



Between Locally Led Response and Domestic Blame Avoidance: Dilemmas in the Management of Syrians in Turkey

İnsani Yardımın Yerelleştirilmesi ve Suçlamadan Kaçınma Arasında: Türkiye'deki Suriyelilerin Yönetiminde İkilimler

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Abstract

Based on observations and unstructured interviews with key actors conducted in Turkey in 2019 and 2020, this study considers the dynamics of sovereignty and transnational cooperation in the management of forced migration. We focus in particular on the question: to what extent can humanitarian governance and host-country social protection schemes converge? The 2016 humanitarian summit recommended a model of international humanitarian governance in which social policy instruments and actors should be given greater weight in humanitarian management. In this paper, we use the case of humanitarian assistance to Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey to test the limits of this policy shift. We argue that as long as supporting forced migrants from public resources is seen as an undesirable action by voters, host country governments must balance implementation of this internationally established norm with attention to “blame avoidance.” “Avoiding blame is the main obstacle preventing the full convergence of humanitarian aid instruments with national social protection instruments.

Keywords: Migration, Humanitarian Assistance, Cash Transfer, Blame Avoidance

Öz

2019 ve 2020 yıllarında Türkiye’de gerçekleştirilen gözlemlere ve kilit aktörlerle yapılandırılmamış görüşmelere dayanan bu çalışma, zorunlu göçün yönetiminde egemenlik ve ulus ötesi işbirliği dinamiklerini ele almakta ve “insani yardım yönetimi ve ulusal sosyal koruma programları ne ölçüde birbirine yakınlaşabilir?” sorusuna odaklanmaktadır. 2016 insani yardım zirvesinde, insani yardım yönetiminde sosyal politika araçlarına ve aktörlerine daha fazla ağırlık verilmesi gereken bir uluslararası insani yardım yönetişimi modeli önerilmiştir. Makalede, bu politika değişikliğinin sınırlarını test etmek için Türkiye’deki geçici koruma altındaki Suriyelilere verilen nakit desteği örneği kullanılmaktadır. Zorunlu göçmenleri kamu kaynaklarından destekleme, seçmenler tarafından istenmeyen bir eylem olarak görüldüğü sürece, “suçlamadan kaçınmak” için ev sahibi ülke hükümetlerinin uluslararası oluşturulan bu normu tam olarak uygulayamayacağını savunuyoruz. Bir başka deyişle, bu makalenin ana iddiası “Suçlamadan kaçınmanın”, insani yardım araçlarının ulusal sosyal koruma araçlarıyla tam olarak yakınlaşmasını engelleyen temel neden olduğudur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Göç, İnsani Yardım, Nakit Destek, Suçlamadan Kaçınma

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Since 2011, Turkey has witnessed a mass influx of migrants fleeing the Syrian civil war as well as other regional conflicts. The country hosts the largest number of international forced migrants¹ in the world (UNHCR , 2023). By far the largest group of these are some 3.5 million Syrians granted Temporary Protection Status (Göç İdaresi, 2023). The presence on Turkish soil of this significant population for an indefinite period has inevitably raised questions relating to domestic security and border control, as well as generating demand for social services ranging from health care to housing, education, and income support. The research presented here focusses on the years 2012-2022.² Over this decade, we suggest, the position of the Turkish government has undergone a complex and non-linear evolution, the result of attempting to balance a number of distinct and imperfectly compatible preferences and constraints.

Most obviously, the potential for further mass cross-border movements of displaced persons prompted the Turkish government to change its approach to migration, closing the border with Syria in 2016. (Batalla and Tolay, 2018: 5). Subsequent decisions restricted the areas within Turkey to which forced migrants could relocate – in principle, at least, stopping movement toward Istanbul as of 2018.³ The necessity of addressing the social and humanitarian needs of forced migrants already on Turkish soil, meanwhile, has led to increased involvement by national and local institutions of the Turkish state. All of these moves are consistent with a reassertion of sovereignty. In addition, the latter in particular is in accordance with the recent evolution of international norms for humanitarian assistance, as proposed by the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, which place the direct involvement of host country authorities and organizations at the heart of response strategy.

While moves to tighten border control on the one hand and to provide active locally-led support for migrants on the other are consistent in the international context, however, their domestic political implications are very different. The research presented in this article suggests that the ideal of full integration of national and international humanitarian efforts may not be altogether sustainable over the medium term because of the host country governments' desire to avoid blame for the unpopular action of supporting refugees from public resources. "Blame avoidance," we conclude, is a key – and understudied – obstacle that prevents international humanitarian instruments from fully converging with national social protection instruments.

This article is based on systematic analysis of public documents, complemented by observations and interviews carried out at the local and national levels in Turkey, as well as interviews with key informants in the European Commission. All interviews were carried out between 2019 and 2020, although documentary research was extended to the first months of 2023. At the request of our interview partners, interviews are entirely

1 This article does not consider the question of persons displaced within their country of origin, sometimes labeled "internal migrants." In the pages that follow, accordingly, the term "forced migrants" will be taken to refer to those whose movement has led them to cross an international border.

2 Research for this article was conducted prior to the 2023 earthquake that devastated a large region of southeastern Turkey and northern Syria. Accordingly, it does not take any account either the direct policy responses to the earthquake or of the indirect impact of this event on Turkish politics and policy more broadly. We have explicitly chosen, moreover, not to update our argument to include discussion of this exogenous event, with a view to preserving the potential comparability of our core argument, which does not depend on an external shock to explain observed effects.

3 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/07/16/turkey-stops-registering-syrian-asylumseekers>

anonymized. Accordingly, interviews or observations are referenced solely by date. The purpose of the interviews, it should be stressed, is illustrative, they provide background information and suggest examples. We make no claim to have or to reveal privileged information. Quite to the contrary, the central observations of this article focus on the public pronouncements and the official actions of actor and agencies in positions of authority. It is these that lead us to the conclusion that host-country governments face a conflict between the imperatives of sovereignty and the desire for blame avoidance, and that this internal conflict illuminates the logic of a pattern of action than might otherwise be difficult to explain.

Who Governs Migration ?

Is control of cross-border migration the sole purview of sovereign states? Is providing economic support for forced migrants allowed to settle, even temporarily, the sole responsibility of the host state? Are one or the other, conversely, subject chiefly to international law, norms, and collective responsibility? In the latter case, is there any scope at all for discretion on the part of host-country actors? The answer to these questions, central to the issues explored in this article, have evolved considerably since the mid-20th century, but this movement has not been linear.

Reasserting sovereignty

Taking the questions most generally, we can see the emergence following World War Two of a body of international law based on human rights understood at the level of individuals, which if taken literally suggested that individuals had far-ranging rights to settle where they chose, including crossing international borders, and that states for their part had broad duties to extend to migrants rights and services equivalent to those provided for citizens. Writing at the end of the 20th century, Sassen (1999) pointed to Article 14 of the UN's universal declaration of human rights, which provides the right "*to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution*," as marking the emergence of "de-facto transnationalism in migration policy". As neoliberalism spread around the world in 1980s, state service provision declined while the private sector took its place. In this context, "*corporations, markets and free-trade agreements are now in charge of 'governing' an increasing share of cross-border flows*" (Sassen, 1999: 177). If anything, however, this trend to "globalization" further removed the control of migration from the arbitrary choices of sovereign governments.

In retrospect, it seems clear that Sassen was describing a historical moment that had already ended. Writing less than a decade later, Koser (2007: 237) provides a clear rejoinder, noting that "*whatever the impact of global economic flows and interstate pacts, states firmly retain the right to [...] control immigration and membership*". Several episodes illustrate this shift notably the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia. Notwithstanding the ongoing role of international organizations such as (but not limited to) the UNHCR, the legal basis for an international human rights regime that recognizes the right of migrants, and the proliferation of transnational civil society organizations, the trend at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries was not so much the "*emergence of transnational civil society*" as an increasingly effective reaction on the part

of national governments. In the end, Koser (2007: 233) concludes that “*transnationalism has reinforced state control.*” The emergence in Europe of “temporary protection” in the wake of the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia (Koser, 2007: 239), and its extensive use by the USA with respect to forced migrants from Central America (Wilson, 2020) mark an important turning point in this development, as governments imposed on forced migrants a status determined (and revocable) by domestic political decisions rather than by either international law and organizations or pressure from transnational economic actors. Ironically, the political salience of perceived loss of control of national borders in the face of massive flows of asylum seekers contributed significantly to the retreat from a more liberal asylum regime as governments in Europe and elsewhere faced a significant backlash from citizens and, increasingly from organized opposition parties, who focused on the perceived cost of hosting large numbers of forced migrants. (Guiraudon and Lahav, eds., 2006) It is to this aspect of the problem that we now turn.

Bearing, and sharing, responsibility for forced migrants

Reassertion of sovereignty with respect to migration and border control notwithstanding, the reality of the decades since the 1990s has been one of increasing flows of forced migrants. This, in turn, has presented states and international organizations with the unavoidable responsibility of humanitarian support and the vexing question of who is to pay for it. In the face of this new reality, a number of distinct responses have emerged, ranging from a near-total delegation of responsibility to international organizations to a renewed ideal of shared responsibility. A useful starting point for understanding these responses, and the persisting differences among them, is to ask what type of policy is being considered. Far from an academic question, this proves to have important practical consequences, and will be at the heart of our ultimate conclusions.

Economic and social support for forced migrants is frequently labeled as “humanitarian” assistance the better to distinguish them from social support based on the rights and duties of national citizens. Over time, however, economic support of migrants may come to resemble the types of social assistance typically reserved for citizens. The notion of “transnational social protection” has thus been taken up by several authors (Levitt *et al.*, 2017; Paul, 2017; Mingot and Mazzucato, 2018: 21-28) in the context of international migration. The resulting hybrid policy regime has been characterized as:

the combination of provisions provided by the state, the market, the third sector (i.e., NGOs, churches, international organizations) and family and social networks to protect individuals and families against declining living standards arising from a number of basic risks and needs (e.g., employment, healthcare, housing, nourishment, education and social participation) in a transnational manner. (Mingot and Mazzucato, 2018: 21-28)

Bilecen and Barglowski (2015: 203), similarly, evoke an “interrelation or ‘assemblage’ of formal and informal elements, with social actors constantly negotiating and combining the use of formal and informal provisions.” The form taken by this “interrelation or assemblage” varies significantly from one case to another. Initially, resources of host countries faced with large and unexpected movements of forced migration may be overwhelmed while at the same time the possibility of international crisis response is at its highest. In such cases, the international humanitarian system may be directly involved

in one or more of the activates outlined by Hoffman and Weiss (2017) as: “*articulation of rights, supplying relief, and providing protection.*”

Beyond “articulations” and “assemblages,” however, distinct types emerge. Experience in cases such as Kenya beginning in the 1990s has shown that when states are overwhelmed by the burden of mass population influx the presence of actors in a position to provide resources, such as UNHCR and international NGOs, can lead to a willing transfer of responsibility by otherwise viable states (Frangeigh, 2016). In such cases, UN agencies such as UNHCR behave in effect as a “surrogate state.” As such they create “their own territory (camps), citizens (refugees), public services (education, health etc.) and ideology (gender equality).” (Slaughter and Crisp 2009: 8). In some cases, such as Iraq, the government can choose among the transnational actors; thus, IFRC was preferred to UNHCR to manage camps for Iranians of Kurdish origin, but the ultimate outcome is still one of near-total delegation of responsibility and authority (Krill, 2001).

This central role of UN agencies in migration governance has been called “State to UN responsibility shift.” (Kagan, 2011) In the case of Lebanon and Jordan, it was formalized by “Memoranda of Understanding” in 1998 and 2003 (Frangieh, 2016) limiting the host state’s responsibility for refugee management and protection. Considering subsequent events, however, it is evident that the Memorandum of Understanding was not a policy instrument designed for mass influx of displaced persons as has been seen more recently in the case of the Syrian crisis. To meet the new challenge, Lebanon and Jordan increased their responsibility towards refugees, mainly to control registration (Frangieh, 2016: 41-42). When it came to meeting economic needs of forced migrants, however, the “state to UN shift” was evident, as the cash transfer program for Syrian refugee in Jordan were financed and managed directly by UNHCR (Hagen-Zanker et al., 2018).

In the face of such responsibility shifts, however, actors and analysts have increasingly recognized that the distinctiveness of humanitarian assistance, traditionally focused on short-term emergency assistance, is eroded in cases of protracted crises. When the refugee presence is protracted, the social support instruments of the hosting country may be called on to address the needs that result. Among the reasons for this is the recognition that the humanitarian system, typified by top-down and internationally led structures, is not ideal for managing complex and ongoing crises (Gingerich and Cohen, 2015). Moreover, observers have increasingly emphasized the inherent limits of humanitarianism. Stubbs (2002: 325) argues that humanitarian assistance by its nature focusses “*not on structures of welfare governance, but on aid to specific vulnerable groups*”. As such, it risks establishing an *ad hoc* and inconsistent policy response, different from the more systematic approach of national social assistance.

These concerns were addressed directly in the consultation period for the UN World Humanitarian Summit 2016. Humanitarian aid organizations proposed the Charter for Change, “to practically implement changes to the way the Humanitarian System operates to enable more locally-led response” (Charter 4 Change, 2015).⁴ It proposed transferring 20 per cent of all humanitarian funding to local and national organizations by 2018 as a means to “*Increase social protection programs and strengthen national and local systems and coping mechanisms in order to build resilience in fragile contexts*” (Grand Bargain Document, 2016: 14). Following in this same logic, several policy documents relevant to

4 <https://charter4change.org>

the case studied here, such as European Commission (2019) and UNHCR (2019), argue for that humanitarian and social support instruments should be more similar, and that the preexisting structure of national social policy instruments should form their core. The purpose of international support, in this logic, should be to strengthen, but not to supplant national policy tools.

This is not, however, the end of the story. While the documents that came out of the 2016 summit addressed both the necessary conditions for a more effective policy response and the desire of host-country authorities to reassert sovereign authority, they paid less attention to another of the key lessons of the 1990s and 2000s discussed at the beginning of this section: beyond its objective economic burden, the perceived economic cost of hosting migrants has become an important political risk to host-country governments. (Guiraudon and Halav, 2006) In response to – or in anticipation of – accusations of spending on migrants resources that should be reserved for citizens, governments may not wish to be visibly associated with the support of refugees, deferring instead to international organizations or NGOs as part of a strategy of “blame avoidance.”

As a general premise of policy, this is a well-known attitude: “*Blame avoidance refers to the act of minimizing the expected blame that one must face when something unwanted happens in the public sector domain*” (Rajala, 2019). Although the humanitarian assistance governance are now more dependent on national welfare system, the political and social cost of this governance provides an incentive for national public actors to avoid being seen as fully involved, and to transfer the governance and public face of the program to NGOs and transnational actors. This dilemma, between “locally -led response” on the one hand and “blame avoidance” on the other is the focus of the case study introduced below and analyzed in more detail in the following sections.

Delegation and sovereignty in Turkey

This new commitment to improve the integration of humanitarian actors and host-country social protection systems brings us back to the notion of “transnational social protection” evoked above (Levitt *et al.*, 2017; Hoffman and Weiss, 2017) with its “assemblage” of national and transnational actors. With respect to Turkey and the response to forced migration from Syria, Yılmaz (2019) comes to a similar conclusion, observing that the EU-Turkey agreement “*shaped the welfare mix by empowering the public sector mandate vis-à-vis the humanitarian actors.*” A similar point is made by in the case of refugee health care by Ark-Yıldırım, Komsuoğlu and Özekmekçi (2019).

Based on preliminary evidence, these studies came to conclusions with respect to aid for forced migrants in Turkey whose logic resembled Koser’s (2007) claim with respect to migration policy: transnational policy instruments may end up reinforcing state control. Of central importance to this claim were the consequences of the “externalization of migration governance” (Üstübcü, 2019) on the part of the European Union. According to this argument, which we share in part, the EU’s decision to aid persons fleeing the Syrian civil war in the countries bordering the war zone, rather than in the EU itself, as formalized in our case by the EU-Turkey accords of 2016, had the ultimate, if perhaps not the intended, outcome of strengthening the institutions of the Turkish state.⁵

5 This article does not address the cases of Jordan and Lebanon, in which large numbers of Syrians also sought refuge and which were the recipients of significant aid from the EU. Our conclusions here may be useful as

From the ottoman era to today, Turkish state is generally characterized as a centralized and powerful state that is reluctant to share the attributes of sovereignty. As such, near-total delegation of responsibility to transnational entities, as seen in Jordan or in some African States, was not an option for Turkey. Even so, the initial response in the beginning of Syrian war, when the presence of forced migrants was considered temporary and short term, was marked by the presence of both international and non-governmental organizations on the Syrian border.

The perception of this situation changed in 2015, when it became evident that the number of forced migrants was increasing rapidly and that they were likely to remain outside of Syria for an indefinite period. The resulting “refugee crisis,” sparked by illegal crossings by Syrian migrants into the EU led directly to the EU-Turkey agreement of 2016, which in turn led to a significant increase in the involvement of Turkish national institutions. Most visibly, this took the form of Turkish enforcement of a closed border, both with Syria and with the EU. In addition, measures were put in place to increase the control of Syrians within Turkey. It is this latter policy that is at the heart of our argument, relating as it does to the management of the social support programs that were funded by this same EU-Turkey agreement.

The resulting governance model, merging international resources and locally-led response, was very much in the spirit of the new thinking on humanitarian assistance, as expressed in the contemporaneous World Humanitarian Summit, held in Istanbul that same year, which urged a closer integration of international and host-country actors and policy instruments. However, being publicly seen by as the only entity responsible for the support of Syrian migrants posed problems for the Turkish authorities (Beyaz et. al. 2019) because of its high and growing social, political, and economic cost.

In the pages that follow, we divide our analysis chronologically into two distinct periods. The first, prior to 2016, is marked by a proliferation of transnational instruments but also by the beginnings of the reassertion of state authority. The second, marked by the impact of the 2016 EU-Turkey accords brings a significant increase in state capacity but also, especially in the most recent years, an expressed reluctance on the part of Turkish authorities to abandon key elements, both practical and symbolic of transnationalism.

Open Borders and Transnational Humanitarian Assistance

Turkey’s initial response to the Syrian civil war was to allow Syrians to cross its border freely even without identity documents (Özer, 2015; Batalla and Tolay, 2018).⁶ Syrians were accommodated in state-organized camps. Only a limited number of international or and national actors were active (European Commission, 2019) and their offer for help was largely denied by Turkish government (Gökalp-Aras and Şahin-Mencütek 2016; Kale, 2017; Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017). Three reasons are given for this refusal: belief that the Syrian presence was temporary accordingly (Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017); reluctance to share domestic information (Kale, 2017); and finally a desire to promote the view of Turkey as an important power and leading humanitarian actor in the region (Gökalp-Aras and Şahin-Mencütek 2016).

starting points for parallel research in these other cases.

6 The legal basis for this policy was the pre-existing visa-free agreement signed 2009 between Syria and Turkey, which the Turkish government chose to apply to forced migrants after 2011.

From a national to a transnational response

This understanding of temporality can be seen in the official vocabulary. Syrians were initially granted the ill-defined status of “guests.” Temporary Protection Status was granted in October 2011. When the number of Syrian refugees exceeded 100.000 in October 2012 a further directive was issued, but not made public (Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017).

A measure of clarification came only in October 2014 with the “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” and with the Regulation on Temporary Protection of the same year. The choice of TPS instead of a more robust status created several advantages for the Turkish Government as it had already created for Western Europe in the case of Bosnian refugees (Koser, 2007). Firstly, TPS is defined within national and administrative laws and regulations without reference to international laws and conventions. Public discontent can be controlled by “stressing the temporary nature of the status.” (Koser, 2007: 239) Even so, the 2014 law and regulation marked the recognition that the situation was more than a momentary emergency to be addressed through informal means.⁷ In a move that reinforced this new understanding, the same 2014 directive shifted responsibility for managing forced migrants from AFAD, Turkey’s principal emergency management organization, to the newly created DGMM, the directorate general for migration management. A further element of this recognition was already under way, as the Turkish state gradually accepted an increased role for transnational actors. Within a year, the Government of Turkey understood that the cost of hosting forced migrants would be high as the war would continue longer than expected, and public discontent linked to the presence of forced migrants was increasing (Kale et al., 2018). Accordingly in 2012, Turkey requested aid from United Nation as part of a UN regional response plan (Memisoglu and Ilgit, 2017).

Even after the presence of international agencies was accepted, tensions were evident between national and transnational approaches to migration management. International agencies willing to contribute to meeting this cost of assisting forced migrants generally preferred not to provide funding directly to government agencies. One reason for this was a general preference on the part of international donors for working through NGOs rather than government agencies (Memisoglu and Ilgit 2017). In addition, questions of access and control persisted. In the early years of the crisis, the Turkish government limited any access to refugee camps. Donors, however, were reluctant to provide any assistance without overseeing how the government spent and distributed the money (*op. cit.*).

From Food Distribution to Cash Assistance

An important consequence of this initial experience was a shift from in-kind to cash assistance for forced migrants in Turkey. Initial food-distribution programs run exclusively by the Turkish government proved expensive (Inglis and Vargas, 2014) and in many cases unsatisfying for those receiving aid (Interview, 2020). Turkey officially requested WFP support to assist Syrians in late May 2012 (WFP, 2012). In July 2012 WFP conducted a voucher feasibility study which recommended providing complementing food assistance by using voucher transfers (Inglis and Vargas, 2014; WFP, 2012). In the year that followed,

7 The introduction of this law was also result of the Turkey’s efforts to conformity with EU acquis.

the scope of the program was significantly increased, as Syrians numbered continued to rise, and more sustainable schemes of cost and responsibility sharing were explored. An overall cost-sharing arrangement was reached between the Turkish government and WFP in 2014. Through this agreement, the WFP contribution toward a cash-transfer card was reduced from 80 TL to 60 TL, with the resulting shortfall 20 TL uploaded by AFAD, on AFAD e-card for food and non-food items (WFP Turkey, 2016b).

By this cost-sharing arrangement, the program was progressively expanded to 220.000 Syrians in 21 camps in June 2014. However, in February 2015, because of funding constraints, WFP withdraw earlier than planned from 10 camps. In the camps where WFP withdrew, AFAD, continue the assistance. WFP adjusted its transfer value to 50 TL per person, while the AFAD uploaded 35 TL on AFAD e-card (WFP Turkey, 2016b). Today, the cost sharing modality is still active as September 2021 (WFP Turkey, 2021). The transfer value provided by AFAD increased to 50 TL while WFP's share stayed same for food assistance contribution in camps (Health World News, 2017). As of September 2021, WFP support was reaching 46.654 refugees in 6 camps, out of a population of approximately 60.000 in the 7 camps remaining in activity (WFP Turkey, 2021). Government service model for Syrians in camps has transformed into responsibility-sharing models.

Over these same years, the number of Syrians living outside camps increased exponentially. Out-of-camp cash policy evolved in an opposite direction to that of in-camp policy: aid distribution was initially carried out mostly by NGOs, but the Turkish government gradually increased its oversight and direct involvement. (Maunder *et al.*, 2018; European Commission, 2019). An out-of-camp version of basic need cash assistance was first institutionalized in 2015. The TRC and WFP launched the program in May 2015. The *Kızılaykart* at that time worked on the same principles used the in-camp programs: as an e-voucher, which could only be used in designated shops⁸ (Interview, 2020). From June 2015 to April 2017, the program spent a total of 147.624.903TL and reached 159.960 beneficiaries. This program was terminated in 30.04.2017 (Ombudsman Institution of the Republic of Turkey, 2018).

Policy Consequences of the EU-Turkey Accords: The limits of state control

Starting in the second half of 2014, the number of forced migrants arriving on Turkish soil increased quickly, further evidence that the situation would not be resolved quickly. (See Table 1, below) This coincided with the rise of ISIS and of the Syrian Kurdish movement. It is in this context that that a new series of negotiations were undertaken by Turkey and the EU about forced migrants flows and, more generally, that the Turkish government continued to rethink and change its policy approach towards support for forced migrants. In this section, we consider the consequences of this acceleration in cross-border flows for both immigration and humanitarian assistance policies.

⁸ E-vouchers enable recipients to make purchases up to the value of the voucher and are often for one-off use in designated stores, within a specified timeframe (Ford, 2017).

Table 1
Registered Syrian Migrants in Turkey

Year (January 1 st)	Number of Syrians under temporary protection
2012	9.500
2013	148.441
2014	559.994
2015	1.552.839
2016	2.503.549
2017	2.274.500
2018	3.424.237
2019	3.622.366
2020	3.575.369
2021	3.643.769

Source: UNHCR: Operational portal – Syrian Refugee Response – Turkey

< <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>>

The EU-Turkey Accords: A Greater Emphasis on Security in Migration Policy

The EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan was announced in October 2015 and confirmed on 18 March 2016 by EU-Turkey Statement. It was intended both to prevent irregular migration flows to Europe and provide support to forced migrants and Turkish Host Communities. Under this plan, Turkey would accept the return of newly arrived irregular migrants transiting through Turkey as of 20 March 2016. For every Syrian sent back, one registered Syrian in Turkey could be resettled to the EU. The EU-Turkey statement considers Turkey as a “safe third country;” all asylum applications submitted in Greece by persons coming from Turkey are considered inapplicable and all the applicants are returned to Turkey (Gkliati, 2017).

This agreement was based on the 2005 Regional Protection Programs (RPP) proposed by the European Commission with the “*aim to improve refugee protection in target regions through the provision of durable solutions. Voluntary repatriation and local integration are the primary durable solutions considered within RPPs, with resettlement to a third country considered when neither of these options are feasible*” (European Resettlement Network, *no date*). RPP’s were initially established in Africa and parts of the former Soviet Union. A program of this type, targeting Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, was established in the context of the Syrian refugee crisis in 2012 in order “*to develop sustainable capacities to respond to the crisis in the medium and longer term*” (European Resettlement Network, *no date*). Although funding levels remained modest, the main activity of support was similar to what would be provided in Turkey.

An important element of this agreement was improving control of refugee entering Turkey. The 18 march EU-Turkey statement emphasizes the “*achievement*” such as “*the introduction of new visa requirements for Syrians and other nationalities, stepped up security efforts by the Turkish coast guard and police and enhanced information sharing*” (European Council, 2016). The registration of Syrians into the Turkish migration system is also required under the Joint Action Plan (European Commission, 2015: 2). In order slow or halt the inflow of people several restrictions were put in places. A border wall

was built from 2016 to 2018 (Batalla and Tolay, 2018), and visa requirements were put in place in 2016 for all persons coming from Syria into Turkey by air or by sea as well as for arrival to Turkey by air for citizens of 18 countries.⁹ Finally, Istanbul and nine Syrian Border cities (Adana, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş, Kilis, Mardin, Mersin, Osmaniye, Şanlıurfa and Hatay) have stopped registering Syrians since late 2017 or early 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2018). Relocating to Istanbul has been also stopped in 2018 because of the increasing population (Kızılkoyun, 2018). To this end, Istanbul Governor's Office issued a decision requiring return to the province of original registration by 20 August 2019 (Tekten, 2019). According to the governor of Istanbul 97.255 Syrians registered in other cities left Istanbul (Hürriyet, 2020).

In practice, the migration aspects of the EU-Turkey agreement demonstrate an effective convergence of security interests between Turkey and the EU, as each side found reason to restrict the movement of forced migrants both into and within Turkey. From the European perspective, this is clearly a case of “externalization of migration governance,” (Üstübcü, 2019) with the Government of Turkey designated as the EU's external agent. As noted by Frelick, Kysel and Podkul (2016: 193), such policies amount to “migration containment and control” although, they are publicly presented as “*either or both a security imperative and a life-saving humanitarian endeavor.*” From the Turkish perspective, security imperatives were equally evident. Transnational elements did not altogether disappear, as evidenced by the ongoing presence of UN agencies. Even so, when it comes to the control of borders and of persons, transnational norms or organizations were eclipsed by a more traditional government-to-government accords.

But what of cash assistance and other forms of material support for forced migrants? We might expect that the trend to ever-greater state control would be evident here as well. As detailed below, however, the outcome was considerably more nuanced. A critical part of the externalization of migration governance was EU budgetary support for Turkish actions for economic and social support of forced migrants. The European Commission's Directorate General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG-ECHO) managed humanitarian aid, while other types of assistance were incorporated into the pre-existing Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) under the authority of the Directorate General for Neighborhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR).

This distinction had important consequences for the dynamics of transnationalism. The central mission of DG-NEAR is to assist with capacity-building in partner states; increases in state control are thus consistent with its broader approach. The humanitarian orientation of DG-ECHO, on the other hand, predisposed it to work with international agencies and NGOs rather than governments.¹⁰ It's actions in Turkey, nevertheless, supported the evolution toward greater government engagement in direct service delivery for refugees over time. The role of NGOs was transformed from direct delivery to providing services not provided by governments such as legal counselling or specialized health services

9 Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Mali, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Uganda. See: https://www.avrupa.info.tr/sites/default/files/2016-12/third_progress_report_on_turkey_visa_liberalisation_roadmap_en_0.pdf

10 According to *Humanitarian Aid Regulation* 1257/96, DG-ECHO depends on intermediaries for program implementation.

or services to unregistered refugees (DG-ECHO Evaluation Report, 2019: 15). At the same time, the Turkish Government limited NGO action by enforcing regulations on international NGO staff. As a result, several NGOs ended operations following non-renewal of their registration (Aras and Duman, 2019).¹¹

The Emergency Social Safety Net and the Consolidation of Cash Assistance

Since March 2016, European humanitarian assistance to Turkey has been consolidated into the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRiT). Among its central components is the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), an unrestricted cash transfer program intended to help forced migrants meet basic needs (DG-ECHO, 2021a). The program assists refugees living outside camps who meet the program's criteria for vulnerability, who are registered either in the temporary or international protection status, and also registered in the Turkish government's address registration system. Assistance goes primarily to families with four or more children; 60% of beneficiaries are below 17. 89 % users are Syrian; 6.6 % users are from Iraq; 3,5% from Afghanistan. Households receive 155 TL (around 15 euro at 2021 exchange rates) (DG-ECHO, 2021b) per family member per month; a quarterly top-up is based on family size.

In practice, the ESSN replaced and expanded pre-existing cash assistance programs. Between 2015 and 2017, approximately 300,000 refugees received assistance (160,000 from the WFP/TRC off-camp Kızılaykart and 140,000 through other NGOs basic needs assistance program) (Mauder, 2018: 18). After establishment of ESSN, DG-ECHO largely ended support to NGO cash transfer programs for basic needs (Mauder, 2018: 65). EU regulation (1257/96) mandates that humanitarian funding can only be directed to international organizations or EU-registered NGOs. The WFP was initially designated to carry out this task in partnership with the TRC.

An important policy innovation brought about by ESSN was the systematic involvement of a key Turkish domestic welfare institution, the district Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations (SASF). In the context of Turkish social policy, the SASF's function is to provide social assistance to eligible persons throughout Turkey. The foundations are established at the district level, 1003 in all. Each SASF has an executive committee headed by the district governor, which makes final decisions about beneficiaries. Those foundations are under the control of General Directorate of Social Assistance which is under the Ministry of Family and Social Services. While SASFs, with their close relationship to the state, are not as NGOs, they are frequently considered "parastatal." (Öktem 2018; Yılmaz and Yakut-Çakar, 2008). For Turkish citizens, they provide social assistance within the framework of policies produced by the central government. In this way foundations implement poverty alleviation policies determined by the central government. In the case of ESSN, the SASF were given the task of evaluating individual applications based on ESSN's eligibility rules.

This public involvement in humanitarian activity has two important consequences: The WFP's role is limited to acting as a bridge and umpire between funders and national institutions. However, this umpire role is constrained by the law on protection of personal

¹¹ One indicator of this is the distinct decrease in IO and NGO agreements. From a high point of 24 in 2016, these dropped in half to 12 in 2018. (DG-ECHO Evaluation Report, 2019: 15).

data. By this law, the Turkish Government restricts WFP's access to household data of actual or potential beneficiaries. "Although TRC has served as an intermediary between the government and WFP on this, it has only been authorized to share an anonymized sample of 3% of the applicant data." (Mauder, 2018: 35).

The SASF, unlike the WFP, have access to household data. Their action, moreover, is not limited to a mechanical application of pre-set criteria. The ESSN's "discretionary allowance" instrument allows up to 5% of a given foundation's assistance budget to be spent at the discretion of its governing board – potentially allowing it to extend aid to families who might not otherwise qualify. The counterpart of this flexibility is that the SASF have become the final arbiter of who receives assistance: there is no formal channel for appeal to international actors. Requests for information and redress end up with the board of the local SASF, which has authority and a limited discretionary budget to grant exceptions. Lacking any direct appeal mechanism, the only possible corrective measure for excluded vulnerable refugees is thus the "*discretionary allowance*" given to each SASF. As of 2018, boards of trustees were granted discretion to include households that do not meet the demographic criteria. This "*discretionary allowance*," thus, is not an absolute right; it is under the authority of the board of trustees who can choose to use it or not.

Between Humanitarian Assistance and Blame Avoidance: Transnationalism Still Matters

The discussion above, and the central role played by the SASF, might be taken as evidence of a desire on the part of Turkish national authorities to assume full control over cash transfer instruments. Recent developments in management of this policy, however, suggest a more nuanced interpretation.

With the arrival of the second tranche of the FRIT distribution, ESSN was divided into two parts. As of 2021 a distinction was made between ESSN and Complementary Emergency Social Safety Net Program (C-ESSN). Following this reform, the existing ESSN program was transformed into a "livelihood program" intended to assist with the transition to formal employment. As presented by the EU delegation to Turkey,

The project aims to support Syrian and Turkish small and medium size enterprises. These enterprises promote the formal employment and inclusion of unemployed or informally employed persons under temporary protection and Turkish citizens into the economic life (Statewatch, 2020).

As before, EU funding comes from DG-ECHO and requires an international intermediary. For the new programming period, this role is played by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) rather than the WFP. This shift is consistent with statements by both Turkish and European actors that the overhead costs associated with WFP management were excessively high (European Court of Auditors, 2018). In addition, it seems likely that the close links between the TRC and the IFRC, whose vice president responsible for the European region as of 2017, Kerem Kınık, is also president of the TRC, contributed to support by the Turkish government for this change. More broadly, this move was interpreted by experts as a sign that the role of the TRC would be strengthened, making it in effect the lead implementation partner (Parker, 2019).

The reimagined ESSN “livelihood” program’s capacity for generating employment, at least in the short term, is clearly limited. The program document cited above projects the creation of some 2,800 jobs and support for an equivalent number of businesses – a drop in the ocean of over 4 million migrants. These numbers suggest that the distinction between migrants who have ‘no chance of obtaining formal employment’ and others may be largely irrelevant in a situation where opportunities for formal employment remains scarce. So long as the commitment not to cut off assistance for those who are seeking but have not yet attained employment persists, public statements by Turkish authorities suggest that they consider it essential that European burden sharing continues – and thus that elements of transnationalism persist.

The new C-ESSN program, for its part, aims to support existing beneficiaries of the ESSN categorized as most vulnerable, those who are considered to have no chance of obtaining formal employment. The agreement instituting C-ESSN was signed on 17th December 2020 between the Ministry of Family and Social Services (MoFSS), the Turkish Red Crescent and the European Commission’s Directorate General for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations (DG-NEAR); implementation began on the 1st of January 2021 (Turkish Red Crescent Migration Services Directorate, 2020). As is usual for programs financed by DG-NEAR, financing for C-ESSN takes the form of a €245 million Euro direct grant to the MoFSS (DG-NEAR, 2021). There is no equivalent to the role played first by the WFP and later the IFRC in the ESSN. From the EU’s perspective, the shift in funding source from DG-ECHO to DG-NEAR marks the policy aims of transitioning from emergency humanitarian support to longer term state capacity building, following the practice both EU’s “neighborhood” and “pre-accession” instruments.

From the perspective of the Turkish government, the shift to direct grants brings with it increased control of public authority over basic needs distributions. From this, it might be implied that with transfer of control comes a transfer of responsibility. This last point, however, is contested by Turkish authorities. In its public pronouncements, the MoFSS has made clear its contention that C-ESSN remains a humanitarian, rather than a social program.

We call this project C-ESSN for short. C-ESSN stands for Complementary ESSN. When we say C-ESSN, we want to emphasize that our project is the support and complement of ESSN. As a matter of fact, we will implement this project on the Red Crescent Card platform as in our ESSN project and we will continue the humanitarian assistance approach as in the ESSN (Euronews, 2020). (author’s translation from Turkish original)

Central to this claim is the more general Turkish position that European financial support must continue for so long as large numbers of Syrian migrants remain in Turkey (Interview, 2020). Tying the new program to the old by retaining the label ESSN is a way to emphasize this position.

Two distinct but complementary arguments support this point of view. Most obvious is the well documented Turkish claim that considerable national resources have and continue to be devoted to economic support of forced migrants, both in terms of direct spending and of commitment of administrative resources – and that without this commitment it would not have been possible to avoid a massive influx of migrants into the European Union. Continued European contribution, in this perspective, is seen as necessary contribution

to a joint endeavor – burden sharing in the strict sense. Beyond this, however, we can ascribe to Turkish authorities a desire for blame avoidance with respect to their own population. We noted above that the potential for public opposition was a concern for the Government (Kale et al., 2018). The Turkish public increasingly sees Syrians as an economic burden and thinks that Syrians benefit from positively discriminated as against Turkish nationals (Morgül, Savaşkan and Mutlu, 2021; Şar and Kuru, 2020). Expressed public opinion disapproves Syrian refugee policy and calls for a policy change (Yayan, 2019). Even though Turks and Syrians live together, the social distance between two communities getting wider over time (Erdoğan, 2020). Examples of this increasingly general discontent include the “Altındağ incident” in Ankara where a Turkish group vandalized Syrian refugees’ shops after a Turkish boy was killed in a dispute between Syrians and Turks (Öztürk, 2021). In the face of these undesirable results of Syrian refugee policy, it is important for the government to show in easily visible ways that Syrians are temporarily in Turkey, and that assistance to forced migrants does not come at the expense of domestic social policy. Maintaining a clear public distinction between “emergency” cash transfer to Syrians – the public face of which is not the State but the TRC – and more permanent programs aimed at Turkish citizens continues to be a useful blame avoidance strategy in this context. The emphasis noted above on the continued use of the TRC card as a platform for distributing benefits to forced migrants contributes to distinguishing it clearly from support programs for Turkish citizens.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the evolution of Turkish and European policy on migration control and on basic needs provision to forced migrants allows us to draw a more nuanced picture both of migration governance and of the dynamics of transnational social protection. The example examined here clearly shows the tension and indeed the dilemma faced by host-country governments. It also makes it clear that we cannot simply distinguish between the host-country perspective and that of its international partners. While assertion of sovereignty is a generally-assumed preference of governments, and is confirmed in the present case through the re-imposition of border controls between Turkey and Syria after 2016 as well as controls over the internal movement of migrants within Turkey, we have seen that this represented the clear preference of the European Union, as well as of the Turkish government, and indeed was an integral part of the EU’s strategy of external governance of migration. With respect to social support of forced migrants, we see a non-linear evolution both of Turkish and of international response; with the initial assertion of Turkish sovereignty to the exclusion of international actors followed by closer collaboration with European and international agencies. More recent developments, however, suggest that the preferred international strategy of structuring humanitarian assistance around local actors and organizations, for all its merits, may not be sustainable for host-country governments in the face of eroding domestic political credibility and declining resources. In this latter context, a logic of domestic blame avoidance becomes an important element of host-country decision-making.

Tracing the impact of the FRiT, accordingly, suggests that movements towards and away from transnational management of migration are not uni-directional. With respect to migration control, most obviously, we see that the engagement with the EU and the

advent of the FRiT directly contributed to the end of Turkey's open-border policy with respect to Syria. We cannot conclude, however, that this is simply as a re-nationalization of border control. Rather, as we have detailed in this article, the Turkish decision was an integral part of its accord with the European Union. In the terms we have proposed, this cannot be seen as a shift toward transnational control, since the Turkish state retains full control over this policy. Control over its borders has not been delegated to a non-Turkish entity.

Analysis of programs contributing to meeting migrants' basic needs also require a nuanced characterization. We have shown in this article that FRiT facilitated the increase of state control by shrinking the service provision space for transnational actors, such as humanitarian NGOs. The role of state institutions increased by giving additional responsibility to already existing institutions such as the SASF.

Taken in isolation this episode would support the proposition that translational policymaking is a temporary episode rather than an inevitable longer-term trend; state authority was restored and extended through classic instruments of public authority: border control, and instruments of social support. External resources, namely EU funding of the ESSN, ultimately empowered renewed national control over all activities in its territory including those carried out by transnational actors.

At the same time, however, subsequent developments make it clear that the Turkish state ascribes considerable importance to the visible attributes of transnationalism. Recent evolution of income support programs such as C-ESSN, show that the reassertion of state influence does not replace transnational action. To the contrary, agencies of the Turkish government have made it clear that they want transnational elements of policy to persist, and to be visible. The successors of the original ESSN, while they are increasingly funded through direct grants to the Turkish state, continue to be managed separately from national social assistance programs aimed at Turkish citizens: the TRC rather than the state remains the visible street-level agency; the instrument used is a distinct payment card, not the same as issued to Turkish citizens receiving social assistance. Most obviously, perhaps the label ESSN, with its emphasis on "Emergency" (*i.e.*, temporary) assistance is retained for these new programs.

As we discussed in this article's final section, several reasons can be put forward to explain the seeming contradiction of a government that seeks to increase control while keeping up the appearance of a temporary transnational program. Most obviously, they wish to ensure that burden sharing between Turkey and the EU does not end. At a domestic political level, ongoing and visible involvement of international and transnational actors – the European Union and the IFRC – contributes to a strategy of blame avoidance by underscoring the distinct status of Syrians and thus, it is hoped, helping to deflect domestic opposition to their continued presence and support.

Bringing these two aspects of policy, border control and economic support, together, we see a pattern of strategic action by a government engaging on the one hand with international and transnational partners and on the other with domestic public opinion. Visible elements of sovereignty are put forward in some cases such as control of borders and of the internal movement of migrants, while the visible symbols of transnational influence, such as the public role of first the WFP and now the IFRC are emphasized in

others. In both cases, we see a government seeking to maximize at once external material support and internal political legitimacy.

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