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SOME ASPECTS OF THE INTEGRATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY

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Abstract

Today, Turkey -once a quite uniform country- is home for one of the largest refugees population on Earth. The massive influx of asylum-seekers did not only transform Turkey in terms of ethnic and religious diversity but featured a major challenge and national security issue. After six years of experience as a host country, the Middle Eastern nation is still in the learning phase of a much longer process of amalgamation of ethnic Turks, Kurds and other minorities with Turkish passport and Syrian refugees. In our current paper using a set of diverse sources (analysis, survey, description and fresh news) and both quantitative and qualitative approaches, we would like to present a concise governmental policy designed to accommodate better those who are still considered to be special guests of the Turkish nation. This plan has five main steps to be analyzed. Namely, we have to deal with the questions of providing security, material goods, proper education and Turkish language instruction and an opportunity to work and do business. Finally, we would like to underline the fact that the success of this process largely depends on the quality of education of both refugees and Turks in order to better know and accept each other.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, Refugee, Integration, Humanitarian Aid

1. Introduction

After the civil war had broken out in Syria in March 2011, an ever-growing number of refugees fled the Middle Eastern nation. The first asylum-seekers have appeared at the Syrian-Turkish border on the 29th April 2011, and the first temporary refugee camp has been established in the southern Turkish province of Hatay (Kap, 2014). Their number remained relatively low until the attack by the forces loyal to the regime in Damascus on the northern Syrian city of Jisr al-Soughour in August of that year. The number of Syrian refugees was around 19,000 by the end of 2011 and kept growing by 3.000 to 6.000 persons ever since every day. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees has registered up to 2.910.281 displaced in March 2017 (UNHCR, 2017), there might be even more according to certain estimates as the European Commission speaks of 3.2 million refugees (European Commission, 2017).

Syrian refugees in Turkey can be divided into three major categories from two different points of view. The first concern is their future or the way as they view their own future. A small proportion plans to stay in until their homeland is pacified and can return there, the second group finds the crisis as an excuse to move to Europe or other Western nations, whereas the majority would indeed remain in Turkey on the long run. The second point concerns those refugees who wish to stay in Turkey for several years or even when the conflict in Syria is over. Their chance to integrate into the overall Turkish society depends on their capabilities as well as the aid the Turkish government and civil society organizations can provide. One can find that from this point of view, there are the following groups in Turkey. The segments of the Syrian refugee population have greater opportunities, namely those who were wealthy merchants and business people in the northern urban centers such as Aleppo and who were able to bring over a part of their financial resources; and those who already had family ties in Turkey prior to the conflict as they come from the Turkish-speaking Turcoman minority of Syria or are related to some members of the ethnic Arabic minority of Turkey. The most destitute are the ones who come from the rural areas and do not possess any ties to anyone in Turkey. Indeed, they are the individuals in need of help of the Turkish government.

The Turkish government assisted by the local NGOs have developed a five-step plan to help the most desperate elements of the Syrian refugee population. The first step was to establish safety and security despite Turkey's being a target for violent terrorists and having a low-level armed conflict in the very border area where most refugees are located. The second step was to implement an urgent humanitarian aid project. The third step was the launching of a program aimed at empowering the Syrian refugee youth by letting them study in Turkey at all levels of national and higher education. The fourth step targeted the adults from the asylum-seekers and proposed them free Turkish language courses. The fifth and last step was destined for the more stable segments of the refugee population by promoting their businesses.

2. Literature and Methodology

The aim of our present paper is to describe in a logical manner how the Republic of Turkey in general and the Turkish government, in particular, reacted to the massive influx of refugees, especially when it became clear that a large proportion of them would stay in Turkey for years or decades. We collected data both from newspapers, websites and the field of academic research and we found out that the official decisions and actions taken by the government and the civil society organization can be divided into the five categories detailed above as the five steps of the governmental aid project. The five following chapters are each connected to one of the above-mentioned steps. Using a complex set of methods, we would base ourselves on works using both statistics and testimonies of officials and refugees, so our approach and analysis could be at the same time quantitative and qualitative. Finally, in our conclusion, we would like to comment on the efficiency of this politics and make a certain number of suggestions to the policy-makers of Turkey.

3. Providing a Safe Heaven

The first step to be taken when such a massive influx of refugees comes to a country is to open refugee camps. The first centers sheltering refugees were already established by the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey locally known as AFAD in late 2011. As of April 2017, 26 major camps can receive up to 260.000 registered refugees meaning that the vast majority, over 90% of them remain outside those facilities and therefore housed at relatives or rented flats across Turkey (European Commission, 2017). The following infographics show how diverse the activities of the experts of the AFAD are and why it was awarded by the United Nations:

Table 1. Working method of the AFAD

THE SHELTERING CENTER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM (SCMS)	
GOALS OF THE SCMS	ACTIONS TAKEN BY THE SCMS
Information and Planning	Entrance and Exit Control and the Centers
Recording Statistics	Logistics Management
Providing Cash Assistance	Education and Course Management
Standardization of the Sheltering System	Temporary Settlement Management
	Temporary Sheltering Constitution
	Personnel Management
	Assistance Management
	Tracking of Visitors

Source: AFAD (2017)

The establishment of a safe environment starts with the adoption of a protection-sensitive registration system (UNHCR, 2016). Refugees come from a multi ethnic, and multi confessional war-torn country where the mere fact to take part of a certain group might lead to dangerous situations, one has to take care of how the personal data of refugees is asked, taken and stored. AFAD did this work concerning almost 3 million people with the help of the United Nation High Commission for Refugees ensuring that a proper risk analysis is done to detect how endangered the registered individual or family is.

Risk has to be understood in two ways. One meaning is the idea of a refugee being at risk as mentioned above, but at the same time, refugees themselves might present a risk for fellow refugees or the national security of the host country. The chance for refugees menacing the security of Turkey or a Western nation is extremely low if one looks at the statistics, but it is worth to be cautious. For instance, the chance of an American being murdered in a terrorist attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year while the chance of being murdered in an attack committed by an illegal immigrant is an astronomical 1 in 10.9 billion per year.(Nowrasteh, 2016) Risk analysis has to be done in both cases, and Turkish authorities tried their best to detect all dangers threatening the refugees and the Turkish nation.

The general refugee crisis has revealed another set of security issues. Though it is not closely related to the point of the reception of asylum-seekers, the reactions to them by the Turkish government could considerably slow down the influx of Syrian newcomers. In 2015, the Turkish government staged a number of crackdowns on traditional smuggling routes between Syria and Turkey reducing to the possible entry points to one single itinerary.(Hoffmann and Samuk, 2016) Though the main reason for this was halting arm smuggle and cutting off Kurdish insurgents from their Syrian hinterland, this move could also halt the arrival of people in need of asylum markedly.

4. Meeting material needs

After the needed registration process, the governmental and non-governmental actors had and have to provide refugees with food and water taking into consideration their dietary habits and need. It is generally observed among the refugees that they often complain about the food they get at refugee camps, so, this is indeed a very particular responsibility of the agencies concerned. In Turkey, those in the camps, meaning the relative minority of refugees have a better situation in this respect as in cooperation with AFAD, e-vouchers enable the purchases of sufficient nutritious food to meet family's needs (UNHCR, 2016).

Refugees placed in camps are supervised on the one hand and theoretically have access to all services (food, schooling, health care etc.) they might need of, but their counterparts residing outside those camps live either on their own income or the humanitarian aid of local and international organizations and the Turkish governmental agencies. A key role is played by the so-called muhtars who work on the lowest level of Turkish administration and who in full contact with the refugees themselves (Hoffmann and Samuk, 2016).

Even though the authorities especially the muhtars and the NGOs try their best, a considerable proportion of Syrian refugees live under the poverty line. In many cases, two or three large families share the same run down flat usually in a working class neighborhood. Often, these

extra families are not announced to the landlords and therefore are not registered with the muhtar and this way voluntarily exclude themselves from the free services refugees normally have access to and increase their poverty (Corabatir, 2016).

5. Working with the Youth

According to the testimonies of the Syrian refugees, there are two urging issues; they are concerned about. The first thing is education as a relatively high percentage of Syrian has no access to learning. The second thing is the issuance of work permits. The latter is linked to the former as one of the main obstacles in front of the Syrian seeking employment in Turkey is the lack of competencies in Turkish.

If we analyze the present situation, we can say that there are 1.3 million Syrian refugee children between the age 6 and 18, out of whom only 500.000 can attend formal education. Unfortunately 38.5% of the overall population might belong to this category. Two third of these children are schooled in camps, 186.000 are integrated into normal Turkish schools (Celik, 2017). That means that only 14.3% of Syrian refugee kids are co-educated with their Turkish friends. Outside Turkish formal education, we can find a number of authentic Syrian education centers and vocation training centers working with Syrian pupils in the Syrian way as the number of teachers among the refugees is relatively high (Corabatir, 2016). Pedagogues in Syria are more targeted by the belligerents than people of many other professions. As they are in danger, they are more ready to flee the country (Seydi, 2013). These Syrian education centers, on one hand, lack proper financial support, on the other are not encouraged by the Turkish government, as they do not always promote the due form of integration into the mainstream Turkish society as they follow the old curriculum from Syria.

The above-mentioned statistics are worse if one analyzes the male-female parity. Many Syrian refugee families are reluctant to send their daughters to Turkish schools for obvious cultural reasons. Turkish experts say that even in the secular Turkish republic if those parents cannot be persuaded, establishing special institutions for female students should be considered (Kanat and Ustun, 2015).

It is also clear that the Syrian refugee community in Turkey needs a proper elite, it is a great challenge that the majority of the already well-educated and better-trained strata of the Syrian nationals opt for continuing to the Western World. This phenomenon has already started in 2012 and is going on ever since (Kanat and Ustun, 2015). It is in the interest of both the Turkish government to educate a few thousands of Syrian intelligence loyal to Ankara and committed to the empowerment of the Syrian refugees in Turkey.

6. Teaching the Turkish Language

The main barrier for this empowerment project is the fact that initially most Syrian refugees cannot master the Turkish language, which is a must when it comes to their integration into the Turkish national education system. An exception can be made for the Turcoman minority of Syria, a bilingual element of the Syrian population who can speak both dialectal Turkish and Arabic. As multilingual people speaking both Turkish, Kurdish and Arabic inhabit the cities along the border between the two countries, many refugees at first did not feel the need to learn Turkish. In many places, inscriptions in Arabic started to pop up, and the local governments in the southern metropole of Adana and the otherwise multiethnic border city of Antioch (Hatay in Turkish) even decided to remove all these engravings to force the refugees to learn Turkish (Tas, 2017).

Of course, Turkish authorities utilize less violent forms of motivation if it comes to persuade Syrian refugees to learn Turkish. A survey done relatively early after the arrival of the first refugees among those who reside in the town of Kirikhan in the province of Hatay proved that there was an urgent need for language courses. Those who answered the survey stated that they wanted to learn both Turkish and English, there was no apparent difference between children and grown ups, males and females as they all saw this lack as the main barrier to success (Dorman, 2014).

Before the arrival of the asylum-seekers, Turkey had a well established Turkish language training system for foreigners. The main organism was the state-sponsored institution called TÖMER which used to focus on introductory courses for foreign university students and language examinations. They had an impressive set of pedagogical materials but designed for young adults and not refugees or children (Coskun and Emin, 2016). Turkey can be characterized by the absence of standardized pedagogical programs and the lack of coordination between the relevant institutions. Most of them are overspecialized as far as language instruction is concerned. For example, the government-run Yunus Emre cultural centers only deal with teaching cultural and civilizational skills and rarely general Turkish courses (Coskun and Emin, 2016). So, the present situation is still far from the ideal and NGO's working on the grassroots level demand for more schools and a better inclusion of women (Jessen, 2013).

7. Facilitating Business Establishment and Tax Paying (Positive Discrimination)

After assimilating the Turkish language, Syrian refugees want to lead an autonomous life but to do so, they need further assistance what we call positive discrimination. As most Syrian refugees in Turkey originate from the major urban centers of Northern Syria and were busy with trade and commerce prior to the war, it is evident that one of the ways of the social inclusion is through letting them to open shops and other businesses in the localities where they are numerous. It is indeed a problematic issue as this process might lead and did lead to a number of bankruptcies among the ethnic Turkish shopkeepers and create a conflict between refugees and Turkish nationals. An example for this happened in the Southern city of Mersin where in a short period of 3 months in 2016 over 1.250 Turkish shops were forced to close their doors due to the cheap and often illegal Syrian concurrence. (Ercan, 2016) The Turkish government try to help Syrians in the official procedures and push them to legalize their businesses to avoid further conflicts between Turks and Syrians, and major losses in tax revenue (Orhan and Gundogar, 2015). If the years of 2012 and 2013 can be understood as the early phase of both the installation of Syrian refugees and the foundation of new businesses, the year of 2014 must be interpreted as the peak as during the first four months of the year, 383 firms were launched by Syrian refugees across Turkey. This constitutes over 25% of all foreign investments in Turkey with a capital of 50 million Turkish Lira (Cetingulec, 2014). This is not a surprise that this growing scene of Syrian refugee businessmen was fertile enough to form their own civil society organization, the Trust of Syrian Business People in Turkey (Turkiye Suriye Isadamlari Dernegi in Turkish). This is a step towards a better integration of investors of Syrian decent into the Turkish society.

8. Conclusion

Turkey faces a massive influx of refugees mainly from Syria, but also Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflict zones of the World. Turkey prior to the civil war in Syria was -practically speaking- off the beaten track of the migrants, no refugees or people of color and was completely not prepared for the arrival of such a large population, -nearly 3 million- on its soil when it has its own security issues with the local rebels. As one could summarize from the above detailed governmental policy of integration composed of five steps, this country lacking experience and resources could respond to the challenge and at least it possesses an emergency plan. We think that most Syrian refugees would remain in Turkey, and therefore we would urge the relevant authorities to focus on education, as it is the key for both integrating the Syrians and educating the Turks about the reasons why they have to patient with these needy people.

In particular, as the period of time that the Syrian immigrants are in Turkey increases, Turkey will face many difficulties from an economic point of view. At this point, it has emerged that Turkey should receive more support from various organizations of the world. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that Turkey will continuously produce new policies and practices in order to better manage this immigration problem.

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