt become a polarizing political issue, with the AKP supporting it, the CHP and MHP opposing it, and the HDP taking sides depending on how many Kurds are among the refugees. At the same time, Turkey's ability to integrate the Syrians, and the government's willingness to listen to the growing Arab community's political and cultural demands, will determine whether this lasting effect can be positive.

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