

## Turkey and the Syrian refugee problem

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Turkey plays a key role in the crisis caused by the migration of refugees from Syria. The largest number of Syrian refugees are currently on its territory (al,most two million have been registered there, according to official figures). Turkey is also the first stop in the main migration route from Syria to Europe, and remains the shortest route to Europe for the anticipated new waves of migrants. Turkey's involvement in the refugee issue, and more broadly in the war in Syria, is long-term and many-layered. This stems from factors both geographic (its proximity, its long border, the fact that it represents the shortest overland route to Europe) and political, both external and internal. Externally, it is a consequence of the ongoing civil war in Syria, which borders Turkey. The conflict is far from over, and the number of internal refugees in Syria, amounting to 7.8 million people, has the potential to create new waves of migrants. In the political dimension, the Syrian refugees are one element (an effect, an instrument, an important factor) of Turkey's deep involvement in the Syrian conflict, and more broadly of Ankara's active Middle East policy and the consequences of this policy for the domestic situation. The failure of Turkey's political calculations – especially the coincidence of unfavourable internal and external conditions over the last year both in Turkey itself and in its neighbourhood – have had a decisive influence on the outbreak of the current migration crisis within the EU. Opportunities to reduce Turkey's Syrian refugee influx to Europe, and for Turkey to become more effectively involved in solving the humanitarian and refugee crisis in Syria, are now severely limited. This is due to both the scale of the growing problem concerning Turkey's capabilities, as well as the current domestic context: the most serious political crisis in years, the campaign for the early parliamentary elections, and the escalation of internal conflicts, particularly the conflict with the Kurds. The priorities of Turkey's domestic policy dramatically limit the possibility of effective short-term dialogue with the EU. Worse still, we cannot rule out the threat of a further deterioration of the situation both in Turkey and in its neighbourhood, or deepening difficulties in Turkish-EU dialogue in the coming months. This may cause further waves of refugees to leave Syria and enter Turkey.

### Turkey and the Syrian refugee problem in numbers

According to data from 12 September 2015, 1,905,000 refugees from Syria have been registered in Turkey<sup>1</sup>. Turkey is thus the country

with the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world, before Lebanon (about 1.72 million), Jordan (about 620,000), Iraq (about 250,000) and Egypt (about 130,000); the number of internal refugees within Syria itself is estimated at 7.6 million people<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik3/gecici-koruma\\_363\\_378\\_4713](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik3/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713); [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/syria_en.pdf); <http://www.mercycorps.org/articles/turkey-iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis>

In addition, up to half a million unregistered refugees may be present in Turkey (as well as in other countries) – primarily from Syria, but also from Afghanistan, Iraq et al., all of whom consider Turkey as a transit country. Only about 217,000 of the Syrian refugees in Turkey (less than 10% of all those registered) are currently resident in the 22 refugee camps located in the southern part of the country; the rest have found their own places of refuge elsewhere on Turkish territory. It is estimated that in Istanbul alone, the number of Syrian refugees is about 330,000<sup>3</sup>; in Gaziantep 220,000, and in Hatay 190,000.

During 2015 Turkey has grown into the most important link in the fast-growing migratory route running through Greece and the Balkans to Western and Central Europe. According to the UNHCR<sup>4</sup>, the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe through the Greek islands this year amounts to nearly 290,000 (as of 14 September). Turkey – from where the refugees reach Greece – has therefore become the principal non-EU country from which the European continent receives refugees and migrants. It has replaced North Africa (mainly Libya) in this role; the number of people coming from that direction has so far amounted to around 120,000 this year<sup>5</sup>.

The UNHCR's figures show that it is mainly citizens of Syria (70%), and to a lesser extent Afghanistan (19%) and Iraq (4%), who are coming from Turkey to Greece. Males account for 66% of arrivals, women 13% and children 21%. The rise in the popularity of the Turkey-to-Greece route is enormous. The number of people who entered the EU via this route rose to 107,000 in August this year, compared to almost 52,000 in July, and fewer than 7000 in the same month last year. In the first two weeks of September 53,000 people travelled this route.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/09/15/syrias-new-capital-istanbul>

<sup>4</sup> [http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php#\\_ga=1.23504573.628287241.1441787759](http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php#_ga=1.23504573.628287241.1441787759)

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

The data indicates that the popularity of this route has been growing by leaps and bounds since spring this year.

## The refugee migration from Syria in Turkish policy before 2014

The scale and nature of the migration of refugees to Turkey has been affected both by external objective factors and by the specifics of the policy Turkey has been pursuing.

Firstly, Turkey shares a border (about 900 km, and difficult to control) with Syria, which since 2011 has been ravaged by war. In addition, there are historical and cultural (including ethnic and religious), and consequently family ties between Turkey and Syria, as well as long-standing traditions of migration (among others, that of Turkish Kurds to Syria in the twentieth century). Finally, up to the eve of the Syrian war, both countries were linked by rapidly developing interpersonal contacts (including visa-free travel). It was therefore quite obvious that the refugees from Syria would choose to head in the direction of Turkey.

## The largest number of Syrian refugees are currently on Turkey's territory (almost two million).

Secondly, almost since the outbreak of the war in Syria, Turkey has conducted a widely promoted open-door policy for refugees, which was associated with Ankara's political calculations. First of all, Turkey expected a quick end to the conflict, in the form of a victory for the Syrian opposition; the stabilisation of the situation; and the return of the refugees to Syria. Turkey's action resulted from a broader state policy: a belief in the attractiveness of the Turkish political model for the Middle East, the strength of Turkey's soft power, and its aspirations for informal leadership – in Syria as well. On the domestic front, Ankara has given priority to mobilising society around the idea of Turkey's

civilising mission in the Middle East; the proximity and responsibility of Turkey for the Muslims living in the lands of the former Ottoman Empire; and the superiority and efficiency of Turkish policy in the region over that of the West. Moreover, in the international arena Turkey has consistently called for military intervention against the regime in Damascus; it has repeatedly expressed its willingness to participate in such a coalition, and even to take unilateral action; it has called for at least the creation of a security zone in Syria along its own border, both as a place of refuge and for the concentration of refugees, as well as a base for the actions of the Syrian opposition. Regardless of the growing reservations of Turkish society towards such a policy, it has been consistently pursued and remains firmly rooted in Turkey's foreign, domestic and security plans; the Syrian refugees have been both the manifestation of and justification for Turkey's activity.

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By the beginning of June 2014, the number of refugees in Syria had risen to about 760,000, some of whom were in refugee camps, while the majority roamed across throughout the country, living by their own means. In both cases, they met with *de facto* support from the authorities. The legal status of refugees was regulated on the basis of Turkish legislation; they were awarded the category of 'guest'<sup>6</sup>,

<sup>6</sup> Turkey is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees of 1951, but it has limited the territorial scope which it covers. This means that Turkey grants refugee status only to citizens of European countries. The status of nationals of other countries is determined by Turkish law. Ankara's policy makes it difficult for refugees to obtain permanent residence (as defined by the UNHCR), and indirectly motivates them to seek asylum elsewhere. <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/syrian-refugees-turkey-long-road-ahead>

and from 2014 they were covered by 'temporary protection', including permission to receive free health care, education, and employment in specific sectors. Residents of the camps were given full-time care, including schools where the languages of instruction were Arabic and Turkish. At the same time, however, the costs of looking after the refugees rose, and tensions between them and the local population based on economic and social factors deepened (rising property prices, falling wages, a lack of hospitals, the rising cost of municipal services in the border towns). The security situation also began to deteriorate; for example, on 11 May 2013 a bomb attack killed 52 people in the border town of Reyhanlı; tension also began to rise between the Sunnis from Syria and the Alawites living in the border regions, who support the regime in Damascus.

### **The crisis of Turkey's policy towards Syria during 2014-15**

The key problems influencing the current migration crisis, as well as Turkey's policy towards Syria and the migrants, erupted in 2014 and have become more serious this year.

The most important factor proved to be the creation and expansion of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, which has been proceeding since June 2014. As a result of the IS's offensive, the humanitarian crisis has worsened significantly: whereas early last June Turkey held around 760,000 refugees, by the end of October the figure stood at about 960,000; in late December it was about 1.5 million, and by September this year there were about two million registered refugees. This forced Turkey to revise its refugee policy; for example, since the beginning of 2015 Ankara has begun to informally limit its open-door policy, making its admittance of refugees dependent on whether places are available in the refugee camps, as well as emphasising that Syria is not suffering

a humanitarian tragedy<sup>7</sup> and stating that refugees should remain on Syrian territory. Turkey has also increased its support to NGOs providing assistance in Syria itself, hoping that this will prevent further waves of refugees. In practice this has meant the collapse of the current migration policy, ignoring the incoming refugees (for reasons including the failure to seal the Turkish/Syrian border), and tacitly approving their passage through Turkey to Europe, in order to temporarily ease the problem.

**The last of the major factors negatively affecting every aspect of Turkey's current policy is the biggest domestic political crisis in more than a decade.**

At the same time, the crisis of Turkish policy towards Syria has deepened: not only has there been no breakthrough in the conflict, the policy of playing the forces involved in it off against each other has also failed. Above all, the so-called Rojava, the Kurdish para-state in northern Syria associated with the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), has strengthened. Ankara sees it as a base for the Turkish Kurds, and as a threat to the stability and integrity of Turkey. Relations between Turkey and the Kurds deteriorated substantially as a result of Ankara's ambiguous policy towards the town of Kobane, which the IS besieged last autumn (despite the pressure and despite Turkey's declarations, it blocked support for the Kurdish forces and refused to accept refugees from the area). By this July the relationship had broken down completely, and the Turkish-Kurdish conflict resumed on a large scale (although the Turkish actions have not been aimed directly at Rojava). Ankara's plans to exploit Islamic radicals, including IS, in order to limit the expansion of the Kurds and weaken the regime in Damascus also proved to be

misguided – none of these assumptions will now come true. Yet worse, Turkey's informal relations with IS collapsed after the bombing of Suruç in southern Turkey (on 20 July, causing 33 deaths), which was attributed to IS; as well as its military actions directly targeting the PI (making bases available to the US Air Force, conducting bombing raids itself, arrests of IS members and sympathisers in Turkey).

As a result, the security situation on the Turkish/Syrian border (as well as the Turkish/Iraqi border) has grown significantly more difficult, and the migratory pressure has increased spectacularly (and it can be expected to rise further). Turkey has lost the functional buffer against the refugees which Rojava represented, as the IS's territory did to some extent before Ankara's latest offensive (the levels of refugee migration before then had been relatively low); and in the end, it finds itself involved in a new conflict (the Kurds and IS), exacerbating the situation on the border. The attack in Suruç gave another spectacular boost to public fears of an increase in the terrorist threat in Turkey associated with the refugees. The conflict between IS and the Kurds has moved directly onto Turkish territory, and the internal conflict between Ankara and the Kurds poses a risk of a new wave of refugees leaving Turkey – this time composed of Turkish Kurds<sup>8</sup>.

The last of the major factors negatively affecting every aspect of Turkey's current policy is the biggest domestic political crisis in more than a decade. In an atmosphere of socio-political tensions rising over recent years – including accusations of the ruling State Justice and Development Party (AKP)'s turn to authoritarianism, and government actions to limit the Kurds' freedom to act – in the parliamentary elections on 7 June the AKP lost its overall majority, for the first time since 2002, and with it the ability to govern alone. In its determination to regain

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-sees-new-refugee-influx-with-isil-at-border.aspx?PageID=238&NID=83982&NewsCatID=352>

<sup>8</sup> See Krzysztof Strachota, 'Turkey: the escalating Kurdish conflict stimulates a domestic crisis', *OSW Analyses*, 16 September 2015: <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-09-16/turkey-escalating-kurdish-conflict-stimulates-a-domestic-crisis>

its parliamentary majority, new elections have been called for 1 November, which the authorities are treating as a plebiscite on the continued existence of the party in its present form, and whether the political course of the state should be maintained. The election campaign is therefore being conducted in a particularly relentless and aggressive fashion; the government is trying to manage, create and channel the tension in order to mobilise and consolidate its supporters, and to win new votes around the idea of a strong leadership which can face up to any threat. In this way, the thorny problems associated with the war in Syria, the Kurdish problem, and the migration crisis have all been brought into the centre of the turbulent campaign and subordinated to it.

### The Syrian issue in current Turkish policy

The problem of the conflict in Syria and the related issue of the Syrian refugees is a serious burden for the government, especially in the context of the election campaign. These involve huge financial costs (the government has mentioned a figure of almost US\$8 billion), social problems (the impact on the labour market, the cost of looking after the refugees, altering the demographic balance in many cities in southern Turkey), security questions (from the terrorist attacks, the feeling of rising criminalisation, indirectly the conflict with the Kurds, up to the threat of escalation), and other matters, in the absence of any real possibilities for a positive solution to the problem. In this context, reducing the number of refugees by failing to register them, and allowing, or even facilitating the refugees' departure from Turkey, is only a temporary solution to the problem.

Another element of Turkey's policy is justifying (in moral and pragmatic terms) its current policy towards Syria and the refugees (supporting the democratic opposition, helping the needy), while criticising the attitude of the West towards Syria: years of neglect and dis-

regard of the problem, its current aversion to mass influxes of refugees, and finally Europe's Islamophobia. This type of rhetoric, critical of the West, is again being used in Turkey, reinforcing the sense of the uniqueness of Turkey's achievements under the AKP, and appealing to the general anti-Western resentment which periodically arises in Turkey.

Paradoxically, the Turkish government regards the Syrian crisis and the refugee problem as justification for its existing policies and an impetus for intensifying them according to its own assumptions. On the international arena, Turkey has again strongly promoted the need for active operations in Syria, targeting both terrorist organisations (which in Turkish logic also means Kurdish terrorists), and above all the Assad regime. Ankara's aim is to create a security zone within Syria itself, as a buffer for subsequent waves of refugees; to repatriate the refugees currently present on its territory; and to create a base for forces which would ultimately be capable of positively resolving the conflict in Syria. Carrying out – or even just supporting – such a plan would represent a relatively positive end to the last four years of Turkey's policy.

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The Turkish demand to set up security zones in Syria has been received very soberly in the West: there is no will for direct involvement in the conflict, especially by land forces; there could be even an *ad hoc* escalation. Moreover the Kurds, whom Turkey treats as a threat, are seen by the West as being at least a potential ally. The possibilities of limiting the conflict in Syria in agreement with Russia and Iran are now finally being examined. One positive omen

for Turkey, however, is the rising support for the creation and support of the old, Turkey-linked opposition forces in Syria.

### **The outlook for the Turkish contribution to solving the migration problem in the EU**

From Ankara's perspective, the Syrian refugee problem is primarily a serious domestic problem, whose importance is rising due to the political crisis and early elections in Turkey. There is no way that Turkey will become involved in any act which might even temporarily complicate the internal situation. Under the current conditions, this means that Ankara will use every opportunity to limit the number of refugees entering from Syria, but will also exploit the refugee issue in its domestic and foreign policies.

Turkey is only too aware of the scale of the problems and limitations of the remedies to the migration crisis which have been tried so far. We can therefore expect its approach to possible piecemeal solutions (such as financial support from the EU) to be rather reserved. From Ankara's perspective, the most desirable outcome would be a radical reformulation of the existing policies towards Syria which took Turkish demands into account (such as the creation of a safe zone in Syria), as well as the longer-term understanding by the EU of Turkey's perspectives of controversial issues, such as the Kurdish question and the other political processes taking place inside Turkey.

A major factor that hinders dialogue between Turkey and the EU is the growing atmosphere of mistrust and mutual accusations. In the case of Turkey, this refers to the use of anti-Western

rhetoric in domestic politics (especially in the context of the election). In the case of the EU, this refers to the atmosphere of searching for those who are responsible for (and guilty of) the migration crisis at various levels, both within the EU as well as outside it. In this context, Turkey is portrayed as a country which is throwing its refugee problem onto the EU (in media accusations that Turkey is illegally organising and supporting migration to the EU alone), and which is facing the consequences of its erroneous political calculations.

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There is a serious risk of the migration problem worsening further. First of all, we can expect an increase in migratory pressure on Turkey from Syria (and the Middle East as a whole). Worse, we may fear a further escalation of the domestic crisis in Turkey, with the probable lack of a political turning point in the elections, the threat of further social tensions (especially if there is an economic downturn), and the high level of terrorist threats (from Kurds, Islamists, or leftists). Even the partial realisation of these worst-case scenarios could significantly hamper cooperation with Ankara, stimulate the further exit of refugees from or via Turkey, and threaten more outflows of refugee migration from within Turkey itself.

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