

**SUPPORT IN THE TIME OF
COVID-19: THE FUTURE OF
TURKEY'S RESPONSE TO THE
SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS**

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Abstract

Since 2011, Turkey has faced the pressures of providing continuous and adequate support for its refugee population – which is currently the largest in the world, with over four-million displaced persons. In 2016, monetary safety was acquired when Turkey signed a deal with the European Union. However, as the deal’s expiration date looms near, how will the Turkish Government continue to provide support for refugees, now in the time of COVID-19? The pandemic has shaped the course of the world, producing ever-increasing uncertainties for all. Even so, the world’s refugee population remains ill-considered in the greater context of the pandemic, despite the reality that their conditions and livelihoods were insecure pre-COVID-19. As a result, this article will analyse the current understanding of COVID-19’s impact on refugees, with a specific focus on Turkey’s Syrian refugee populace. Through the perspectives of both non-governmental organisations, social workers, and refugees, this article will observe how dire support can be provided to refugee communities – for whom person-to-person interaction is key – when remaining physically detached is a priority.

Introduction

For the Syrian civil war, now in its tenth year, an end is not yet in sight. This continues to prolong any desired return to the homeland by the millions of Syrian refugees who now call other parts of the world, ‘home’. In particular, for Syrian refugees residing in Turkey, being viewed as a ‘temporary guest’ since the Syrian refugee crisis’ (SRC) inception has brought additional challenges. To further complicate this situation, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the day-to-day lives of both Turkish citizens and Syrian refugees alike, but perhaps, in differing manners. This article argues that, so long as Syrian refugees continue to be viewed by the Turkish Government with a ‘temporality’ lens as ‘guests’, their status as some of the most hard-hit in Turkish society will endure. As a vulnerable community, throughout its progression, the pandemic has only further intensified how at-risk Syrian refugees continue to be.¹ This article will discuss Turkey’s response to the SRC, whilst also taking into consideration the support provided through the EU-Turkey deal. It will then analyse Syrian refugees’ livelihoods as temporary guests and some of the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in Turkey.

Turkey and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

Early into the unfolding events in Syria, Turkey exhibited a humanised approach to what would eventually become the SRC in

¹ Aslihan Nisanci, Rumeysa Kahraman, Yusuf Alcelik, and Ulviyenur Kiris, “Working with Refugees during COVID-19: Social Worker Voices from Turkey,” *International Social Work* 63, no. 5 (September 2020): 686.

allowing for the entrance of refugees in April 2011.² The first refugees entered Turkey on April 29th whereby 252 individuals sought refuge.³ Since then, Turkey has seen a steady influx of refugees into its territories, and as of October 2020, it hosted 3.6 million Syrians.⁴ Throughout the SRC, Turkey has battled between providing adequate support for its refugee populace and satisfying the needs of its citizens, in an attempt “to accommodate the domestic harmony among people in the country.”⁵

Due to its continued refugee support, Turkey has often been perceived as “a significant voice in international foreign policy decision-making.”⁶ However, it has additionally faced restrictions due to international law. Whilst being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Turkey is solely bound to its geographical clause. In 1967, the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees was introduced and allowed participating states to remove the temporal and geographical obligations they were bound to. Turkey chose to

² Kemal Kirişçi, *Syrian Humanitarian Crisis: The Fundamental Difficulties Facing Turkey*, Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2013.
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/syrian-humanitarian-crisis-the-fundamental-difficulties-facing-turkey/>.

³ M. Murat Erdoğan, *Thinking Outside the Camp: Syrian Refugees in Istanbul*. Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2017.
<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/thinking-outside-camp-syrian-refugees-istanbul>.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Turkey Operational Update, October 2020*.

⁵ Selin Yıldız Nielsen, “Perceptions Between Syrian Refugees and their Host Community,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (2016): 100.

⁶ *ibid.*

maintain its geographical limitation.⁷ As a result, it can only legally support refugees from Europe. In other terms, non-European asylum-seekers cannot be given refugee status.⁸ Irrespective of this, Turkey proclaimed an open-door policy to the SRC which would allow for the free-flowing entrance of refugees.⁹ Over time, the government provided necessities such as education and healthcare which complimented this protection.¹⁰

Turkey's 'Guests'

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) specifies that upon the use of the term 'refugee', states have certain requirements they are bound to, which include providing refugees with legal documentation confirming their refugee status and verifying that they will not be forcibly returned to their country of origin.¹¹ When the Turkish Government decided to host Syrian refugees in the early stages of the Syrian war, it believed this to only be temporary. This is particularly highlighted in its decision to label refugees as 'guests'—a 'legal designation' first used in the 1990s upon the arrival of Iraqi-Kurdish refugees into Turkey.¹²

⁷ UNCHR, States Parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, April 2015, <https://www.unhcr.org/protect/PROTECTION/3b73b0d63.pdf>.

⁸ Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan, and Kim Rygiel, "Syrian refugees in Turkey: pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 1 (2017): 41.

⁹ Nielsen, "Perceptions Between Syrian Refugees," 100.

¹⁰ Kemal Kirişçi and Raj Salooja, "Northern Exodus: How Turkey Can Integrate Syrian Refugees," Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2014. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/northern-exodus-how-turkey-can-integrate-syrian-refugees/>.

¹¹ Nielsen, "Perceptions Between Syrian Refugees and their Host Community," 101.

¹² Kirişçi and Salooja, "Northern Exodus."

Kemal Kirişci and Raj Salooja indicate that Turkey’s use of ‘guest’ lessens any responsibilities it would have to otherwise fulfil.¹³ For example, refugees would not be able to obtain the legal status and rights they were entitled to, following the Turkish Government’s reiteration of its perspective in believing that the influx was temporary.¹⁴ Ahmet İçduygu and Evin Millet affirm that the perception of refugee influxes is additionally clouded by the idea that refugees will return to their homelands. If the Syrian war were to end, Syrians’ return home is not concrete—this, “because of residual societal tensions, infrastructure destruction and the weakened economy.”¹⁵ For Turkey, the authors ascertain that Syrian refugees’ occupancy could be “medium- to long-term.”¹⁶ With this in mind, Turkey had to take action in order to provide its refugee populace with some semblance of stability. To accomplish this, two laws were passed: the 2013 Law of Foreigners and International Protection and the 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation.

The Law of Foreigners and International Protection

In 2013, Turkey undertook steps to reverse its ‘guest’ rhetoric in passing the Law of Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP). Argued as “a model [on] how to protect refugee rights,” the LFIP is viewed as demonstrating the responsibility Turkey took to support its

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Ahmet İçduygu and Evin Millet, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Insecure Lives in an Environment of Pseudo-Integration*. Global Turkey in Europe, 2016: 4.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

refugee populace according to international norms.¹⁷ As a result, Syrian refugees could both reside in Turkey indefinitely and without being subjected to the prospects of forced removal.¹⁸ Whilst the LFIP is significant in eliminating refugees' fear of deportation, according to N. Aslı Şirin Öner and Deniz Genç, it has done little to reassure the Turkish population, which has continued particularly anti-refugee sentiments and beliefs. Öner and Genç state that Turkey has grappled between its ideals and desires — of opening its borders to support refugees — and the reality that “the societal and mental borders are closed.”¹⁹ The authors reiterate the temporary element of the use of ‘guest’ supported the closed mindset of the population. The use of this terminology has affected the realities of Syrian refugees facing continued hardship amidst the rhetoric that they can never indefinitely settle in Turkey, even if in reality, they will. As the authors succinctly state, “...Syrian refugees are still vulnerable in many respects because the regime applied to them is marked by temporariness.”²⁰

The Temporary Protection Regulation

In 2014, Turkey reversed its stance and actions when it provided all refugees with temporary protection through the Temporary Protection Regulation. Significantly, this ensured that refugees could access social welfare.²¹ However, as Feyzi Baban et al. highlight,

¹⁷ Kirişçi and Salooja, “Northern Exodus.”

¹⁸ Nielsen, “Perceptions Between Syrian Refugees” 100.

¹⁹ N. Aslı Şirin Öner and Deniz Genç, “Vulnerability leading to mobility: Syrians’ exodus from Turkey,” *Migration Letters* 12, no. 3 (2015): 259.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 257.

²¹ İçduygu and Millet, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey*, 4.

inconsistencies arose as a result of this regulation. The Temporary Protection Regulation stipulates that, upon migrating to Turkey, Syrian refugees are subject to the temporary protection provided in lieu of international protection. Some believe that this temporary protection will hinder their ability to obtain refugee status and protection elsewhere, or that upon relocation to a Western or European nation, they will face deportation.²² Additionally, Syrian refugees are provided with *kimlik* (identity cards) which enable them to access social welfare benefits provided to citizens. However, *kimlik* bind refugees to the city or town in which it was registered, and in turn, refugees consider this to be movement-restricting.²³

Whilst Turkey has passed laws which remove refugees' temporary status, the overall stipulations within the laws and what they mean for Syrian refugees, are ambiguous. Baban et al. argue that a simplified pathway to understanding the meaning of the laws is not provided.²⁴ This is exemplified by the conflicting statuses provided by the Turkish Government. On one hand, the 'social citizenships rights' element ensures that Syrians are entitled to temporary protection, one which leads them to social welfare benefits. On the other, they are unable to obtain full citizenship.²⁵

²² Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel, "Syrian refugees in Turkey," 48.

²³ *ibid.*, 49.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*

Use by 2021: The EU-Turkey Deal

In the same manner that Turkey has been concerned with the SRC since its initiation and attempted to find a solution, the European Union (EU) did as well, due to its fear of receiving a large and consistent influx of asylum seekers. On March 18th, 2016, the EU and Turkey agreed to jointly manage irregular migration into Europe.²⁶ The ‘EU-Turkey deal’ stipulated that for every Syrian refugee entering Europe via Greece, another would be allowed legal resettlement into a European Member State.²⁷ The EU-Turkey deal was established to curb irregular migration for the EU’s sake. For its efforts, the EU believed that this deal would ensure that refugees reach Europe safely using legal means. This, through “a more orderly resettlement process” in contrast to the insecure modes of travel often adopted by refugees, but not by choice.²⁸ Whereas Turkey would benefit from the EU’s contribution of \$6 billion to its refugee efforts,²⁹ Turkish citizens would be able to easily enter Europe due to lessened visa restrictions.³⁰

Kim Rygiel et al. state that the EU has been scrutinised for its ‘hands-off’ approach to the influx of Syrian refugees. In creating and supporting this deal, the authors argue that EU Member States chose

²⁶ Kim Rygiel, Feyzi Baban, and Suzan Ilcan, “The Syrian refugee crisis: The EU-Turkey ‘deal’ and temporary protection,” *Global Social Policy* 16, no. 3 (2016): 315.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 316.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Kemal Kirişçi and Başak Yavçan, *As COVID-19 Worsens Precarity for Refugees, Turkey and the EU must Work Together*. Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2020. <https://search.proquest.com/blogs,-podcasts,-websites/as-covid-19-worsens-precarity-refugees-turkey-eu/docview/2411875745/se-2?accountid=14782>.

³⁰ Rygiel, Baban, and Ilcan, “The Syrian refugee crisis,” 316.

to forgo their duty to support refugees per international humanitarian law.³¹ The authors argue further that, whilst the deal's "one-to-one initiative" has been a point of contention, so too has the idea that the EU has "[a] dogged determination to turn its back on a global refugee crisis, and wilfully ignore its international obligations."³² In establishing controversies, the deal did provide the EU with some sense of security. For example, in 2015, 885,000 individuals crossed the Aegean Sea in comparison with a mere 42,000 in 2017.³³

In 2020, Kemal Kirişci and Başak Yavçan analysed the EU-Turkey deal in light of the pandemic. They argue that, when Turkey begins its post-pandemic rebuild, it will be faced with "a weak economy and fragile domestic political scene."³⁴ The authors maintain that both Turkey and the EU must re-examine the deal before it terminates. In doing so, they should primarily focus on refugees in Turkey who are some of the most affected by the COVID-19 "to improve refugees' access to livelihood opportunities."³⁵ The authors share two suggestions: first, further monetary support from the EU is required for both restricting COVID-19's spread and providing the necessary aid to Syrian refugees. Second, the integration of refugees into society is proving difficult for all involved parties, especially as "the traditional refugee-response system... is broken."³⁶ Therefore, a more robust solution needs to be found which

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ Kirişci and Yavçan, *As COVID-19 Worsens Precarity for Refugees.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.*

would both provide “opportunities for enhancing refugee self-reliance and the resilience of host communities.”³⁷

The Reality: Syrian Refugees in Turkey, pre- and post-COVID-19

Syrian refugees have lived precarious lives since the SRC began, and with the inclusion of the COVID-19 pandemic, further insecurities have been added. Accordingly, a small body of Turkey-refugee literature offers an insight into the livelihoods of refugees during the pandemic. The following key themes emerge at the forefront of this research: refugees’ at-risk and vulnerability statuses, limited healthcare access, and lack of financial support. Each theme highlights the role of the Turkish Government’s temporality lens has played in implicitly ensuring that refugees are further marginalised from Turkish society.

The At-risk and Vulnerable

From a health standpoint to their ability to consistently access adequate levels of societal-state infrastructures, refugees are susceptible to being some of the most affected in Turkish society.³⁸ While this was well-documented in the pre-COVID-19 era, a small understanding into the realities of Syrians refugees during the pandemic is coming to light. As Fatih Budak and Sedat Bostan state, the livelihoods and experiences of Syrians in this period must be

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Erhan Doğan and H Deniz Genç, “Early-Responding Civil Society and a Late Coming State: Findings from Turkey during the Pandemic,” *De Gruyter Nonprofit Policy Forum* (2021): 2.

understood – in both the Turkish and global contexts – especially as “the effect of the pandemic on refugees is considered extremely important for [the] national and international policies that will be developed against Covid-19.”³⁹ To identify their experiences, it is important to distinguish between the camp-based and urbanised refugees. This is particularly noteworthy as, in April 2020, the Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management estimated that only 1.8 per cent of refugees lived in camps over the 98.2 per cent living in urban contexts.⁴⁰

Turkey has adopted several measures to curb the influx of Syrian refugees. One such measure was undertaken at the height of the SRC when Turkey created a large number of refugee camps. By 2016, 25 camps primarily located in the south of Turkey were erected and in use. Of the three million Syrians living in Turkey, nearly 200,000 refugees inhabited them – which significantly amounted to ten per cent of Turkey’s refugee population at the time.⁴¹ In 2013, Kemal Kirişçi discussed the establishment of refugee camps as it occurred, stating that “Turkey has been making what might be called five-star accommodation available to refugees in camps,” but that financial burden would ensue if further were erected.⁴² Naturally, more Syrians would live beyond the camps, therefore creating more

³⁹ Fatih Budak and Sedat Bostan, “The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Case of Kilis,” *Social Work in Public Health* 35, no. 7 (2020): 580.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel, “Syrian refugees in Turkey,” 44.

⁴² Kirişçi, *Syrian Humanitarian Crisis*.

camps was illogical.⁴³ The camps have created a financial burden, but continue to act as places in which refugee support is well-established due to NGO access. In the context of the pandemic, Joseph Chamie argues that camp-based refugees around the world could “face the possibility of a devastating virus outbreak given their proximity to highly affected countries and often cramped living conditions, coupled with already stretched healthcare services.”⁴⁴ To combat this in Turkey, the government has enforced tight security processes – such as all individuals moving in and out of camps having their temperature checked, to individuals with COVID-19 being given the applicable medical support needed.⁴⁵

However, compared with camp-based refugees, those residing in cities outside have experienced the pandemic differently. In 2017, M. Murat Erdoğan stated that urbanised refugees have shifted how refugee support is established and managed. This, as refugees move to cities, they require support either medically, financially, or linguistically. With large swathes of refugees migrating to urban cities — an estimate provided at one point was 522,000 in Istanbul alone — there are negative reverberations.⁴⁶ The increase of refugees over time has disallowed for refugees to be met with positivity,

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Joseph Chamie, “International Migration amid a World in Crisis,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 8, no. 3 (2020): 236.

⁴⁵ Şevkat Bahar Özvar, İlker Kayı, Deniz Mardin, Sibel Sakarya, Abdulkarim Ekzayez, Kristen Meagher, and Preeti Patel, “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies for refugees and undocumented migrants in Turkey,” *Journal of Migration and Health* 1-2 (2020): 4.

⁴⁶ Erdoğan, *Thinking Outside the Camp: Syrian Refugees in Istanbul*.

whereby “in some cities [their numbers] have caused tensions with the local populace.”⁴⁷ Upon integrating them into urban cities, the task of supporting refugees is given to local governments which are often “severely underfunded and understaffed.”⁴⁸ In 2020, much of the pre-existing difficulties faced by urbanised refugees remained.⁴⁹ The following sub-sections outline the extent to which urbanised Syrian refugees have been particularly impacted by COVID-19.

Limited Healthcare Access

Syrian refugees are reported to have poor health conditions, aggravated by their lived experiences and living conditions.⁵⁰ Additionally, it is common knowledge that many refugees are unable to regularly access adequate healthcare. To prevent this, as the SRC progressed, the Turkish Government endeavoured to make healthcare accessible to its refugee populace. In 2013 the LFIP stipulated that, upon registering with the DGMM, refugees would be able to access the same healthcare system as Turkish citizens.⁵¹ However, the main exception to this law was that, as refugees were legally bound to the province in which they registered, their access to healthcare was bound to this province as well.⁵² Subsequently, by 2019, the

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Budak and Bostan, “The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic,” 580.

⁵⁰ Dima Al Munajed and Elizabeth Ekren, “Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability on distancing as a protective measure against COVID-19: The case of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey,” *Journal of Migration and Health*, 1-2 (2020): 2.

⁵¹ Ozge Karadag Caman, Erva Nur Cinar, Muge Cevik, F. Deniz Mardin, Ali İhsan Nergiz, and Selma Karabey, *Situational Brief: Report on Forced Migrants and COVID-19 Pandemic Response in Turkey*. (London: Lancet Migration, 2020): 1.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

government reversed its decision to provide blanket healthcare access to all registered refugees, instead, limiting it to individuals with high needs whereas the newly-registered would have one year's access following registration.⁵³ To continue accessing healthcare, refugees would need to obtain health insurance – but even so, this would also be bound to their 'registration province'.⁵⁴

The implications of binding healthcare to registration provinces and cities were felt by documented refugees who had chosen to reside in larger cities, such as Istanbul, over their registration city due to increased employment opportunities in the informal sector.⁵⁵ This has meant that refugees – whether registered or not – often continue to work and do not report their illness(es) in fear of being deported.⁵⁶ In regards to unregistered individuals, only pregnant women and infants can access healthcare organised by Family Health Centres and Migrant Health Centres.⁵⁷ For all others, if in an emergency, they can access healthcare but before being discharged, must be able to fully fund their visit.⁵⁸

Seeking healthcare in Turkey was difficult before COVID-19, with one-in-three Syrian refugees reporting that it was inaccessible.⁵⁹

⁵³ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Özvar et al., "COVID-19 barriers and response strategies," 2.

⁵⁵ Mahmood Monshipouri, Burcu Akan Ellis, and Cassidy Renee Yip, "Managing the Refugee Crisis in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 4 (2020): 186-187.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁷ Özvar et al., "COVID-19 barriers and response strategies," 3.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Al Munajed and Ekren, "Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability," 5.

After the pandemic, the healthcare access of 61 per cent of Syrian households was negatively impacted.⁶⁰ As the virus ensued, to support its refugee populace, the Turkish Government translated information into Arabic which would be disseminated both through pamphlets and digitally.⁶¹ For example, the Ministry of Health worked in conjunction with the World Health Organization to produce a refugee-directed website, whilst the Municipality of Istanbul released a series of videos targeted at informing Syrian refugees on COVID-19 transmission-prevention mechanisms.⁶² In April 2020, the government mandated that all individuals residing in Turkey, irrespective of their status, could access COVID-19-related healthcare free-of-charge.⁶³ While this meant that the government took steps to ensure that the virus could be reduced, refugees continued to fear accessing the healthcare system.

Likewise, to ensure that individuals in Turkey can properly adhere to social distancing rules in public, the Turkish Government made face masks more easily accessible to citizens. Any citizen could request face masks which would be mailed through the national mail service.⁶⁴ While this means that the largest demographic of the country was accounted for, this left many unregistered migrants and refugees vulnerable to COVID-19 as they were unable to access this initiative.⁶⁵ When the Turkish Government mandated that face masks

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Özvar et al., “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies,” 4.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip, “Managing the Refugee Crisis,” 187.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

must be worn in public, it created another initiative whereby registered individuals would receive a text message informing them that they could collect their face masks at pharmacies.⁶⁶ In this instance, unregistered individuals who did not have identification numbers could not access this initiative, either.⁶⁷ As the initiative proved to be unsuccessful, the government sought to find a compromise. Face masks were sold at 1TL (*Turkish Lira*), which meant that they could be somewhat available to all.⁶⁸

To effectively combat COVID-19, the Turkish Government must address the issues faced by refugees. First, it can often be difficult for refugees to maintain preventative hygiene measures when they are living in crowded homes.⁶⁹ Upon contracting the virus, refugees are often unable to abide by both physical distancing and isolation rules, especially when living in homes with up to two other families.⁷⁰ Second, whether they are registered or not, refugees continue to live in fear of deportation. They believe that, if infected with COVID-19 and they decide to utilise seek medical assistance, they will either lose their legal status or be deported.⁷¹ Şevkat Bahar Özvar et al. argue that the Turkish Government must recognise the issues refugees are faced with by having the Ministry of Health and

⁶⁶ Özvar et al., “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies,” 4.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Ayşen Ustübeci and Sibel Karadağ, *Refugee Protection in Turkey during the First Phase of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Turkey Interim Report. (Istanbul: Koç University, 2020), 29.

⁶⁹ Özvar et al., “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies,” 5.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 4.

Ministry of Interior “collaborate to develop a trust[-]based COVID-19 communication strategy with refugee groups.”⁷² Lastly, it is paramount that in doing so, the ministries would place attention on ensuring that refugees are no longer marginalised “at both the community level and in health care settings.”⁷³

In stating that the Turkish Government can adopt a number of measures to combat the virus and support Syrian refugees may not be entirely influential unless some of the root issues faced by refugees are addressed. These issues, such as pre-existing health and wellbeing issues especially related to the Syrian war, have been predicted to have heavily impacted refugees’ ability to adhere to social distancing and isolation rules. Due to this, “they may feel overwhelmed with how to logistically cope with the threat of the virus.”⁷⁴ Budak and Bostan conducted a study into the impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees residing in the Kilis Province.⁷⁵ They found that, while refugees were predominantly highly sensitive to the virus, those who had obtained legal status such as citizenship could battle the virus more than non-citizens.⁷⁶ The authors argue that refugees with such status “feel themselves secure with a sense of belonging to their country of residence, show more effort to combat the health issues than the refugees who cannot feel this sense of belonging.”⁷⁷

⁷² *ibid.*, 6.

⁷³ *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Al Munajed and Ekren, “Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability,” 5.

⁷⁵ Budak and Bostan, “The Effects of the Covid-19 Pandemic,” 581.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 586-587.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, 587.

It is clear that, as the Turkish Government continues to approach Syrian refugees' access to its healthcare system with hesitance, there will be negative reverberations for all involved. In the direst time of need, during this pandemic, the government's tone-deaf nature has influenced refugees' decision(s) to not seek access when they might need it most. As has been established, many refugees are unable to exercise the opportunity given to access COVID-19-related healthcare. In essence, this has aftereffects for all of Turkish society, leaving the prospects of contracting the virus arguably even higher as many remain untreated or are recovering in crowded homes.

Lack of Financial Support

Since their arrival into Turkey, Syrian refugees taken to working in the informal sector to make ends meet. The effects of this were especially felt when the pandemic took place as the livelihoods of many Syrian refugees was threatened. Turkey has not provided Syrian refugees with a means to legally work in the country, allowing for only 35,000 work permits,⁷⁸ or a mere three per cent of the refugee population.⁷⁹ This has left an estimated 1.5 million refugees resorting to working in the informal sector which does not ensure financial security.⁸⁰ As registered refugees are legally bound to their registration city, this proves to be a hurdle for many who seek jobs in larger, more opportunist cities over the smaller.⁸¹ For undocumented

⁷⁸ Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip, "Managing the Refugee Crisis," 186.

⁷⁹ Al Munajed and Ekren, "Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability," 4.

⁸⁰ Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip, "Managing the Refugee Crisis," 186.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

refugees, they do not have options other than to work informally. As a result, for the majority of the pandemic, many refugees have stayed at home with no consistent source of income. It is believed that 69 per cent of refugees became unemployed, with 83 per cent being negatively impacted to the extent that they could not maintain their basic livelihoods⁸² or social distancing practices. This is aptly summarised in the following, that: “Syrian refugees find themselves having to choose between food, rent payments or supplies related to distancing measures—such as masks, cleaning products and gloves. The additional expenses are too much to absorb...”⁸³

If individuals can continue to work during the pandemic, due to poor work conditions they are at high risk of contracting COVID-19.⁸⁴ In addition, due to limited work options and the obligations to provide a living, they are likely to also continue working while infected.⁸⁵ As a refugee migration expert in Turkey stated:

There were also huge violations of the imposed curfew among informal Syrian workers, like those working in the textile industry [...] If your boss says you must come [...] and you need to take public transportation to get there, you just do it. Therefore, they are at a higher risk than formal workers who have aid to cover their expenses. If they refuse to go [work], it means no money

⁸² Özvar et al., “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies,” 5.

⁸³ Al Munajed and Ekren, “Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability,” 5.

⁸⁴ Özvar et al., “COVID-19 barriers and response strategies,” 5.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*

to buy food or *colonia* [high-alcohol perfume used as disinfectant] and no masks.⁸⁶

In contrast, citizens working in the formal sector were supported through the government's *Economic Stability Shield*, worth nearly \$15 billion.⁸⁷ In conjunction with financial support from the government, formal workers could utilise other support schemes such as delaying loan repayments.⁸⁸ This meant that they could both continue to afford basic life necessities and protect themselves from COVID-19 by staying at home with ease. For the majority of Syrian refugees and nearly one-third of Turkish citizens working in the informal sector, they did not have these means to help them survive the pandemic.⁸⁹ Aslihan Nisanci, Rumeysa Kahraman, Yusuf Alcelik, and Ulviyenur Kiris' article highlights their own experiences during the pandemic.⁹⁰ Following social distancing regulations, all social work had to be conducted digitally which meant that both new and old clients were contacted by phone. When it came to old clients, this was not an issue. However, when attempting to assess new clients' situations, difficulties arose as they were unable to truly understand the refugees' issues well, which risked their 'retraumatisation'.⁹¹ Additionally, the authors state that the majority

⁸⁶ Al Munajed and Ekren, "Exploring the impact of multidimensional refugee vulnerability," 5.

⁸⁷ Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip, "Managing the Refugee Crisis," 186.

⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ The experiences of Kahraman, Alcelik, and Kiris.

⁹¹ Aslihan Nisanci, Rumeysa Kahraman, Yusuf Alcelik, and Ulviyenur Kiris, "Working with Refugees during COVID-19: Social Worker Voices from Turkey," *International Social Work* 63, no. 5 (September 2020): 687.

of client contact was related to financial aid, for which the social workers would need to assess refugees' homes.⁹² As this could not take place, they were often unable to assess whose issue was a priority. Social workers could not consistently direct refugees to aid organisations as they were, themselves, unable to cope with pressures brought about by the pandemic.⁹³ For example, 43 per cent of NGOs' work was halted, whereas another 83 per cent said that their services were in demand.⁹⁴

In the same way, Monshipouri et al. argue that, while the health and wellbeing of camp-based refugees are paramount – especially when taking into consideration how camp contexts lead to higher rates of infections in any health situation – this allows for urban-based refugees' issues to be masked.⁹⁵ Over government backing, urban refugees are often left to rely on non-government-related networks for support and information, as they “tend to be generally outside of the assistance framework of government ministries and international organisations.”⁹⁶ The authors contend that refugees' reliance on other services not provided by the government hinders the state's ability to adequately and successfully curb COVID-19 “when having access to government-led information and resources is pertinent to survival

⁹² *ibid.*

⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Doğan and Genç, “Early-Responding Civil Society,” 10.

⁹⁵ Monshipouri, Ellis, and Yip, “Managing the Refugee Crisis,” 184.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

rates.”⁹⁷ As the pandemic progressed, central and local governments undertook steps to support their refugee populace.

This was highlighted by Erhan Doğan and H Deniz Genç, who in September 2020, interviewed non-governmental organisation workers at the frontlines of refugee support during the pandemic. A key finding which can be argued to have emerged from this study is the ‘tone-deaf’ nature of the central and local governments which additionally emphasised the tension between the two governments. One such instance was the Municipality of Istanbul’s decision to initiate the *Askıda Fatura* (‘Paying a Neighbour’s Bill’) campaign, which was formed in opposition to the central government’s resistance of the idea for opposition-run municipalities to conduct fundraising plans. (In contrast, the central government ran its own campaign – one heavily favoured by pro-government entities – *Biz bize yeteriz* (‘We are self-sufficient, Turkey’) which supported 1,960, 239 families across Turkey).⁹⁸

The *Askıda Fatura* campaign was aimed at encouraging citizens to support other citizens who were negatively impacted by the pandemic, whose water or electricity bill was paid for, which saw great success.⁹⁹ While citizens were able to use this initiative, many refugees were exempt – not because they were not applicable candidates, but as they feared any repercussions which could arise

⁹⁷ *ibid.*

⁹⁸ Doğan and Genç, “Early-Responding Civil Society,” 8-9.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

from providing their personal information.¹⁰⁰ This is a prime example of how refugees continue to be overlooked or ill-considered in these situations. As some of the neediest in society, this campaign had the strong potential to help the thousands in need. However, without the safety of being properly accounted for, or permanent citizenship, refugees were unable to make good use of such an opportunity.

Citizens' role in supporting fellow members of society must be noted. With a key demographic, the elderly, being sheltered from the public for their protection, many neighbourhoods began to conduct their elderly neighbours' errands.¹⁰¹ Doğan and Genç state that the "Traditional solidarity networks of Turkish society also became activated," but these actions could not enough as the central government is responsible for this support.¹⁰² Ultimately, this initiative – and others of a similar nature – additionally emphasised the need to support fellow citizens and members of society. Especially more so against the backdrop of the anti-refugee and -migrant rhetoric which continued. Primarily this was powered by the pandemic's effect on the Turkish economy with the inclusion of the already-existing idea that migrants were appropriating citizens' employment opportunities.¹⁰³ An individual employed in the civil society sector stated the following:

¹⁰⁰ Doğan and Genç, "Early-Responding Civil Society," 14.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰² *ibid.*, 8.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*, 17.

I have been working in the civil society for more than twenty-five years. For the first time in the last four–five years, the responsiveness of the society has fallen behind the responsiveness of the state. Turkish people used to pity migrants, refugees, war victims, Africans, etc. and they pressured the state to act. They used to be more responsive than the state. Now they see Syrians and Afghans as the reasons of their economic and other problems. And unfortunately, [there is] discrimination, exclusion, and otherisation of the migrants.¹⁰⁴

The arrival of Syrian refugees into Turkey has been viewed from both a humanitarian stance and one of disdain. Selin Yıldız Nielsen argues that at first, the Turkish population was “united around the cause of their Syrian neighbors at the onset of the crisis... [and] also pitched in [in supporting refugees alongside the government].”¹⁰⁵ However, as the prospects of refugees’ return home lessened, Turkish citizens were faced with the need to adapt to refugees through “businesses’ ... cater[ing] to the Syrian population through restaurants and clothing stores,” or the use of Arabic in conjunction with the Turkish language.¹⁰⁶ As a result, there has been a tendency for Turkish nationals to become more opposed to the likely-permanent re-settlement of refugees. Interestingly, Nielsen states that this

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Nielsen, “Perceptions Between Syrian Refugees,” 101-102.

¹⁰⁶ *ibid.*, 102.

perception is in line with the idea that Syrian refugees, as ‘guests’, are “overstaying his/her visit.”¹⁰⁷ This has tarnished the perception of refugees whereby they are viewed as ‘overstayers’ and a disruption to the established society.¹⁰⁸ From a humanitarian, non-individualistic standpoint, Turkey’s perspective is counterproductive as it ensures that anti-refugee rhetoric continues to exist when finding means to support refugees in the long-term – or permanently – should be a priority.

In essence, these examples highlight the discrepancies between citizens working in the formal sector versus those in the informal, as well as the difficulties Syrian refugees are enduring due to their ‘guest’ and non-permanent status in Turkey. Syrian refugees are likely to remain in Turkey in the long-term, especially more so when taking into consideration the pandemic. Therefore, the Turkish Government and a multitude of inter- and non-governmental organisations are bound by the obligation to provide continuous support for Syrian refugees in the employment sector, without the lens of temporality in sight.

Conclusion

Over the course of the Syrian refugee crisis, Syrian refugees have faced hurdles whilst seeking to establish substantial lives in Turkey. The Turkish Government has continued to claim that its refugee populace will return home, and in doing so, has negatively

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

influenced the livelihoods of refugees as they stand. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has only emphasised Syrian refugees' place in Turkish society as second-class individuals with unequal protective mechanisms in place, living as spectators in a country which is home for the unforeseeable future. For this to change, Turkey must accept its reality, that Syrian refugees will need to be legally and permanently integrated into society—for the benefit of country and population.

As, instead of impacting society through legal employment which has positive ramifications for individuals' health, well-being, and educational pursuits, refugees continue to exist without being offered the opportunity to truly live. Without the prospects of permanent citizenship, the hardship they experience will only continue with time. Without an end to the Syrian civil war, this hardship is tinged with permanence.

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