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THE SELF-SETTLEMENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TÜRKIYE: DYNAMICS, CHALLENGES, AND REFUGEE AGENCY

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Abstract

Türkiye hosts the largest population of Syrian refugees globally, with more than 95% residing in urban areas, showcasing the phenomenon of self-settlement. This article examines the dynamics and challenges of Syrians' self-settlement in Türkiye across three periods: 2011-2015, 2016-2019, and 2019 onwards. It identifies key actors, analyzes settlement/housing policies, and evaluates governance structures using secondary analysis of academic research, government policies, legal documents, NGO reports, and media coverage. The findings reveal that despite a centralized migration management approach, Syrians' settlement in Turkish cities heavily relies on their self-reliance primarily due to the absence of comprehensive housing/settlement policies and limited intervention of local authorities and civil society organizations. While self-reliance facilitates social participation, against the backdrop of the lack of proper support mechanisms, it also perpetuates Syrians' disadvantaged positions, leading to an insecure struggle for survival. This study outlines two sets of main challenges of Syrians' self-settling in Türkiye along with policy/legal recommendations. The first set encompasses socioeconomic, ethnic, and legal (status) aspects, discrimination and informal settlements, while the second addresses the administrative dimension, assessing the roles of local governments, civil society, and non-state actors.

Keywords

Self-settlement, refugees, housing, self-reliance, Syrians, Türkiye

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Introduction

As of June 2023, an estimated 110 million individuals had been forcibly displaced, with the Syrian civil war playing a crucial role.¹ Since 2010, 13 million Syrians have experienced displacement; of this total, nearly six million individuals have undergone internal displacement within Syria, while the remaining have sought refuge in other countries.² As of February 2024, Türkiye is the leading global host of the largest refugee population, accommodating 3,159,174 registered Syrians.³ In the context of Syrian forced migration, Türkiye is notably featured in policy/political debates and research on three durable solutions (outlined by UNHCR) in response to displacement, namely third-country resettlement, voluntary return/repatriation, and local integration.⁴ Third-country resettlement pertains to the process of refugees being resettled in countries other than their country of origin or initial host country, while return signifies refugees voluntarily agreeing to return to their home country when conditions allow.⁵ Local integration involves refugees becoming economically, socially, and politically incorporated into the host country when returning home is not feasible or advisable.⁶

Resettlement and return studies primarily concern the macro-scale governance of migration, international relations, and politics under the shadow of methodological nationalist approaches that examine migration movements, their consequences, and governance at the nation-state level.⁷ Integration studies offer insights into local consequences of forced migration and the engagement of refugees in social, economic, and cultural aspects of everyday life, but they often fail to acknowledge the initial experiences of refugees such as first encounters and initial sheltering.⁸ Consequently, resettlement, return, and integration processes provide limited information regarding refugees' initial settlement in their host country/city. To respond to this gap, research focusing on refugee settlement is crucially needed whereby settlement refers to the initial establishment of a new residence for refugees, typically in protection centers or in (temporary) settlements in urban/rural areas and meeting immediate humanitarian needs through the provision of basic necessities and support.

In response to Syrians' incoming, Türkiye has established camps, predominantly in border cities, but has not pursued an obligatory encampment policy and/or pilot city application entailing the placement of refugees in specific cities/settlements. Türkiye has granted temporary protection (TP) status to Syrians, allowing them to disperse to

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cities, under the condition of registering and not leaving without permission. This approach is rooted in the perception that Syrians are guests in need of humanitarian assistance, and they are expected to return when conditions normalize. More than 95% of Syrian refugees in Türkiye reside in non-camp settings, allowing us to witness a less common process in other country contexts: the self-settling of refugees in urban areas. Self-settling refers to the ability of refugees to act as independent agents, with their individual agency power influencing decisions related to their journeys and settlements.⁹ However, self-settlement is not solely driven by refugees'/migrants' own choices as it can also occur due to lack of other choices, absence of guiding policies, or as a survival strategy. Thus, it encompasses far more than just finding accommodation and selecting a location; it is a key indicator of their overall integration and engagement in society. While numerous studies in Türkiye explore how Syrians integrate into urban areas in terms of education, employment, and their social inclusion,¹⁰ there is a limited focus on the self-settlement process.

Therefore, this study aims to elucidate the dynamics and challenges of the Syrians' self-settling in Türkiye within the existent legal and policy framework. It also seeks to discuss the role of key (non)state actors and scrutinize the policies framing the housing and settlement process. This study complements fieldwork-based literature on refugees' self-settlement experiences in Türkiye by focusing on its legal and political dimensions.¹¹ The discussion relies on secondary analysis, utilizing a desk study to review a range of research materials produced particularly since 2011, including academic research, government policies and programs, laws and regulations, situation reports by civil society organizations (CSOs), bilateral agreements, statistical reports, and media coverage. Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze the data. The article starts with an extensive literature review on refugees' self-settling and particularly focuses on Syrians' experiences in Lebanon, Jordan, Germany, and Sweden, representing different country responses to Syrian incoming. Then, it examines Syrians' settlement/housing in Türkiye across three periods, discussing dynamics, policies, and actors involved. Following this, it addresses the challenges in Syrians' self-settling process, drawing from academic literature, country practices, and internal dynamics, and concludes with policy recommendations.

On Settlement: Extent, Policies, and Refugee Agency

The concept of settlement, although occasionally used interchangeably with resettlement and integration, distinguishes itself in terms of temporality and spatiality. First, resettlement involves the permanent relocation of refugees to

a new country where they attain legal residency and receive sustained support for long-term integration.¹² Resettlement is mostly limited to a small number of refugees annually, less than 1% globally, prioritizing the most vulnerable cases with specific risks or needs.¹³ Second, integration refers to “the process of settlement, interaction with the host society, and social change that follows immigration,”¹⁴ entailing access to resources and social citizenship. Contrary to these two concepts, settlement encompasses fulfilling the basic needs of refugees and enabling temporary or permanent accommodation, regardless of legal status or conceived level of vulnerability. Settlement is also about the provision of the space in which protection is offered while access to basic services and resources is ensured. In this context, settlement is not only the initial phase but also a prerequisite for integration.

Different approaches are observed in various country practices regarding the settlement of refugees. These approaches vary based on the international protection context, volume and scale of mobility, identified needs, and asylum policies of the countries. As Bakewell underlines, especially during mass refugee movements, determining where protection should be available is crucial for three main reasons.¹⁵ First, integrating a high number of refugees into the host country’s society often poses social challenges with potential resentment from the local population. Second, providing immediate basic needs, like food, water, shelter, and medical assistance becomes challenging, and locating refugees in known and accessible locations facilitates aid distribution. Lastly, states are primarily concerned about security, as refugees near the border may attract hostile attention and pose potential threats to the local population, especially during conflicts. Consequently, when confronted with large waves of refugees, the prevailing reaction by states has been the establishment of camps. Refugee camps are the specialized protection zones established to meet the basic and urgent needs of displaced individuals collectively.¹⁶ In accordance, encampment is a policy requiring refugees to stay in a designated area exclusively allocated for their use, unless they have obtained specific permission to live elsewhere. Camp regulations often face criticism for creating spatial barriers and hindering integration by treating displaced individuals as temporary guests with limited mobility.¹⁷

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Dispersal policy is another prevalent approach in the settlement of refugees. States often enforce or encourage refugees to settle in predetermined areas. Dispersal policies are employed to prevent the concentration of refugees in cities, reduce spatial segregation, provide suitable housing, and distribute costs nationwide to minimize potential social discomforts.¹⁸ Some OECD countries, such as Denmark, Finland, Portugal, and Sweden, develop dispersal policies linked to employment, while others like Austria consider municipality size, immigrant ratio, and individuals' familial and health status. Dispersal applications are typically no-choice, requiring asylum seekers/refugees to remain in selected localities unless permitted otherwise.

Social housing is another settlement policy applied by countries to offer affordable accommodation to asylum seekers. For example, in the UK, social buildings are allocated to asylum seekers until their application processes are completed.¹⁹ In the Netherlands, while policies exist to aid refugees with housing, residency in public/social housing is not obligatory.²⁰ Canada's Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) provides social housing for government-assisted refugees (GARs) during the arrival year.²¹ Another approach to settlement is the implementation of local settlement policies. Here, urban or rural areas are identified, and refugees are encouraged to settle there. The objective is to engage refugees in income-generating activities (e.g., agriculture) and facilitate their integration into social interactions, ultimately aiming for their self-reliance. For example, in Uganda, each refugee household residing in the preselected settlement receives initial food rations and a plot of land for subsistence agriculture under the Self Reliance Strategy.²²

Besides state-led applications, there are other possibilities wherein refugees decide where they reside and self-settle. The concept of self-settling is linked to the idea of self-reliance, as refugees opting for self-settlement in urban areas often seek independence and agency outside of governmental and international humanitarian frameworks.²³ Studies on the reasons behind refugees' self-settlement encompass a range of motivations. Early studies highlighted the importance of seeking education and employment in cities, while recent research emphasizes the value of livelihood opportunities in urban areas.²⁴ In this context, prominent factors include but are not limited to the housing market conditions, social aid mechanisms, health, education and infrastructure services, labor market conditions, and the presence of family/relatives and co-ethnics.²⁵ However, asserting that the self-settling process occurs at the

refugees' initiative is a misleading. On one hand, governments often intervene to facilitate, promote, and regulate the self-settlement of refugees through implementing livelihood programs, addressing structural impediments in attaining self-reliance, and providing land use rights. On the other hand, refugees' self-settlement involves an interplay of opportunities and constraints for livelihoods, and the engagement of various actors, including CSOs, local population, municipal decision-makers, and other local actors. Self-settlement is also shaped by the availability of resources and refugees' capacity to navigate legal and social obstacles.

The Self-Settlement of Syrians in Diverse Country Contexts: A Brief Overview

Türkiye is hosting around 3.2 million Syrians and is followed by Lebanon (784,884), Jordan (639,552), Iraq (273,258), and Egypt (155,825).²⁶ These countries host Syrians under temporary protection. However, the number of Syrians seeking asylum or granted refugee status in European countries should also not be underestimated. Germany hosts 522,575 Syrians, Sweden 111,199 Syrians, Austria 73,923 Syrians, and the Netherlands 45,141 Syrians. The varying legal statuses granted to them in different countries have led to significant disparities in the rights and processes concerning their initial reception, accommodation, settlement, and integration. Therefore, this phase of the study will concentrate on the settlement processes of Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan where they are granted temporary protection status, and in Germany and Sweden where Syrians are recognized as refugees. However, it is important to note that the selected countries exhibit significant differences in their migration histories, legal frameworks and policies on migration, arrival infrastructures, and most importantly, in terms of their geographical positions and the speed, volume, and profile of incoming Syrians. Therefore, this section aims to establish a foundation for a comprehensive discussion of Syrians' self-settlement process in the Turkish context, rather than providing a comparative analysis.

Lebanon is the second country hosting the highest number of displaced Syrians under TP. Not being a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, Lebanon has not formally recognized Syrians as refugees. Lebanon initially viewed the Syrians' situation as temporary and implemented an open door policy. In 2014, Lebanon initiated a policy to decrease the number of Syrians by restricting access to the country and encouraging return. Concerning Syrians' settlement, Lebanon has not introduced any encampment policy for Syrian refugees,

reflecting a predominantly non-encampment approach. This approach is thought to be influenced by the long-standing presence of Palestinian refugee camps in the country for more than 60 years.²⁷ Consequently, Syrians have attempted to address their housing needs independently. According to Fawaz, Syrians initially sought shelter in informal settlements and existing Palestinian refugee camps; however, they predominantly secured housing through rental arrangements.²⁸ Due to an uneven influx, rental prices have spiked in cities where Syrians settled the most like Beirut, leading to the emergence of housing profiteers and informal housing. Some realtors, driven by the potential for high profits, aggressively pursued strategies like apartment re-subdivision and encouraging Lebanese landlords to vacate. This attracted external investors who converted entire buildings into profitable rental housing.

Jordan hosts around 640,000 Syrians, and similar to Lebanon, does not officially recognize Syrians as refugees. Jordan initially maintained an open door policy, however, due to increasing numbers of newcomers and security concerns related to DAESH, it securitized the borders with stringent visa requirements and surveillance measures.²⁹ In this context, entry for Syrians was restricted, allowing access only in extreme humanitarian cases. Jordan initially embraced a non-encampment policy, rejecting the establishment of camps. Later, the country reversed its stance and set up six camps, accommodating nearly one-fifth of Syrians. Nevertheless, approximately 20% of Syrians resided in camps when first established, and in time, the majority has dispersed across urban areas.³⁰

In Germany, Syrians are granted refugee status, providing access to social security, education, and work permits. Syrians typically stay in reception centers for an average of three months.³¹ Afterwards, individuals are relocated to one of Germany's 16 federal states based on tax revenues, quota applications, and population sizes. The responsibility for the distribution and financing of Syrians' accommodation lies with the federal states, with local actors handling most aspects of implementation, reception, accommodation, and integration. Upon arrival in federal states, asylum seekers are distributed to various communities, cities, and towns, primarily residing in the collective housing facilities provided.³² Such accommodation serves as temporary shelters until individuals attain refugee status or find permanent housing. Some states impose restrictions, preventing refugees from leaving the assigned accommodation or communities for three years, unless they can demonstrate educational or job

opportunities in other states. Under this system, refugees lack the autonomy to select their settlement locations or move independently between municipalities. Upon obtaining refugee status, individuals are entitled to receive public grants and rent allowances.³³

In Sweden, Syrians are also recognized as refugees. Until 2015, Sweden granted asylum to 49% of overall applicants, with an impressive 89% acceptance rate for Syrians who receive permanent residence status.³⁴ In 2015, Sweden adjusted its policy due to a spike in asylum seekers and enacted a law mandating that applicants after November 2015 would only get temporary residency, conforming to EU minimum standards to prompt asylum seekers to seek refuge elsewhere. The Migration Agency handles the asylum process, arranging travel and accommodation for resettled refugees and processing asylum applications. CSOs also play a crucial role, providing support at arrival points and aiding in the integration process. Municipalities and city councils are vital actors as they cover most of refugee intake costs, and provide housing for unaccompanied minors.³⁵ Additionally, they bear responsibility for offering varying levels of health and social services, and education to resettled individuals. While awaiting application processing, asylum seekers in Sweden can choose between government-provided housing or finding their own accommodation. Due to financial constraints, many Syrian refugees opt for government housing, typically situated outside major cities. Resettled refugees lack housing location choice, often residing in areas with limited employment prospects. After obtaining a residency permit, asylum seekers can either settle independently or be assigned to a municipality with available housing. Municipalities receive government financial aid for refugee integration and accommodation expenses.

The Self-Settlement of Syrians in Türkiye

The self-settlement process of Syrians in Türkiye will be examined in three periods concerning initial reception and accommodation, settling in camps (i.e., temporary protection centers) and/or cities, and the actors involved, along with the tools and channels used. This analysis will be conducted in the context of Türkiye's migration management policies and their relation to political, social, and economic changes since 2011. These three periods are:

1. 2011-2015: Syrians' encampment and unforced dispersal to cities. The period was marked by an open door policy and immediate solutions for accommodation.

2. 2016-2019: Syrians as urban refugees and actors in the rental housing market. The period was marked by strict border policies and securitization attempts, and increased Syrian presence in cities.
3. 2019-ongoing: Syrians as long-term residents. The period is marked by growing anti-refugee rhetoric, and restrictions on Syrians' mobility and settlement.

Period 1: 2011-2015

Türkiye welcomed Syrians as guests with a humanitarian response, initially implementing open border and non-refoulement policies, and granting them TP. Türkiye did not recognize Syrians as refugees due to the geographical limitations put on the Geneva Convention in 1951 which exempts the country from providing refugee status to individuals from non-European countries. Thus, Syrians cannot benefit from conditional refugee status and/or apply for international protection from other countries. TP status ensures Syrians' legal stay, access to basic services, and protection from refoulement, and is not equivalent to a residence permit. There is no time limit for the continuation of TP.

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Triggered by the mass migration of Syrians, Türkiye revised its legal framework for migration and asylum in 2013 and introduced the “Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP).” This law, maintaining the geographical limitations introduced above, became a key document for refugees, conditional refugees, and temporary protection. The law led to the establishment of the Presidency of

Migration Management (PMM), formerly known as the Directorate General for Migration Management, as the primary institution responsible for migration management. Following the law, the Temporary Protection Regulation (TPR) entered into force and introduced how individuals under TP would access services like healthcare, education, the labor market, and social assistance. Concerning settlement and housing, the LFIP does not commit to providing shelter for those under protection. Article 95(1) specifies that “applicants and international protection beneficiaries are responsible for arranging their

own accommodation.” However, the law empowers the PMM to establish “Reception and Accommodation Centers” to address the needs of applicants and international beneficiaries, including accommodation, food, healthcare, and social support, with priority given to those with special needs. The camps constructed near the Türkiye-Syria border played a crucial role in providing accommodation for Syrians. Initially, 23 camps with varying capacities were nearly fully occupied until 2015.³⁶ The camps, well-maintained in infrastructure and essential services, provided amenities such as kindergartens, primary to high school education, vocational training courses, Turkish language classes, internet rooms, grocery stores, markets, health centers, and post offices.

Other than camps, Türkiye did not formulate an intrusive policy concerning the accommodation and settlement of Syrians with the exception of the Dilution Policy in 2022. No specific tools, such as credit and rent support, tax reductions, were utilized for Syrians in Türkiye. However, Syrians received financial aid through the Emergency Social Safety Net Program (ESSN) and the Conditional Educational Assistance to Foreigners (CCET) for education and health services. Residence in camps was not obligatory, and Syrians were granted the right to settle in cities as long as they registered, resided, and refrained from unauthorized relocation. Under the circumstances, more than 95% of Syrians in Türkiye opted for self-settlement, primarily in urban areas either through the rental housing market or informal arrangements such as unofficial subletting, staying with relatives, and makeshift housing. Syrians predominantly settled in border towns (Kilis, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa) and major metropolises (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir).

Period 2: 2016-2019

In 2015, the surge in crossings reignited intensive migration diplomacy between the EU and Türkiye, and led to the formulation of the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan in November 2015 and the EU-Türkiye statement of March 2016. Initially, both sides agreed that individuals arriving illegally in Greece would be returned to Türkiye. Furthermore, for each Syrian returned to Türkiye, an EU member state pledged to resettle one Syrian refugee from Türkiye. The EU agreed to provide financial aid to improve refugee living conditions in Türkiye and to resume Türkiye’s membership negotiations.

In internal politics, the focus on addressing mass migration shifted from humanitarianism to securitization, in line with domestic and foreign policy priorities. The open door policy gradually become more hesitant, although no official declaration of a closed door policy was made. From 2016 onwards, Syrians’

entrance to Türkiye without passports was restricted, except for those requiring urgent medical attention. Certain border entry points were also temporarily closed for security reasons and as of 8 January 2016, Türkiye ceased allowing visa-free entry for Syrians.³⁷ This policy shift possibly mirrored changes in Türkiye's public opinion against refugees (i.e., anti-refugee stances), economic challenges, and a tense election period. Additionally, following a failed coup attempt in July 2016, Türkiye reshaped its securitization policies and intensified its operations against terrorist organizations. In January 2016, construction of a concrete wall began on the Syrian border in Hatay's Yayladağı district. Moreover, since 2017, the Turkish government has established safe zones within Syria's borders as a result of military intervention, notably Operation Euphrates Shield launched in August 2016. These zones serve three main purposes: sheltering civilians from regime attacks during escalations, reducing migratory pressure on Türkiye's border, and facilitating the voluntary return of Syrian nationals.³⁸

In terms of settlement and accommodation, this period is characterized by a gradual decrease in camp settlements and an increase in urban concentration. The decline in camp occupancy is attributed to the voluntary nature of staying in camps and strict rules regulating camp life and entry-exit, as well as the

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Syrians' preference for living outside camps mainly to generate income.³⁹

Due to their prolonged stay in Türkiye, Syrians largely moved from camps and border cities to industrialized and/or metropolitan areas to access developed services and the job market. Under these circumstances, the fundamental question became: how and under what conditions did Syrians settle in cities?

Syrians freely entered the rental housing market, but they were not allowed to buy land or real estate.⁴⁰ Thus, their housing was heavily reliant on the functionality of the rental housing market. However, this does not imply easy and sustainable access to housing mostly because rental prices surged significantly in border towns and metropolitan areas, with large refugee populations.⁴¹ Syrians with limited financial means or with no means at all were engaged in a struggle for survival, residing in crowded conditions in small apartments, storage areas, parks, ruins, damaged dwellings, and makeshift and unauthorized temporary arrangements. Various research in Türkiye has demonstrated that Syrians largely resided in impoverished, low-quality, and affordable areas in cities, primarily in dilapidated homes on city outskirts and inner-city deprived areas.⁴²

Period 3: 2019-ongoing

The prolonged stay of Syrians in Türkiye, combined with policy shortcomings concerning settlement, housing, and formal employment, heightened competition between locals and Syrians for scarce urban resources. Language barriers and perceived cultural dissimilarities paved the way towards an increase in anti-Syrian sentiments, characterized by exclusionary rhetoric prevalent in political party declarations and media. This period has been dominated by restrictive border and mobility policies, and discourses centered around repatriation. For example, in 2019, the Governorship of Istanbul announced that Syrians in Istanbul who initially registered in other cities upon their arrival would be returned to their original registration cities.⁴³

During this period, difficulties in accessing rental housing persisted and intensified such as speculative rent increases and the reluctance of landlords and realtors to rent to Syrians. Informal settlements and alternative forms of housing became more prevalent, including accommodation in dilapidated houses, abandoned buildings, converted sheds, newly constructed backyard rooms, car garages, and storage areas for coal and wood.⁴⁴ Additionally, Kahraman emphasized that Syrians predominantly reside in informal settlements and areas undergoing urban redevelopment, often through basic renovations of demolished or vacated dwellings.⁴⁵ Te Lintelo et al. highlighted that with the incoming and prolonged stay of Syrians in Turkish cities, a new bottom-tier rental housing segment is emerging, showing limited overlap with the historical *gecekondu* (slum-type settlements) experience in terms of formation and development.⁴⁶ They also noted that Syrians are often compelled to choose the cheapest options available, characterized by insecure verbal lease agreements and substandard living conditions.

Since 2019, new policy schemes on controlling Syrians' settlements in cities have emerged as a result of the increasing concentration of Syrians in cities; their involvement in urban life, and the job and housing markets; increasing urban informalities; growing unrest in society towards the foreign population; and the current culmination of policies aimed at restricting the residential mobility of Syrians. The most prominent example of this is the Dilution Policy introduced in February

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2022. Within the scope of the *Fight Against Spatial Concentration Plan* by the Ministry of Interior to increase social cohesion and prevent segregation of specific groups (including Syrians), a dilution policy was initiated in certain neighborhoods or districts in 16 provinces, stating that the foreign population should not exceed 25% of the neighborhood population. To achieve this goal, selected areas of residence are closed to foreign registrations, with refugees being voluntarily relocated to different districts. Ankara, Antalya, Aydın, Bursa, Çanakkale, Düzce, Edirne, Hatay, Istanbul, Izmir, Kırklareli, Kocaeli, Muğla, Sakarya, Tekirdağ, and Yalova provinces, along with 800 neighborhoods in 52 provinces, have closed registrations for Syrians.⁴⁷

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In this framework, the main challenges of Syrians' self-settling process will be further discussed under two headings with relevant policy recommendations. The first focuses on the socioeconomic, ethnic, and legal dimensions of self-settling, discrimination, and informal settlements. The second discusses the administrative dimension of the process, evaluating the involvement of local governments, civil society, and non-state actors.

Economic and legal status-based challenges of self-settlement

Due to the state of war, the migration of Syrians to Türkiye has occurred without institutional and/or financial readiness, resulting in a significant portion of them being economically disadvantaged. Consequently, many have been stuck in unhealthy, insecure, and often informal settlements concentrated on outskirts or in cities. Difficulties in accessing the formal job market (mostly based on paperwork), the inadequacy of EU-based social assistance mechanisms, and the anti-refugee rhetoric have further exacerbated this disadvantaged situation. Moreover, TP status in Türkiye grants Syrians temporary rights and limits their long-term settlement options. Syrians' prolonged displacement under TP largely reproduces precariousness, unpredictability, and disadvantage in daily life. Challenges include barriers to self-reliance, bureaucratic obstacles in accessing housing and employment, and discrimination, all leading to the social marginalization of Syrians as individuals reliant on aid mechanisms. Due to the precarious legal status and deepening economic disadvantage, many Syrians live in makeshift accommodation like tents, abandoned buildings, or garages, sacrificing safety and comfort. At the same time, these dwellings often do not meet legal standards, making it impossible to obtain the proof of residence required for registration with local migration authorities. Another challenge is

the growing hostility towards Syrians in Turkish society. As Kibreab points out the self-settlement of refugees might disturb host communities because refugees (in)directly compete with locals for jobs, limited affordable housing, and public services.⁴⁸ While reports on the impact of Syrians on the welfare of Turkish society show no negative national impact and no discernible effects on the formal economy,⁴⁹ the perceived issues including the increases in rental costs and living expenses, alongside decreases in wages and illegal hiring of Syrians by small businesses have negatively influenced the perception of Syrians by natives.

What can be done against all these challenges? Currently, the legal framework focuses on TP for Syrians, without offering long-term residency or citizenship rights. The question of how long Syrians will remain under TP is uncertain. To enable self-settled Syrians to integrate into Turkish society, transitioning from being mere guests to active contributors in economic, social, and cultural aspects of life is essential. Thus, it is crucial to establish clear timeframes and facilitate their transition to permanent statuses. This necessitates legal measures, including lifting geographical restrictions preventing Türkiye from granting refugee status to non-Europeans. In the self-settling process of Syrians, supportive programs and policies are vital to enhance their self-reliance beyond being seen as guests, ensuring access to economic freedom, the labor market, and education, alongside basic rights. This requires comprehensive governance where state and non-state actors work effectively to determine the steps and boundaries for the self-settling process. To lower social unrest, a humanitarian discourse is required which recognizes Syrians as individuals entitled to equal status with the native population in terms of human rights. Statements implying that Syrians are merely guests can indirectly contribute to negative perceptions among the local population.

To enable self-settled Syrians to integrate into Turkish society, transitioning from being mere guests to active contributors in economic, social, and cultural aspects of life is essential. Thus, it is crucial to establish clear timeframes and facilitate their transition to permanent statuses.

There is also a growing need for an urban perspective in managing the settlement process. As also underlined by Fawaz, refugees increasingly seek shelter and

livelihoods in urban areas due to protracted displacements.⁵⁰ Thus, the refugee crisis and/or humanitarian crisis becomes more of an urban crisis, aligning with contemporary debates on urbanization. Temporary shelters in camps cannot provide a permanent solution for the housing needs of three million Syrians, as maintaining high standards in these centers is costly and not sustainable. Moreover, many studies indicate that Syrians primarily access housing through renting. This necessitates examining housing production and acquisition processes beyond the market lens and investigating the nature of the housing market segment that addresses the needs of Syrian refugees, especially the most vulnerable. This includes exploring how rental contracts are structured, accessing housing without registration, controlling speculative rent increases, and preventing inhumane living conditions. Examining Syrians' housing access and settlement patterns reveals the reliance on informal housing in cities to accommodate large numbers of refugees. In urban areas where there is no comprehensive settlement plan or regulations supporting self-reliance in the housing market, urban informalities offer a partial solution to the accommodation issue. This situation exposes the city's infrastructure, residents, and refugees to a high level of vulnerability that needs to be reduced. To reduce (additional) vulnerabilities, it is crucial to understand the gaps addressed by existing informal housing channels and to leverage their strengths, such as social networks that are instrumental in facilitating housing exchanges in efficient ways. However, of utmost importance is the development of a comprehensive settlement plan or housing action plan crafted through negotiations among stakeholders at various levels to regulate newcomers' self-settlement from their first day onwards.

Administrative and governance challenges of self-settlement

Türkiye's migration management has a highly central character under the leadership of the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM). The PMM is the sole institution managing all migration and asylum-related processes. The PMM's activities, supported by relevant ministries and state actors, manage migration on a macro scale. At the city level, the PMM extends its reach through provincial directorates and governorships. The role of international and local NGOs and municipalities remains primarily limited to integration-focused activities, like social support, language courses, and vocational training, with minimal involvement in key urban outcomes of migration like housing and settlement.

When examining this phenomenon within the context of other nations, Türkiye appears to distinguish from them. In Germany and Sweden, migration

management is predominantly state-controlled, irrespective of newcomers' legal status. However, the responsibility for managing the urban outcomes of migration, including initial reception, settlement, and housing, is clearly divided among regional and local governments and NGOs. Following Türkiye, Jordan and Lebanon host the largest numbers of Syrian refugees, with a more ambiguous approach to managing their settlement process. In these countries, there is also a macro-level management approach led by the state, including deterrent measures such as voluntary return of Syrians and making it more difficult to extend residency permits. Yet, observing a clear policy framework on these matters is challenging. Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan are struggling to self-settle in urban areas under precarious conditions. As observed in Fawaz's research, non-state actors such as realtors and building managers prominently engage in Syrian refugees' access to housing, rental arrangements, and settlement processes. While these actors might be filling policy gaps in addressing critical needs, their unregulated activities extend beyond market dynamics often further disadvantaging Syrians and placing them in even more precarious situations.

In this context, it is possible to discuss three key administrative and governance challenges regarding the self-settlement process of Syrians in Türkiye: (i) the limited role of municipalities; (ii) the limited role of CSOs; and (iii) the involvement of diverse non-state actors.

- (i) Türkiye has initiated national efforts to manage Syrians' incoming through specialized institutions and camps, yet local governments face challenges in adapting policies for urban refugees without a clear national strategy. Local governments are only referenced as collaborative partners of the PMM in managing Syrians' settlement and integration processes in Articles 96 and 104 of Law No. 6458. They are not entitled to address Syrians' housing needs in terms of provision, financial support, or guidance. Nevertheless, some municipalities extend services to Syrians by leveraging Articles 13 and 38 of the Municipality Law, which afford individuals access to city services based on local residency. According to Sunata, municipalities fall into three categories concerning their services for Syrians under TP:⁵¹ (i) municipalities establishing dedicated integration units; (ii) municipalities providing urban amenities and integration-oriented services; and (iii) municipalities contemplating tax measures for the urban Syrian populace receiving public

services. However, services vary between districts in terms of extent, delivery mode, and funding, reflecting diverse interpretations of Syrians' needs. Central budget support to municipalities is based on citizen counts (along economic indicators, infrastructure needs, etc.) and mostly excludes Syrians. Population projections employed by municipalities to forecast future trends and develop facilities and urban services also exclude Syrians. Some municipalities explicitly avoid supporting refugees due to fears of attracting more refugees or losing local elections amidst rising anti-Syrian sentiments. Consequently, Syrians are primarily subjected to discrimination and (intentionally) excluded from municipal services, omitted from housing needs assessments, and unable to receive support during the housing access process.

- (ii) Numerous CSOs have commenced operations in settlements characterized by a high concentration of Syrians. They engage in activities such as providing technical support for registration, monitoring repatriation and resettlement processes, and facilitating access to education. However, political apprehensions, such as concerns over conspiracies and transparency, prompted governmental authorities to impose regulatory restrictions especially on international CSOs. Consequently, certain CSOs were compelled to adhere to financial obligations, employ local personnel, and operate under surveillance.⁵² Various Turkish associations, cooperatives, and foundations provide support for Syrians, albeit typically on a small scale. While they offer services such as advocacy, psychological support, and education, they notably do not provide rent support, housing assistance, or settlement services. CSOs supporting Syrians often regard them as passive recipients of charity rather than active participants, leading to a problematic cycle of dependence.⁵³
- (iii) Similar to observations in Lebanon and Jordan, the policy nonaction of Turkish authorities on Syrians' settlement and housing access, coupled with the limited roles of municipalities and CSOs in managing urban migration consequences, has inevitably prompted the involvement of local non-state actors – realtors, families, friends, acquaintances, co-ethnics and pioneer migrants, ethnic and class-based networks, landlords, *mukhtars* (non-partisan elected administrators at neighborhood level), labor brokers

(known as *çavuş* in Turkish), tradespeople, and local political party representatives – who take active roles in shaping Syrians’ location choices and housing access. As indicated in various research,⁵⁴ this situation reveals that many actors without a direct role in migration governance often engage in activities lacking long-term strategies or plans, and devoid of collaboration, based on their (arbitrary) decisions; (conflicting) individual/collective interests (e.g., making profits, gaining symbolic power over other ethnic/social groups); and unequal social, economic, and political power and resources/capital. For example, realtors, collaborating with landlords, may set higher rental prices targeting refugees and employ ethnic discrimination in the housing market.⁵⁵ *Mukhtars* often offer services such as finding accommodation, providing furniture, accompanying individuals to hospitals, and assisting in job placement for some Syrians.⁵⁶ While these actors may partially address needs and mitigate policy gaps, it is crucial to acknowledge that such arbitrary practices often hinder Syrians’ access to healthy housing, integration, and social inclusion, serving the interests of certain non-state actors.

The policy and legal recommendations provided below may contribute to addressing the administrative challenges. First, there is a need for the implementation of a multi-scale and multi-actor migration governance in Türkiye. Here, migration ought to be perceived as a process that yields outcomes not solely regulated by national-level policies but also at regional/urban and even neighborhood levels. Simultaneously, as seen in many Turkish cities hosting Syrians, numerous non-state local actors play a role in Syrians’ housing access and location choice. In this context, transitioning to a robust governance model that involves central and local authorities, civil society, and non-state actors seems crucial. Looking specifically at the self-settling process, the implementation of this governance model requires increasing the authority, resources, and responsibilities of municipalities and civil society, as well as ensuring coordination to facilitate collaboration with the PMM. Second, municipalities need to be redefined as active stakeholders, beyond merely being potential auxiliary actors in migration management, in order to play a decisive role in Syrian settlement, access to housing and urban services, and integration. Syrians should be recognized as “urban citizens” rather than guests and be included in urban planning processes by incorporating them into municipal zoning plans and population projections that form the basis for the allocation of services and resources among social groups. Considering

the massive incoming of Syrians to specific settlements, there is a necessity to recognize the burdens placed on municipalities' jurisdiction and to enhance their institutional and financial capabilities to address growing needs. Third, considering CSOs' strong field-based insights, equipped human resources, and their interactions with Syrians and local population in daily life, they need to be recognized as effective actors in governing the local consequences of migration. Lastly, awareness about non-state actors is essential. These actors not only fill policy gaps, support state policies, and provide practical solutions to problems, but also reproduce exploitative and discriminatory systems, perpetuate informality, and act in their own interests. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the underlying issues beneath the informal solutions they produce within an ethical framework and comprehend what their practices actually address.

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