

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY



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The first Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey on April 29, 2011 and within 24 hours the Turkish government established an emergency tent camp in the Hatay province. Since then Turkey has taken in an estimated 800,000 Syrian refugees, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which represents a quarter of all Syrian refugees. Turkey has 22 camps in 10 provinces that house over 224,000 refugees. Turkey has been generous, adopting an open-door policy by admitting all Syrian refugees, giving them “temporary protection status” and spending \$2.5 billion from its own budget. However, Turkey’s current strategy, which relies on exceptionally well-maintained refugee camps, may not be sustainable in the long run.

The camps, despite their pristineness, are not a permanent solution. Turkey is struggling to keep up with the growing flow of refugees, which far exceeds the capacity of the camps. The increasing number of urban refugees is leaving Syrians vulnerable and burdening local communities. The international community must take in and support more Syrian refugees and provide additional funds to help neighboring nations cope with the crisis. Currently, the West has not met the relatively minor refugee quotas requested by the UN, nor provided even half of the

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requested funds to help Turkey care for the refugees. Without a show of solidarity from the international community to share the burden of the Syrian crisis, Turkey will continue to struggle under the growing costs of thousands of refugees who will be unable to return to Syria for many years.

“Five Star” Camps

Refugee camps in Turkey have been described as “five star,” exceeding many international standards for camp conditions. Fieldwork done in 2013 showed that 88% of refugees said they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the camps. There are clean streets, power lines, health centers, grocery stores, playgrounds, community centers, laundry rooms and schools. Rather than relying on the UNHCR to establish and run the refugee camps, the Prime Ministry’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) is in charge of the refugee effort. The camps are staffed by Turkish employees and NGOs are given supporting roles. This allows the government to maintain control over the refugee camps and simplify the support process, as different NGOs often have overlapping services.

The Turkish government appoints camp staff members, who report to the camp administrator, who in turn reports to the governor of the region. This model minimizes some of the issues associated with refugee camps, such as diversion of supplies, crime, black markets and sexual assault. Food is delivered through an e-Food Card program and the costs are shared by the AFAD and the World Food Programme (WFP). Each family is given a debit card when they register as refugees and a monthly budget of 80 Turkish lira (nearly \$40) to spend as they wish at the camp grocery stores. This allows refugees to have a certain level of independence and is beneficial for local grocers.

Despite the high-quality accommodations, however, many refugees do not want to live in camps long-term. Boredom and a lack of purpose are serious issues, as camp residents are not allowed to work outside of the centers and there are few available jobs. A field study in May 2013 revealed that 72% of camp residents said they were “redundant” with no responsibilities and no opportunities for “self-realization.” Only 28% had jobs at the camp and 66% said they had no daily activity. The lack of purpose in daily life is compounded by the lack of psychological support. Nearly half of Syrian refugees think that they or a family member needs psychological assistance, and lack thereof, combined with close proximity and unemployment, could

spark unrest in even the most secure camps. One third of camp refugees also face difficulties in obtaining required medications and the risk of an outbreak of epidemic-prone communicable diseases is increasing. The lack of desire to stay in the camps, combined with the inability to meet all refugee needs despite intense effort, demonstrates that the camps are not a long-term solution to the refugee crisis.

The Vulnerability of Non-Camp Refugees

Turkey’s current strategy for dealing with the refugee crisis by constructing refugee camps may prove unsustainable. In February 2014, the UNHCR reported that over 30,000 Syrian refugees had arrived since January, marking the biggest influx since early 2013. Over 500 Syrians arrived daily and sometimes as many as 1,000-2,000. This growing influx poses a huge problem for the camp system in Turkey, as the number of refugees outside of the camps far surpasses those within. Of the 800,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey, only 224,000 are located in camps. Since March 2013, the number of refugees living outside of the refugee camps has risen from less than 50,000 to over 443,000. While Turkey deserves much praise for its efforts, they are simply not enough to meet the flood of refugees who are coming across the border faster than the government and NGOs can respond. Although Turkey’s new Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which will go into effect in April 2014, provides a legal framework for defining refugee status and creates the Directorate General for Migration Management (GDMM) to handle proceedings regarding foreigners, it needs to be strengthened with policies for integrating the refugees.

Current strategies to deal with the growing numbers appear insufficient and could put refugees in harm’s way. Due to the growing influx of refugees, Turkey began to establish a number of makeshift camps along the Syrian border for those waiting to receive permission to enter Turkey in mid-2012. In the 25 camps, there are nearly 100,000 individuals waiting to get into Turkey. While some may prefer to stay inside Syria, the camps are faced with a security challenge due to their proximity to fighting in nearby cities. There are also reports that health, education and nutrition standards are low, alongside increasing criminal activity. These are dangerous conditions for the refugees, especially given the violent nature of the Syrian conflict, and will only worsen as the crisis continues.

Turkey’s tightening of its open-door policy due to security con-

cerns has led to a growing number of refugees crossing the border illegally or utilizing smugglers. Those who traverse through unofficial crossings without passports have no identity cards or registration and therefore no way of accessing services provided to refugees. Only 45% of non-camp refugees are registered with the AFAD and only 19% have residence permits. This means that one in three non-camp refugees has no registration at all. A new registration system, using biometric records and 19 mobile registration centers, has been successful in increasing registration, especially outside of the camps, but more work must be done. Only 15% of non-camp refugees receive aid from humanitarian aid organizations. According to the UNHCR, 370,000 non-camp refugees have never been provided food assistance and 80% say that their basic needs are not adequately met.

The difficulty in accessing health services is a particularly dire concern for urban refugees. The AFAD found that only 60% of refugees outside of the camps used health services in 2013 and over half have had difficulties in getting necessary medications. In January 2013, the Turkish government declared that all Syrians, registered or not, were entitled to the same health care as Turkish citizens in 81 provinces. However, some unregistered non-camp refugees have had difficulty accessing health services, particularly tertiary care and follow-up visits. Furthermore, this has put an enormous strain on Turkish hospitals and health workers. In response to the problem, the Turkish government is working with the UNHCR and the EU to open 10 fully equipped hospitals and 12 mobile health units to increase access to health services for Syrians.

Many urban refugees are unable to find adequate shelter or education. Three in four non-camp refugees reside in a house or apartment. However, the remaining 25% live in ruins, makeshift shelters, or in the open. Their status makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, particularly for women and children. There are a number of reports that document cases of early marriages (under the age of 18), child labor, and domestic and sexual violence due to the crowded living conditions. Another serious issue with urban refugees is that only 23% of non-camp Syrian children are in school, as attending a Turkish school requires a passport, registration with the police and a residence permit, as well as knowledge of the Turkish language. Efforts to train Syrian teachers and build new schools for Syrian children have increased the number of refugees able to attend school. Nevertheless, as half of the refugees in Turkey are under 18,

access to education remains a major concern. Despite Turkey's extensive efforts to help urban refugees, the government is unable to keep up with the growing needs of the most vulnerable Syrians.

The Impact on Local Communities

The influx of refugees into border towns has burdened local communities, causing rent and home prices to skyrocket. In the Turkish provinces of Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kilis, real estate prices have doubled and rents have increased three-fold from two years ago. In Istanbul, where there are an estimated 100,000 refugees, rent in relatively poorer areas has nearly doubled. Syrians who are forced to work illegally are depressing local wages and creating competition for Turkish wage earners. This considerably increases the cost of living, especially given that the per capita income along the border is usually lower than the national average. Decreased border trade and the closing of factories have further impacted the economies of host communities. Small farming families within 5 km of the Syrian border in several provinces have lost over half of their annual income as a result of the crisis. The combination of a loss of income from the Syrian conflict and the drastic rise in the cost of living could create resentment and hostility against the refugees in affected communities.

The presence of refugees in urban areas has created security concerns in border communities due to the open border policy and movement of opposition fighters. Many people in Turkey have died as a result of car bombs, rockets and stray mortar near the border. While there have been reports of rebels moving freely in and out of the camps, the government closely monitors camp activity. Furthermore, fighters are not permitted to bring weapons across the border or openly recruit refugees from the camps. Nevertheless, the movement of fighters and smuggling of weapons along the porous Turkish border threatens the security of local communities.

Lastly, the presence of the refugees has a social cost on local communities. While multiple wives and early marriages are common in Syria, both are illegal in Turkey. However, thousands of these types of marriages have taken place since the beginning of the crisis, as many refugees see marriage as the only way to gain financial security. Furthermore, as few refugees are able to work, families are living off their savings or the generosity of Turkish hosts. As the conflict continues, these funds will

dwindle, and more and more refugees will be unable to afford shelter and basic necessities. The deteriorating economic situation of many urban refugees has already led to an increase in begging and petty crime, which will likely escalate. The Turkish government must be able to maintain stability and address the distress of local communities struggling to absorb the refugees.

The Need for Burden-Sharing

In order to address the needs of the current refugee population, Turkey would have to construct approximately 40-50 additional camps, which would require resources well beyond the \$2.5 billion that the government has already spent. Furthermore, camps are not meant to be a long-term solution. The Turkish government constructed its first camp in 2011 with the idea that the refugees would soon return to Syria. While the majority of refugees would prefer to return, this will not be an option for many years to come, even if a political solution is reached. The AFAD found that nearly half of the Syrians in the camps reported that their homes are completely or very severely damaged. Syria's infrastructure has been destroyed, whole neighborhoods have been bulldozed and 1.5 million houses have been demolished. Given that it will be many years before the majority of Syrians can return to their home country, a more permanent solution must be found.

The Turkish government has been urging the international community to provide greater financial assistance and take in refugees since 2012. In October, the UNHCR called on western

nations to "show solidarity" and take in 30,000 of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees on resettlement, humanitarian admission or other programs by end of 2014. Unfortunately, countries have not accepted adequate quotas to even meet the relatively small number requested. Currently, 19 nations have accepted quotas to resettling 18,900 refugees, plus an open-ended number pledged by the US. Western nations must be willing to take in additional refugees to prevent a deteriorating situation in all neighboring nations.

More aid is also needed to bolster local communities against the influx of urban refugees. Turkey has yet to receive adequate assistance from the international community. The UN's Regional Response Plan (RRP) for 2013 requested \$372 million for Turkey. The overall appeal only raised 68% of the \$2.98 billion requested and Turkey received only 37% of the requested funds. The lack of funds is beginning to hinder Turkey's ability to meet the needs of the refugees –the monthly ration given to camp refugees to purchase food will be cut starting this month. Refugees already complain that the food rations are barely enough to purchase necessary supplies, so a reduction could lead to unrest in the camps. Furthermore, additional funds are needed to address current deficits in Turkey's response, including the provision of psychological support, expanded access to education, and protection for the most vulnerable refugees, i.e. women and children, from exploitation and abuse. If the international community does not take in additional refugees and provide further funds, Turkey will be stretched thin and the quality of services for Syrian refugees will deteriorate.

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