

The Reasons Why the EU-Turkey Deal on Refugees is Important

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Globally nearly 85 percent of the refugees are being hosted today in developing countries, all of them struggling with their own economic and political challenges. In the case of the Syrian refugees, the 4 million Syrians, who have been displaced and are living outside their country's borders, are to be located in just three countries, namely Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. Now that the Syrian civil war is reaching its fifth year, the resources in most of these host countries are naturally drying up and as a result many a refugees have just begun to look to Europe for shelter.¹ So currently Syrian refugees, the dangers notwithstanding, are now trying every possible route to reach Europe. This humanitarian issue is becoming a problem that needs to be solved with the full cooperation of the international community as a whole. That is why, in this analysis, we will try to highlight why the 18 March 2016 refugee deal is imperative for any future action between EU and Turkey.

As some European states continue to use wired fences and barricades to stop the incoming flow of migrants, Turkey, on the other hand, due to its open diplomacy, is currently hosting 2.7 mil-



lion Syrian refugees. At the inception of the Syrian war in 2011, according to Ankara's projections, only tens of thousands were expected to come to Turkey, by crossing its 900 km- frontier. However, the flow of refugees in excess of Ankara's expectations due to unfolding incidents in Syria has continued to rise extending far beyond Turkey's capacity. First, at the outbreak of civil war in Syria due to the Assad regime's brutality against its own people, many refugees have been obliged to flee the country and have been seeking safety in neighboring countries. During the later years of the civil war, when Damascus started to lose its grip over the country's governance, the ensuing chaos laid the ground for the rise of several radical groups, the most important of all being ISIS, which aim to fill the existing power vacuum for their own ends. For example ISIS still continues to impose its medieval-style rule across large parts of the country. This failing or failed state has created a "dispersed" environment, which has attracted both regional

¹ Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan and Susan Fratzke, "Europe's Migration Crisis in Context: Why Now and What Next?", *Migration Policy Institutes*, 24 September 2015, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/europe-migration-crisis-context-why-now-and-what-next>, last visited on 12 February 2016.

and external powers in proxy wars via the assistance of either local groups or non-state actors to further their interests in the country. The continuous fighting between Assad forces and opposition fighters, which has lasted nearly five years, reached a stalemate on the battle ground in 2015. However, the opposition forces surprisingly started to gain ground in the northern parts of Syria, in places like Idlib. This battle ground success the opposition forces had notched up did not continue for long especially after the Russian intervention via its air force bombardment of September 30th 2015, which caused the existing balance of power to turn against the opposition forces. Russia, at the inception of this air bombardment, claimed that their attacks were aimed at the ISIS presence in Syria. According to the Western media outlets, 80 per cent of Russian bombardments have been against the opposition forces rather than ISIS. Under the first tide of Russian bombardment, the opposition forces and the Bayirbucak Turkmens, who were living in the northern parts of Syria, were victimized. This situation led to another massive wave of refugees towards and into Turkey. Ankara has attempted to share its concern with the international community, including the EU in the face of this new flood of refugees. Due to the deteriorating conditions in Syria over the last few years, the border control agency Frontex has stated that the flow of refugees, especially from Syria, was considered to be a serious problem for Europe. This is particularly true when this increasing flow of Syrian refugees is added to many others that are currently fleeing other similar conflict zones such as Afghanistan and Eritrea and are headed towards the borders of Europe. Most EU countries have been searching

for some means in order to prevent this influx of displaced persons. Prominent officials from Europe have come to the conclusion that this new flow of refugees from war zones to the gates of Europe can now be defined as the greatest refugee crisis ever since World War II.

Unless the civil war in Syria is brought to an end, this human tragedy will continue both to breed a new flow of refugees into Turkey and Europe and to stoke up some inspiration for foreign fighters to flow in and out of the country. Hence, this observable refugee problem is not only going to stand as a mere human tragedy for international community but will also remain a serious security problem for the region and even beyond. Unequivocally, European countries are currently having diverse opinions on the issue of how to address the incoming refugee problem. Some countries mainly in eastern and central Europe are alleged to be utterly opposed to accepting refugees into the EU in general and into their home country in particular. Such Countries as Hungary, Slovakia, Austria and Poland are among those that find and consider the incoming flow of new tides of refugees- either from Syria or elsewhere- a threat to their European identities. The good news is that there are other countries like Merkel's Germany and its followers in the EU that assert that the Union has a responsibility to tackle this humanitarian refugee crisis. It is therefore no coincidence that some circles in the IR have already started to describe this new divide in the EU as Europe's new clash of civilizations. Moreover, that is why the EU-Turkish refugee deal brings optimism for a possible move in the right direction that may result in the cooperation of the two sides, putting the issue of refugee crisis back on track. If the cooperation

between the sides falls through, however, this issue, together with the present fractured status of the Middle East, has the capacity to breed further instability and to increase radicalism at worst. More importantly, within the current context of the Middle East, where the number of the refugees outnumbers the population of a single host country, this could also become to some extent a source of instability for the host, besides being a financial burden that can go beyond the host's capacity. Lebanon is a case in point with 25 per cent of its population being now comprised of the refugees from Syria. The same is also true for Jordan. The overwhelming presence of refugees is looked upon as a potential source of instability considering the proportions it has reached in both countries. In the case of Turkey, the number of refugees who are residing in the country has already exceeded Ankara's capacity. Most important of all, now that these refugees are not able to return to their homeland due to the continuing war, they need to seamlessly integrate into Turkish society. What is essential for this integration effort to pay off is to reassure the refugees that they will be well taken care of during their stay in Turkey thus reducing the risk of any potential social unrest.

It is true that some IR experts are questioning whether the latest refugee Joint Action Plan Deal, signed on November 29, 2015 between Turkey and the EU, will provide a remedy or not. As the Joint Action Plan states, the two sides are expected to reciprocally co-operate in the face of the inflow of refugees into Europe. In this regard, the EU has aimed to curb the flow of refugees from Turkey who are sailing across the Aegean Sea, and in return Ankara has pledged to reduce the number of refugees and in this way

to help ease the EU's overall concerns about the refugee problem to a certain extent.

According to those who criticize the Joint Action Plan, this strategy will be a risky exercise because they argue that it would have taken more of an effort than what both sides have already done.² The Turkish authorities, though they have previously welcomed this November refugee deal, legitimately complain that the Europeans have been slow in initiating the clauses into action. It took nearly 4 months for the EU to dispatch Ankara up to three million euros in aid as part of the deal, which was to be used to meet the Syrian refugees' needs. The promising news is that things now seem to be changing for better and moving forward especially following the March 7th Turkey-EU Summit because the two sides have in principle agreed to put the November deal into effect.

The Negative Repercussions of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey

The integration of the Syrian refugees into the Turkish population stands as one of the significant challenges before the Turkish Government. The socio-economic repercussions of the five-year civil war in Syria created a serious burden for Turkey both materially and morally all the way down the line. That is why Turkey and the EU are now in an attempt to develop a joint long-term strategy so that the integration of the Syrian migrants, who will stay in Turkey for some time, can be achieved. But so far, Turkey has had to deal with the Syrian refugees by its own means

² March Pierini, "Will Turkey and EU See the Bigger Picture?", *Carnegie Europe*, 3 March 2016, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/?fa=62955>, last visited on 10 February 2016.

and Ankara has constructed 27 refugee camps in the country's southeast region, where 300,000 Syrian refugees are residing. But, the thorny and intractable problem about the rest of an estimated nearly 2 million Syrian refugees, is that they have spread across the country. Naturally those who are not residents in the camps are out of reach of the government and hence they found themselves living under very difficult conditions. They are now deprived of the kind of support that they need. It is an utmost urgency for Turkey to provide optimal living conditions for these Syrian refugees out of the camps so that it might help stop the flow of Syrian refugees towards Europe. People who are dealing with this issue are under the impression that without proper initiatives in this regard, these refugees would be radicalized. In the worst case scenario this may lead to adverse consequences not only for Turkey's overall security but also for Europe's as well.

This is the reason why the March 7 Summit between the EU and Turkey was so important in that the two sides needed to find ways of cooperating on the issue of the Syrian refugee crisis. The EU in this respect should take into account Turkey's current concerns associated with refugees, especially the pleas of Ankara that the Union should assist Turkey during the different phases of the Syrian refugee community integration. Moreover, a substantial outcome of the March 7 Summit is also needed so as to show and reassure the Syrian refugees that these migrants in Turkey are going to be well protected and hence they will start living a decent life. The good news is that after the March 18 Turkey-EU Summit on tackling the refugee issue, the comprehensive deal hailed by Brussels and Ankara

now shows that Brussels is, at least on paper, is settling down to solve the problems of Syrians who are living in Turkey.

Currently, the focus of public policy has now naturally shifted from the provision of shelter, medical supplies and food in the early stages to the incorporation of the Syrian children into the national primary education system with the support of central and local administrations as well as facilitating the inclusion of adults into formal employment.³ When one takes into account the large-scale demand for health, education and skill-and-language training, it would by no means hard to reach a foregone conclusion that Turkey should require more financial and other assistance from the EU so that Ankara could be better off delivering these needed services to Syrian refugees.⁴ According to several research projects being conducted by ORSAM-TESEV and International Labour Organization's (ILO) Turkey Office in order to explore the economic impact of Syrian refugees on Turkey and its current employment market, there is always a potential for this situation to deteriorate and thus paving the way for possible social tensions in Turkey⁵ unless some safeguards are taken in the form of re-integration of these refugees into Turkish society.

The January 15th law entitled the "Decree Concerning the Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection" is a landmark achieve-

3 Sadık Ünay, "Incorporating Syrian Refugees to Formal Employment", *Daily Sabah*, 5-6 March 2016

4 Sinan Ülgen, "Turkey Can't Be Europe's Gatekeeper", 1 October 2015, *Carnegie Europe*, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/2015/10/01/turkey-can-t-be-europe-s-gatekeeper/ijeh>, last visited 3 February 2016.

5 Sadık Ünay, "Incorporating Syrian...", *ibid.*

ment of this government. As an outcome of this decision, Turkey is now making a legal change in the working rights of the refugees, and has also endorsed new initiatives in education to give Syrians the message that they will be entitled to better opportunities in Turkey in everything from housing and job creation schemes to healthcare facilities together with better education opportunities including Arabic for their children.

Turkey, during the different phases of the Syrian civil war, when faced with the increasing tides of refugees from Syria, has done its best by creating a protective shelter through the construction of refugee camps. Apparently these people are

unlikely to return to their home-country in the short run due to the prevailing war-torn conditions in today's Syria. Therefore an urgent need has arisen to integrate Syrian refugees into Turkish life. The Turkish government has already started to devise action plans in this regard but there is still a lot to be done in the same sense and hence Ankara government now seeks to cooperate more with its European friends to tackle the 21st century's most dramatic humanitarian crisis. The 18 March 2016 deal brings hopes in this direction. Yet, the jury is still out on how Brussels will fulfill its promises to Turkey regarding the issue of refugees who are residing in Turkey.

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