

Safe Havens Overflowing on the Turkey-Syria Border

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Brief Analysis

The growing refugee zones straddling the border could force Turkey to voice its demands for direct U.S. and international assistance on the Syria crisis.

Download a Google Earth map layer ([kmz file](#)) ([/uploads/Documents/other/SyriaTurkeyRefugeeZones.kmz](#)) with data on the three main refugee cantons on the Syria/Turkey border. To view, after downloading, open the [Google Earth \(http://www.google.com/earth/index.html\)](#) application, from the menu choose File >> Open, and select SyriaTurkeyRefugeeZones.kmz.

As Ankara struggles to accommodate the tide of Syrian refugees waiting to enter Turkey, temporary havens are forming on the Syrian side of the border, and without apparent interference from Damascus. This development is creating new facts on the ground, reviving the prospect of formal, internationally backed safe havens in Syrian territory while blurring the legal and ethnic boundaries between the two countries. If left to fester, these issues could challenge Turkey's domestic stability and test U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Syria.

BORDER BACKLOG

As fighting intensifies in Syria's northwestern Idlib and Aleppo provinces, more and more refugees have been fleeing to Turkey. Southern Turkey is a natural destination for these refugees, many of whom have kinship ties with Arab Turks in Hatay province (sandwiched between Syria and the Mediterranean coast) and other areas. At the moment, some 80,000 Syrians are living in Turkish refugee camps. August witnessed an especially dramatic increase in the number of registered crossings, with as many as 5,000 occurring per day during peak flow.

Ankara also estimates that around 50,000 Syrians have traveled to Turkey legally and are benefiting from a visa-free policy that allows them to remain in the country for up to ninety days. Many of these entrants have long overstayed their legal limit.

In addition to straining Ankara's ability to shelter large numbers of civilians, the heightened refugee influx could pose security threats. For example, the terrorist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) recently carried out a car bombing in Gaziantep, a large city near the border, exacerbating Turkish concerns about PKK operatives from Syria entering the country in greater numbers. In response to such issues, Ankara recently closed certain border crossings and increased security controls for Syrian refugees. This move has increased the wait time for entry, however, further swelling the backlog of refugees on the Syrian side of the border and spurring the formation of de facto camps there. As of September 5, an estimated 10,000 Syrians were encamped in this manner.

Ankara has been calling on the international community to recognize these emerging facts on the ground and support safe zones for refugees in Syrian territory. The White House has so far balked at the request, stating, "Our focus has been on helping and supporting Turkey to be able to expand the number of refugees that it can handle on its side of the border."

THREE MAIN HAVENS

[\(/uploads/Maps/SyriaTurkeyBorderRefugeeZones.jpg\)](#)

As the exodus continues, areas with favorable geography and nearby crossing points have experienced the largest flows, producing disconnected refugee cantons straddling the frontier at several different points. Each of these zones is under Turkish care; the Syrian government has all but abandoned them. So far, this trend has been strongest in three areas: near Turkey's Yayladagi, Cilvegozu, and Oncupinar crossings. On August 18, Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate (AFAD) began to dispense aid at these crossings, while Turkish military forces equipped with antiaircraft systems have been positioned within range of some of the camps.

Yayladagi. Located at the southern tip of Hatay, Yayladagi is a small town of about 6,000 residents. AFAD is currently distributing aid to 1,000 refugees waiting to enter Turkey via the town's crossing point. For the time being, they are encamped in the Syrian town of Kasab, a predominantly Armenian community of about 2,000 located some two miles from the border. The surrounding terrain is relatively flat, facilitating the potential formation of a longer-term safe haven.

Cilvegozu. This crossing (known as Bab al-Hawa in Syria) is located in Hatay just east of the town of Reyhanli, which has a population of about 65,000. It is also approximately twenty-five miles west of Aleppo, Syria's largest city and the site of intensifying violence between the Assad regime and the opposition. On August 27, Ankara temporarily closed the crossing, citing security concerns and lack of space to accommodate more refugees. Since then, it has been administering aid from Cilvegozu to nearby areas inside Syria, although it does not officially acknowledge crossing the border to do so. The defunct Syrian border checkpoint at Bab al-Hawa now accommodates about 2,000 refugees, while the Atimah camp a few miles north holds some 7,000. Across the border in Turkey, less than three miles from Atimah, Syrians

[\(/uploads/Maps/SyriaTurkeyBorderRefugeeZones.jpg\)](#)

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who have managed to gain entry are being housed at the Kusakli and Bukulmez camps. Overall, the Cilvegozu area's ethnic Arab composition and proliferation of refugee encampments make it fertile ground for a border-straddling safe haven to form and grow.

Oncupinar. Turkey's Oncupinar crossing is another area from which AFAD is administering aid to refugees on both sides of the border. On August 26, Turkish authorities reportedly halted crossings there and began directing refugees to Bab al-Salam, the Syrian checkpoint facing Oncupinar about a mile to the south. According to the governor of Kilis, the surrounding Turkish province, aid is being distributed to Syrians waiting at the gate -- around 6,000 at last count. Six miles north, on the Turkish side of the border, another 12,000 refugees are encamped in Kilis, a town of approximately 85,000 residents. On the Syrian side, about three miles south of Oncupinar, is the town of Azaz, which has a population of about 30,000 and is effectively under opposition control. Overall, the area's combination of large towns, accommodating terrain, and large refugee encampments already in Turkey make it another potential safe haven. In addition, Ankara has held military exercises and deployed its Atilgan air-defense systems in Oncupinar.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY

If these cantons continue to grow in size and number, they will further erode the practical significance of the Turkey-Syria border. Parts of the border already seem to be blurring, especially in areas where large Sunni Arab communities live on both sides of the frontier. These zones represent a redrawing of the map for refugees, while also highlighting key security implications for Turkey:

- First, almost all of the refugees hosted in the areas highlighted above are Sunni Arabs. Although Sunni Arab Turks in Hatay welcome this development, Alawite Arabs there have found themselves increasingly at odds with the refugees, mirroring the Alawite-Sunni split in Syria. Indeed, many Alawites in Turkey oppose Ankara's policy toward the Alawite Assad regime and resent the creation of Sunni Arab cantons. As one local Alawite leader put it, "We do not want 'refugees' residing in Turkey during the day only to cross into Syria at night to murder our brethren." During recent demonstrations, Turkish Alawites have carried placards calling the refugee zones "terrorist camps" and condemning the government's policy of supporting the opposition Free Syrian Army. In response, the Hatay governor has banned public protests. New or enlarged cantons could further stoke these sectarian tensions, making it difficult for Ankara to pursue a policy of undermining the Assad regime.
- Second, the gradual blurring of the border presents a long-term challenge: although it is mainly a conduit for refugees at the moment, the porous border could eventually allow PKK elements and, perhaps, jihadist fighters in Syria to move freely between the two countries.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

If the growing refugee issue is not handled properly, it might also imperil Ankara's recently improved ties with Washington. The two governments already have clear policy differences on Syria: Ankara wants to move fast and potentially with force against the Assad regime, while Washington wants to exercise caution. For the most part, Turkey has managed the issue well, shying away from targeting Washington's policy in public. Yet signs of a potential rift emerged on September 5, when Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan chided President Obama on CNN for "lacking initiative" on Syria. A massive flow of refugees and new cross-border cantons could force Ankara to voice its demands for U.S. assistance more publicly -- for instance, by asking Washington to help convert the zones into internationally sanctioned safe havens and expressing bilateral discord if these demands are not met. Refugee havens could therefore become a key test of U.S.-Turkish cooperation on Syria, with Ankara viewing them as stepping-stones to the next stage against Assad, and Washington seeing them as temporary fixes to the Syria crisis.

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