

The Consequences of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Jun 14, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

Washington, Ankara, and others should pay close attention to the Syrian refugees flowing into Turkey given their potential impact on the region.

Over 8,500 Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey, escaping a violent crackdown by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

As the crisis continues in Syria, Turkey is reportedly preparing to accept tens of thousands of more refugees. Further flows of Syrian refugees...are likely. The consequences of this will be profound for the U.S., Syria, Turkey and the region.

Why Many More Refugees Are Likely If Violence Continues

If the Syrian regime continues its violent crackdown -- as all signs indicate it will -- many more Syrians will take refuge in Turkey. Why?

First, the Turkish-Syrian border is an open one. The 544-mile Turkish-Syrian border runs largely across flat terrain. There are few physical barriers. The two countries recently removed the minefields along their border. They also lifted mutual visa restrictions.

Second, familial and ethnic ties link people across the border. Drawn at the end of World War I to follow an Ottoman railway line, the Turkish-Syrian border does not conform to ethnic divisions. There are ethnic Arabs on the Turkish side of the border and ethnic Turks and Turkmens on the Syrian side. Kurds and Eastern Christians live to the north and south of the borderline. Knowing that they will be welcomed by family and friends and kin tribes once they cross the Turkish border, Syrians are much more likely to seek refuge in Turkey.

Third, the Syrian side of the border is heavily populated, especially along its eastern and western stretches. For instance, Aleppo -- Syria's second largest city with 3 million inhabitants of mixed Arab, Kurdish, Turkmen and Christian heritage -- lies only 26 miles from the Turkish border.

In case of unrest and crackdown in this city, it is conceivable that we could witness a refugee flow numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

The Geopolitical Consequences of the Refugees

On Syria:

Until recently, both Washington and Ankara have used engagement and dialogue with the Assad regime to try to change its regional behavior. Most notably, the two capitals have tried to make Syria separate from Iran and give up its support for Hezbollah.

The U.S. and Turkey have also sought to revive stalled Israel-Syria peace talks, which were last carried out under Turkish auspices in 2008.

But with protests sweeping Syria and the Assad regime's violent response, such negotiation efforts are over. Both Washington and Ankara have shifted their focus from pushing for Israel-Syria peace to condemning gross human-rights violations in Syria.

On Turkish-Syrian Ties:

Turkish-Syrian ties started to improve in the late 1990s. Turkey successfully pressed Damascus to stop harboring the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), a group that had used Syrian territory and the Syrian-occupied Bekaa Valley in Lebanon as a training ground to carry out terror attacks in Turkey since the late 1970s. Turkey threatened to invade Syria, and the Assad regime, taking this threat seriously, kicked out the PKK.

Bilateral ties improved further when the AKP came to power in 2002 in Turkey and launched its policy of "zero problems with neighbors." Turkey worked to improve Turkish-Syrian relations. Since then, the two countries have held joint military exercises and strategic discussions at the cabinet level.

With overall trade of around \$2.5 billion in 2010, Turkey stands as Syria's largest trading partner.

But the recent uprising in Syria has put Ankara between a rock and a hard place. Should Ankara stand with the regime or side with the protesters?

So far, Turkey has tried to do both.

It asked Assad to stop using violence. Assad refused and instead sent tanks into Syrian cities. Ankara has kept its line of communication to the Assad regime open, but it is now under pressure to institute trade sanctions on Damascus in an attempt to stop the regime's bloodletting.

The AKP recently organized a gathering of the Syrian opposition in Antalya, Turkey, to draft an opposition manifesto. The governing party in Ankara has also allowed the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, one of Syria's best-organized opposition groups and an ideological kin of the AKP, to operate publicly in Istanbul.

How long can Ankara's policy of working with the regime while aiding its opponents last?

If the crackdown turns even bloodier and refugees continue to flow into Turkey, bringing the humanitarian crisis to the TV and computer screens of common Turks, Ankara will be forced to confront the Syrian regime more vociferously.

On Turkey:

A flow of Syrian refugees into Turkey could have unintended consequences by allowing unwanted visitors into Turkey.

The PKK is well organized in ethnically Kurdish areas of northern Syria along the Turkish border, including in Azez and Kameshli. The Syrian branch of the PKK is a hard-line faction that opts for violence. The Turkish branch is in the process of integrating itself into the Turkish political system.

In the recent Turkish elections on June 12, 36 deputies belonging to the Kurdish nationalist Peace and Democracy Party, which publicly states its sympathies for the PKK, entered the Turkish parliament.

If a flow of hard-line PKK members and sympathizers were to enter Turkey, this could potentially re-direct the Kurdish nationalist movement in Turkey toward a violent stance.

A flow of Syrian refugees could also inflame Turkish public opinion to demand its government break ties with Assad. Given the ethnic ties that cut across the Turkish-Syrian border, the AKP government is likely to come under pressure from the many Turkish citizens who have family across the Syrian border.

Finally, if the crackdown in Syria takes on a sectarian color with the Alawite regime appearing to persecute the Sunni population, this could have ripple effects across the border, creating unwanted tensions between Turkey's own Alawite and Sunni populations.

The situation is in flux, and Washington, Ankara and others should pay attention to Syrian refugees moving to Turkey. They could change the region in substantial ways, many of which we cannot predict and likely cannot control.

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