



# Between Borders and Policies: Türkiye's Evolving Approach to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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## Abstract

Located at the intersection of Europe and Asia, Türkiye has long been a key player in West Asian geopolitics. As conflicts raged in neighbouring countries, particularly Syria, Türkiye emerged as the world's top refugee destination, hosting around 3.6 million forcibly displaced persons. This qualitative study analyses Türkiye's evolving role in addressing the refugee crisis, exploring its policies and legal frameworks, socio-economic effects on society including the difficulties encountered by both host communities and refugees, further shedding light on the political and social implications of Ankara's policy. The paper also examines challenges faced by the Syrian refugee population and subsequently the Turkish government in managing the crisis. As regional dynamics shift, particularly in Syria after the change in leadership, Ankara's refugee policy continues to evolve, shaping and influencing its foreign and domestic policies. The research highlights the intricacies of Türkiye's refugee dilemma and the need for sustainable solutions that reconcile refugee rights with Turkish citizens' interests, prioritizing social integration, long-term stability and overseeing the safe and voluntary returns of the Syrians to their homeland.

**Keywords:** Türkiye's Refugee Policy, Syrian Refugees, Refugee Crisis, Social Integration, Türkiye

**Jel Codes:** F22, I38, O15

## Sınırlar ile Politikalar Arasında: Türkiye'nin Suriye Mülteci Krizine Değişen Yaklaşımı

### Öz

Avrupa ile Asya'nın kesişim noktasında yer alan Türkiye, uzun süredir Batı Asya jeopolitiğinde kilit bir aktör olmuştur. Özellikle Suriye başta olmak üzere, komşu ülkelerde çatışmaların şiddetlenmesiyle birlikte Türkiye, yaklaşık 3,6 milyon zorla yerinden edilmiş kişiye ev sahipliği yaparak dünyanın en büyük mülteci kabul eden ülkesi hâline gelmiştir. Bu nitel çalışmada, Türkiye'nin mülteci krizine yönelik değişen rolünü incelemekte; izlediği politikalar ve yasal çerçeveler, hem ev sahibi toplumun hem de mültecilerin karşılaştığı zorluklar dâhil olmak üzere topluma olan sosyo-ekonomik etkiler ve Ankara'nın mülteci politikasının siyasi ve toplumsal yansımaları ele alınmaktadır. Makale ayrıca, Suriyeli mültecilerin ve akabinde bu krizi yönetmeye çalışan Türk hükümetinin karşı karşıya kaldığı zorlukları da değerlendirmektedir. Bölgesel dinamiklerin, özellikle Suriye'deki liderlik değişimi sonrasında, değişmeye başlamasıyla birlikte Ankara'nın mülteci politikası da dönüşüm geçirmekte ve hem dış hem iç politikalarını şekillendirmektedir. Araştırma, Türkiye'nin mülteci sorununa ilişkin karmaşık yapıyı gözler önüne sererken; mülteci hakları ile Türk vatandaşlarının çıkarlarını uzlaştıran, toplumsal entegrasyonu önceliklendiren, uzun vadeli istikrarı hedefleyen ve Suriyelilerin güvenli ve gönüllü geri dönüşünü gözetken sürdürülebilir çözümlere olan ihtiyacı vurgulamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türkiye'nin Mülteci Politikası, Suriyeli Mülteciler, Mülteci Krizi, Toplumsal Uyum, Türkiye

**Jel Kodları:** F22, I38, O15

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## INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Türkiye has always been a popular destination for people around the world looking for a safe haven, better opportunities and a better life. Since its founding in 1923, Türkiye provided a home for a wide variety of migrant groups, such as Bosnians, Chechens, White Russians, Kosovars, and Iraqis escaping war and devastation. Even today, Türkiye is host to a large number of migrants who have been forcibly displaced as a result of conflicts and hostilities, especially Syrian, Iraqi, and Afghan refugees. Some people move to Türkiye in search of better opportunities, while others view it as just a transit point or a gateway to Europe (Kirişçi, 2023). The Republic of Türkiye has seen pre-Syrian migrant flows, but these have mostly been of Turkish ethnic and cultural nationality since the modern history of Türkiye in the 1920s. Kinship based flows dominated the asylum and migration system, which was encouraged for the process of nation-building, but this changed in the 1980s when Türkiye started to open its gates to non-Muslims or non-Turkish foreigners as a result of the globalization process, geopolitical realities, and the lucrative prospects it has to offer as a state itself, including being a gateway to Europe (İçduygu, 2015).

This paper, however, mainly focuses on the Syrian refugee<sup>1</sup> crisis that Ankara faces since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2014. A lot of the refugees live inside the official camps which were made for them initially but a large majority of refugees live outside of official camps, settling into urban areas among local residents. Ankara has made commendable efforts in addressing this crisis; however, there are many challenges and issues existing in the policy responses and their effects that require further scrutiny and deeper research, now more so, in light of the change of government and a developing situation in neighboring Syria. In order to understand Ankara's policy responses to the crisis, two central legal instruments need to be looked at that have shaped and structured Türkiye's immigration and asylum policy.

The first is the *1934 Settlement Law*, that gave priority to the people of Turkish origin, a policy that has continued in the nation's legislation even after some amendments. The Settlement Law of 1934 was passed to enable the immigration of ethnic Turks and was the main immigration law for many years. It introduced a classification policy that divided people having Turkish heritage, non-Turkish Muslims, and other immigrant communities. For

instance, immigrant Bulgarian Muslims, Turkomans, Uighurs, and Uzbeks of Turkish ethnicity are classified as "migrants" in official documents as well as in general usage. Kurds, Syrians, and other non-European Muslims without Turkish origin are referred to as "guests". Those who do not belong to either of these categories are considered "foreigners" (Kaya A et. al, 2023).

The second is the *1951 Refugee Convention* and the *1967 Additional Protocol* on the Status of Refugees. These are the foundational legal documents of international law defining who is a refugee, their rights and legal obligations of the states. The 1951 refugee convention originally applied to only refugees from events occurring in Europe before 1 January, 1951 whereas the additional protocol of 1967 removed the geographical and temporal restrictions of the 1951 Convention which means it now applied to refugees globally regardless of when and where the displacement happened (UNHCR, 2025). But Türkiye is among the few nations that have applied a geographical restriction, meaning restricting refugee rights solely to Europeans and not granting non-Europeans refugee status (Şimşek, 2020). This limitation means that only individuals fleeing events in Europe can be granted full refugee status. Non-European asylum seekers, such as those from Syria, Afghanistan, or Iraq, are typically granted temporary or conditional protection rather than full refugee status (*Temporary Protection in Law on Foreigners and International Protection, n.d.*). In addition, Turkish citizenship can be obtained by Birth, place of birth being Türkiye, and Descent or having relative connections as per the Turkish Citizenship Law. Citizenship by birth needs the consent of the relevant authority (Turkish Citizenship Law, 2009). Foreign nationals are eligible for citizenship through naturalisation procedures such as extraordinary naturalisation and marriage to a Turkish citizen (*Naturalisation - Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2024*). Syrian refugees have mainly obtained Turkish citizenship under the exceptional arrangements included within Türkiye's naturalisation law of 2009, investment or marital relations (Levkowitz J., 2025).

## POLICY RESPONSES: MANAGING A MASS INFLUX

Ankara calls the Syrian refugees 'Guests,' as done previously in other instances, for example, the Bosnians and Kosovars, who came to Türkiye in the 1990s due to war

<sup>1</sup> This paper would address the Syrian population in Türkiye, otherwise termed as 'guests' by Ankara, as Syrian refugees throughout the paper.

and persecution in their homelands. Guest hood is not an enactment in Turkish law and derives from Ankara's temporary protection policy. The imprecision of the label has assisted the Turkish government in stressing their hospitality instead. In the case of Syrian nationals, they were already permitted visa-free access in 2011 during the start of the civil war due to the bilateral agreement with Syria two years earlier on the assumption that there would be few Syrians fleeing and that a quick follow-up return was imminent, once the situation resolves or subsides in neighboring Syria, but that did not follow. In October 2011, Türkiye's Ministry of Interior declared that Syrian refugees would be granted "Temporary Protection" (TP) status, which, although initially unclear, in effect granted immediate and full protection to those fleeing Syria. In August 2012, the previous Turkish Foreign Minister declared that Türkiye will accept Syrian refugees up to a maximum of 100,000; suggesting that further admissions would be limited. The policy responses of Ankara to the crisis had been on an 'Open door' and 'Open border' policies since 2012. In addition to this, Syrians were accorded the 'right of non-refoulement,' according to the 1951 Refugee Convention which entitles them the right to not be pushed back forcefully into Syria (Batalla, 2018). Another major step was the establishment of different camps for refugees, which received plenty of international as well as domestic acclaim. A new immigration law titled the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)" was also enacted in April 2013. The LFIP sets the legal basis for Temporary Protection (TP); however, the Temporary Protection Regulation, published in October 2014, and the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, or AFAD, on healthcare and other services for Syrians, published one year prior in September 2013, specify the details of the TP status for Syrians. Turkish TP status, modeled after the European Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC), grants a variety of rights and advantages, such as compliance with the principle of non-refoulement, access to health and social welfare services, access to education opportunities, and access to the labor market and services for the special needs of individuals (Batalla, 2018). For example, Syrians have been issued work permits since 2016 with respect to a few conditions (Uysal and Kirişçi, 2019). As the crisis escalated, Ankara ended the free-visa regime along with tightening work permits regulations for the Syrians ([hurriyetdailynews.com](http://hurriyetdailynews.com), 2016). In 2016, path to citizenship was also opened for the Syrian refugees and although; as of December 2023, over 238,055 have acquired citizenship through naturalisation process under exceptional measures to gain citizenship, a large Syrian population lives under the Temporary Protection status

(*Naturalisation - Asylum Information Database | European Council on Refugees and Exiles*, 2024).

In March of 2016, the EU-Türkiye migration agreement was signed. According to the agreement, migrants attempting to enter Greece would be deported to Türkiye, and Ankara would take steps to prevent new migratory routes from opening. In exchange, the European Union agreed to resettle Syrian refugees from Türkiye on a one-to-one basis, reduce visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, pay 6 billion euros in aid to Türkiye for Syrian migrant communities, update the customs union, a wider pledge to strengthen bilateral relations, reinvigorate the accession process, and launch new negotiation chapters in the accession talks was guaranteed by the EU. For Türkiye, a state aspiring to join the EU, the deal provided not only economic assistance but also considerable leverage over the EU (Terry, 2021). While the EU-Türkiye agreement represented a collaborative effort to manage migration, its long-term efficacy and adherence to humanitarian standards remain subjects of ongoing debate. The deal allowed Ankara's increasingly isolated authoritarian leaders to become more assertive on the international stage. In addition, the accord altered the character of relations with Türkiye from a faraway candidate country to a strategic partner addressing issues of shared concerns such as migration. The agreement is viewed by the Turkish government as an instrument of power. Nevertheless, the deal has had profound political implications for the Turkish government. Sections of Turkish citizens have come to see the deal as their government's tacit acquiescence in hosting about four million Syrian refugees indefinitely, shedding Europe's load on Türkiye. This increasing anger among the citizens was evident through the 2019 local polls. The AKP government—Justice and Democratic Party—lost votes in significant cities like Istanbul and Ankara (Dagi, 2020). Policy reactions subsequent to 2019 have been observed as to be guided by this changing mood of the Turkish populace.

Actions such as enhanced border security measures and resettlement of Syrians were implemented. For instance, The Peace Spring was one such military operation undertaken in the northern parts of Syria by the Turkish army with a goal of expelling Kurdish militias from the area and creating a safe zone where the Syrian refugees could be resettled in October 2019. Thus, it was also legitimized by the need to resettle Syrian refugees to northern Syria—a factor that contributed immensely towards increased popular support for the operation in Türkiye (Kınıklıoğlu et. al, 2020). There were also reports of alleged withdrawal of Turkish citizenship and forced

repatriation of the Syrians by the government (Bozkurt A., 2024). President Erdogan also initiated direct negotiations with the recently removed President Assad, emphasizing the safe repatriation of millions of refugees but nothing definite resulted from it because both parties were determined on their terms. Damascus demanded that Turkish forces retreat from Syria and wanted a withdrawal timeline, whereas Ankara demanded that its issues regarding the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) militia (which it considers a terrorist organization) be addressed. (Spicer J., 2024).

These were some of the most significant policy measures that Ankara undertook as a response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Throughout history, it has been observed that Ankara's policy was dictated by foreign policy and ethnic politics. For example, Bosnians and Kosovars were handled much better than Chechens due to keeping good Türkiye-Russia relations. The current policies can be said to have been a mixture of both resettlement and integrationist policies.

## IMPACT ON SOCIETY

In the beginning, the Turkish citizenry welcomed Syrian refugees warmly, but with the changing geopolitical scenario and increasing burden on Ankara resulted in a changed situation and consequently different attitude. Thus, Syrian refugees' arrival has had both positive and negative impacts on the Turkish society. One point to keep in mind is that most of these consequences were shaped by numerous factors including political, economic, and social factors.

Despite early concerns that migrants would put a pressure on resources, Syrian refugees have made significant contributions to the Turkish economy in a number of ways. Many have become entrepreneurs, starting enterprises that employ both Syrians and Turks. While some see Syrians as job competitors, they have also displayed an entrepreneurial spirit by starting businesses that improve their own and others' livelihoods. As stated by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Türkiye (TOBB), "Syrians have invested close to \$334 million in 6,033 new formal businesses since 2011 and are ranked first in foreign founders of new businesses annually since 2013." It is estimated that Syrian investments in Türkiye amount to around 463,000 USD (Batalla, 2018). Syrian firms have been particularly engaged in sectors like manufacturing, textile, and retail, contributing to the richness and variety of local marketplaces. In addition, the arrival of Syrian refugees has enriched Türkiye's cultural fabric. Syrian food, art, and music are becoming more and more

fashionable in cities like Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa. This cultural exchange has helped to ensure social integration by enabling Turkish people to experience Syrian culture. In addition, Syrians have contributed key skills to Türkiye, specifically in the construction and agricultural sectors, which has further developed the workforce of the country.

But at the same time, the influx of Syrian refugees to cities like Gaziantep has ignited emotions among certain locals that the refugees are stealing their jobs, specifically hurting the skilled labor force. Syrian refugees have likewise had a profound impact on the workforce of Türkiye, especially in low-salary industries. Being a developing economy, Türkiye possesses an enormous informal labor sector. Most Syrians work in informal jobs, which has created increased competition for low-skilled jobs, further resulting in decreasing wages for local Turkish workers. According to the [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) 2020 report](#), the influx of refugees has added to informal work in certain sectors, including agriculture and construction. It also stated that despite an increase in work permits provided by the Ministry of Family, Labour, and Social Services (MoFLSS) and a reduced fee for Syrians under temporary protection, only 3% had their employers issue them work permits (ILO, 2020). Another serious concern has been the strain placed on Türkiye's public services, especially those in the areas of healthcare, education, and accommodation. Türkiye's healthcare system has been overwhelmed by the refugee inflow, which has struggled to cope with the increased demand for different services (Achiri et.al., 2022). In addition, in densely populated refugee urban areas such as Istanbul and Hatay, neighborhood schools are often overcrowded, and the quality of education has at times degraded as a result.

The presence of a large refugee population has fueled social unrest in certain regions, typically fueled by economic competition and cultural differences, which pose difficulties in the process of social integration. There are reports of an increase in xenophobia and anti-refugee sentiment, particularly in those places with high concentrations of Syrians (Alakoc et al., 2021). A report published by the Istanbul Bilgi University in 2021 also stated that there were tensions between the Syrians under TP status and the Turkish citizens but are declining compared to past research (INGEV, 2021). Tensions have sometimes broken into violence, protests and clashes between the locals and the refugees happened in cities like Kayseri resulting in recent riots in the nation. With forceful opposition, the government and the president denounced the riots and called for halting of the targeting

of Syrian nationals' livelihoods and called for unity. The Turkish-occupied northern Syrian territories also witnessed dissatisfaction with mobs pulling down the Turkish flag. These incidents highlight the increasing resentment of the Turkish populace towards the Syrians (McLean, S., & Sariyuce, I., 2024). Some citizens also fear that most Syrians being of Sunni origin, is among the reasons AKP is politically inclined towards them. Others also worry about the refugee population dominating and altering the country's demographics and politics, further fueling misconceptions and resentment. Thus, the refugee crisis has become a politically charged issue in Türkiye. While the Turkish government originally had an open-door policy towards Syrian refugees, public opinion, as mentioned earlier, is said to have been shifted, especially during times of economic slump and increasing unemployment.

Opposition parties have also subsequently used the refugee crisis to condemn the government for favoring refugees over the interests of Turkish nationals. The increasing discontent has been a central theme in political debates, affecting both local and national elections (Kirişci, 2023). For example, since its inception in 2021, the far-right Zafer (Victory) Party has been capitalizing on the anti-immigrant sentiment. The party's narrative has been fueling demands of stricter actions on the refugee issue and has been critical of the ruling party's policies in response to the refugee issue (Türkiye Today, 2024). The leader of the anti-immigrant party, Ümit Özdağ was recently detained in January 2025 for allegedly insulting President Erdogan in a speech he delivered. He was later released but again arrested for spreading hatred and hostility among the public and inciting anti-Syrian refugee riots in the Central Turkish province of Kayseri. Critics of the present government including Ekrem Imamoglu, the former popular mayor of Istanbul, seen as a possible candidate to challenge Erdogan in the next elections, also criticized Ozdag's, arrest stating it as a political meddling in the judiciary (AP, 2025).

## ASSESSING CHALLENGES: THE PLIGHT OF SYRIANS AND ANKARA'S PRESENT DILEMMAS

This unprecedented crisis has been unfolding for 13 years, and although, Ankara has set an example and has been applauded for its approach, it has also been reproached for the mismanagement of the crisis on numerous levels. For example, Syrians have been issued work permits since 2016 with respect to a few conditions (Uysal and Kirişci, 2019). Despite this, working Syrians have remained few for various reasons. Turkish

companies faced problems in regards to their capacity to employ the increasing population, and therefore, were compelled to employ individuals in the informal sector at minimal wages. It was also seen that employers' reluctance to navigate the bureaucratic process of obtaining permits and associated costs added to more complexities (Leghtas & Hollingsworth, 2017). Consequently, most refugees were employed in the informal sector. The majority of them are employed in the manufacturing sector, mainly in the textile industry, as well as in construction, trade and hospitality sectors (ILO, 2020). Obstacles to geographic mobility and restrictions on the proportion of refugees compared to Turkish citizens in the labor market have been pinpointed as being at the heart of the low level of work permit applications (Skribeland, 2025). Fear of the political and economic fallout caused by heightened competition for formal work aggravates the already protracted bureaucratic procedures. Consequently, the design of social safety schemes has disenfranchised people from accessing formal jobs.

Additionally, although Türkiye's healthcare services have been appreciated by the Syrian refugees, access to these services is hard because of the geographical restriction since Syrians can only access healthcare in the province where their Temporary Protection (TP) ID is issued. Those who move to other cities, often for work, face serious difficulties. Many are unable to transfer their TP ID due to bureaucratic restrictions imposed by the General Directorate for Migration Management, leaving them without healthcare access. Undocumented Syrians who have not obtained Temporary Protection status face even greater challenges. Seeking medical care at a hospital or clinic risks exposing them to authorities, potentially leading to deportation. This fear also affects Syrians whose TP ID is registered in a different city from where they currently live (Al Herari, 2025). Numerous Syrian refugees inhabit congested and inferior housing environments. The elevated cost of living, coupled with restricted access to reasonably priced housing alternatives, intensifies their susceptibility. Certain refugees reside in unofficial encampments characterized by insufficient infrastructure and services (Içduygu & Osseiran, 2022).

There also exist considerable disparities in educational achievements between Syrian refugee children and their Turkish counterparts. Elements such as linguistic challenges, economic adversity, and social marginalization serve to diminish enrollment figures and elevate dropout rates among Syrian learners. A number of these children are necessitated to join the labor force to assist their families, thereby further impeding their educational

progress (Kirdar et al., 2023). Due to persistent inflation and economic hardships, there has been rising anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye as discussed above (Guzel & Fraser, 2024). To tackle this, there must be improved social integration measures; e.g., programs of harmonization to address the growing tensions among Syrians and Turkish citizens, concentrating on the Syrian refugees' and Turkish nationals' needs as well, and striving to achieve harmony between domestic and foreign policies. There must be stringent checks and controls on unorganized markets and better salaries to improve their deplorable living conditions.

Along with these challenges, Ankara also needs international assistance in the present times, finances to provide for the residency of millions of refugees. Since the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria, around 2.74 million Syrian refugees have returned to Syria as of 8<sup>th</sup> May, 2025 (UNHCR, 2025), according to data sourced by the UNHCR from the Government of Türkiye. After the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Türkiye reopened its embassy in Damascus and opened three border crossings to enable refugees to return safely to Syria. Ankara's burden could be reduced by this significant change of government in neighboring Syria but the outcome relies on the number of Syrians who will voluntarily return. The Turkish government should aim to resolve the problems of Syrians who decide to stay in the country.

Although, the Turkish government has encouraged Syrian refugees to return while there are ongoing speculations about forced repatriations including making it harder for the Syrian refugees to return to Türkiye once they leave, since the Turkish residency permits are taken away once they leave the country at checkpoints (Porter, 2024). Turkish Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya addressed the situation stating that Ankara has and would continue to manage the 'safe and voluntary returns' of Syrians (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2025). Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan held talks with Syria's new interim leader Ahmed al-Shara to boost cooperation between their countries. Both presidents have decided to merge efforts for a collective security solution that addresses regional security problems relevant to both countries. This alliance is crucial to both Syria and Türkiye. Damascus needs Ankara in the reconstruction and revival of the Syrian economy while it is crucial for Ankara that

stability returns and remains in Syria with the new government to better manage the refugee crisis and maintain regional security (Hubbard B., 2025). It remains to be seen how Ankara faces these new challenges and to what extent the Syrian-Türkiye cooperation pans out this time as the previous administrations had a paradoxical relationship.

## CONCLUSION

Türkiye's standing as the world's largest host country for refugees emphasizes both its humanitarian mission and the geopolitical advantages it derives from this position. The massive influx of millions of displaced people, the majority of whom came from Syria, has radically transformed Türkiye's economic and socio-political landscape. While Ankara has tactfully leveraged its location to engage with international actors and shape regional politics, the refugee crisis has also exerted intense strain on domestic resources, increased socio-economic disparities, and incited political discussion. The research illustrates a complex spectrum of challenges that Türkiye is dealing with, perhaps most prominently the need to balance state interests and humanitarian obligations. The legal mechanisms that regulate the protection of refugees, while providing temporary protection, are not adequate to face the complexities of long-term integration and financial sustainability. Moreover, the shifting regional dynamics, such as the current Syrian situation, introduce new uncertainties into the backdrop of Ankara's refugee policy. Ankara, in the future, needs to implement sustainable policies that promote concurring relations among refugees and host populations. Initiatives focusing on social integration, equitable distribution of resources, and transparency of the law will be essential in reducing tensions and providing long-term stability including safe, just and voluntary returns of Syrians. By addressing both domestic issues and foreign obligations, Türkiye is best positioned to maximize its position as a swing state in regional geopolitics while protecting the rights and welfare of its citizens and refugees alike.

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