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Examining Türkiye's Humanitarian Aid Performance in the Case of Syria/Syrian Refugees

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Türkiye's humanitarian aid performance in relation to Syria and Syrian refugees, covering the period from the onset of the Syrian civil war to present. The evaluation is conducted through the lens of four key dimensions commonly emphasized in humanitarian aid literature: Coverage, Sufficiency, Complementarity, Connectedness, and Effectiveness. These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for assessing the nature and effectiveness of Türkiye's humanitarian efforts. The study examines aid directed both to Syrian refugees within Türkiye and to war-affected populations within Syrian territories under Türkiye's sphere of influence, shaped by its security policies. While Türkiye remains the largest donor of humanitarian aid, its performance has been influenced by internal challenges and global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, impacting the dimensions of scope and adequacy. The findings suggest that addressing these challenges requires enhancing local initiatives and fostering stronger global cooperation networks to improve the overall effectiveness of humanitarian assistance.

Keywords: Coverage, Effectiveness, Humanitarian Aid, Syrian refugees, Syria

Introduction

Humanitarianism in the sense of goodness is as old as the beginning of history. However, it is a process that started in our recent history in terms of systematic global aid and the actors who implement them. In this system, crises such as the pain caused by wars and natural disasters are intervened, and in the long run, it also struggles with consequences like migration. With the events that started in 2011, there was a crisis that caused many grievances and is continuing and diversifying in Syria and its neighbourhoods. Türkiye, the country with the longest neighbouring border (TWF, 2022), was most affected by this. In the same context, Türkiye is one of the countries performing the huge amount of humanitarian aid. With this aspect, Türkiye's humanitarian performance evaluation has become meaningful.

This consideration will be based on some measurement dimensions such as Coverage/Sufficiency, Complementarity/Connectedness, and indirectly Effectiveness (ALNAP, 2018). They will be the main ones in the context of this paper, particularly with pointing out the coordination of actors. Based on these dimensions, Türkiye will be considered a case in its humanitarian-related performance to Syria/Syrian Refugees. Türkiye is chosen because it hosts the most refugees, majorly Syrian ones (UNHCR, 2021). So, this paper will discuss theoretical frameworks with links to the existing humanitarian system's

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"strengths and weaknesses". Based on this, it will define Türkiye's status in terms of its humanitarian performance on Syria issues and provide suggestions. Moreover, in the case of Türkiye, it will be argued that cooperation within the framework of basic universal humanitarian principles will positively affect its performance in the context of *coverage*, *sufficiency*, and relatedly *effectiveness*.

1. Theoretical Background

Although it is not possible to make a definitive definition of Humanitarianism, it is possible to follow some traces of "charitable" actions from history to this day (Maxwel and Walker, 2009:14). In addition to mentioning a wide range of religious arrangements from the inscriptions in the ancient inscriptions that speak of giving food to people, it is also possible that today's humanitarian actions can be traced back to the conditions in which Protestantism arose (Maxwel and Walker, 2009:14-15). So, if "humanitarianism" is defined as charity, it is old as ancient as humanity (Barnett, 2011:19). However, it can be said that in terms of the meaning of humanitarianism in modern discourse, globalization and interconnection should be pointed out. World wars occurring of international organizations such as the United Nations and Bretton Woods, foundations of supra-state organizations like the EU can be considered traces of the-new-meaning-based humanitarianism, which also signs a natural changing process of humanitarianism (Maxwel and Walker, 2009:21-42). Since the crisis which may/have occurred during and after this period is on a global scale, the action is also needed to be global, which is essential for humanitarianism. In fact, this refers to a global humanitarian system.

In terms of a global system, its roots may be traced back to her experiences with war and natural disasters in the West, notably in Europe, but it is currently participating in missions worldwide (Davey et al. 2013:1). The comparative history of humanitarianism has been divided in terms of historical turning points such as WW-1, WW-2, and the Cold War. For example, it is divided into three ages: "an imperial humanitarianism" between the 19th Century and WW-2; "a neo-humanitarianism" between that point and finish of the Cold War; and "a liberal humanitarianism" from the Cold War and now (Davey et al. 2013:5 cited in Barnett, 2011). Today humanitarianism expresses the whole of the actions of some primary actors. These actors: donors, United Nations (UN), Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Military Actors, Private Sector and Corporate Actors and Beneficiaries (Borton, 2009:17-20). So, based on this brief explanation, it is possible to define the current situation of the humanitarian system.

2. The Performance of the Present Humanitarian System

When it comes to today's world in terms of the humanitarian system, it is essential to point out the conflicts, migrations, famine and more natural or other humanitarian crises since, in the present conditions, the system is struggling to respond to these problems. It is said that the humanitarian aid system has been strained, funding has been diverted to short-term initiatives, and the emergency budget has supplanted risk management and investments in more local players (DFID, 2017:7). Thus, in a

system where wars may last decades and short-term help is insufficient for a sustainable solution, numerous longer-term solutions are required, both in crisis zones and in nations with a high refugee population (DFID, 2017:16). So, understanding how the system works becomes more significant.

The system works with its actors and is based on principles such as humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence inspired by International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Ocha, 2012:1). These are principles which expected to be in use. Whether they exist or not is vital to understanding the system's performance. In this regard, for evaluating this, the measurements of ALNAP like coverage/sufficiency, relevance/appropriateness, effectiveness consisting of preparedness/timeliness, coordination, monitoring and human resources/institutional capacity, connectedness, efficiency, and coherence can be referred to (Harvey et al., 2010). Briefly, based on the existence of these principles, the actors of the humanitarian system may show weakness or act appropriately.

“Coverage” and/or “Sufficiency” are the dimensions measuring the performance of the humanitarian system used by ALNAP. It consists of these two questions: “Does the system have adequate resources to do the job? Is the system able to reach all populations in need?” and aims to address the sufficiency of funds and reach relevant people (Harvey et al., 2010:23). Furthermore, complementary and/or connectedness has this main question; “Is the international community actively engaged in building capacity for local humanitarian response?” (Harvey et al., 2010:15). Suppose it is needed to summarize the current situation by pointing out their difference or complementary slightly; In that case, it can be said that despite an increase in funds, since the rate of needs goes faster up, meeting the needs is lacking (ALNAP, 2018). Additionally, effectiveness is referred to as stakeholder collaboration and accountability in the context of providing aid and responsiveness in all circumstances, including local and national responses and the engagement of national or multinational corporations (Muguruza, 2015:14-5). This paper accepts that the deficiencies related to coverage and connectedness naturally affect the effectiveness.

The Humanitarian System's Capabilities/Strengths And The Humanitarian Movement's Flaws/Weaknesses

In terms of coverage, it is possible to say that although the capacity of humanitarian contributions has been rising, particularly with a jump from 2005, funds cannot meet the demands of the wants (Harvey et al., 2010). Another reason for reducing coverage capacity is that several aid agencies have been less eager to engage in high-risk locations (ALNAP, 2018:122). Another reason is the lack of information about the risky regions by humanitarian actors (ALNAP, 2018:123). The entire system, in general, and Türkiye, which is the subject of this research in particular, are experiencing coverage issues.

Complementarity and/or Connectedness point out the significance of regional “humanitarian response” and the connections between the global community and state players (ALNAP, 2018). In this sense, humanitarian clusters, which are expected to be the answer to the coordination problems that emerged

in the Indian Tsunami and Darfur crisis, are also a critical dimension (Jensen, 2012:150). Because, lacking coordination between these sides have the potential to prevent responses to the crisis in time, affecting all processes. In Türkiye's context, there are NGOs supporting refugees both in camps and cities and in the crisis regions in Syria with some official institutions such as Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), Red Crescent (semi-official and working as NGO), some governmental institutions like Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundation (SYDV) and international organizations like United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Their coordination is crucial in terms of affecting many dimensions of humanitarian aid like coverage. Additionally, while the coverage problem's structural dimensions, unexpected developments such as pandemics can deepen this problem.

As a current issue, the Covid-19 pandemic is a factor affecting the globe in many dimensions. Old methods of humanitarian efforts were interrupted by the pandemic, but institutions were still required to be responsive reasonably rapidly and on a massive scale despite restrictions (Khan, 2021:12). So, the state of not being ready can be considered an inadequacy of the system. As it has had impacts across the world (Rebecca et al., 2021:9-15) on Türkiye's performance as well. Nevertheless, it can be considered a permanent factor affecting the system, potentially shaping the system (ALNAP, 2021:8) rather than a temporary situation. This can affect many dimensions of the system but has explicitly the potential of stopping and/or slowing down field operations (Rebecca et al., 2021) and directly impacts coverage, connectedness, and effectiveness.

3. Türkiye's Humanitarian Performance in Syria and on Syrian Refugees

Türkiye is a country having the most refugees and also may have to engage in a humanitarian system (UNHCR, 2021) because it has the longest border with Syria, which has one of the severe humanitarian crises which began with upheavals against the Assad regime and became a catastrophe generating millions of refugees who did flee from the war region to neighbour countries such as Türkiye (Koseoglu&Cevikel, 2014). So, first of all, Türkiye found itself in the middle of the crisis due to its geographical location. Türkiye maintains operations in Syria, particularly in some locations and border camps, towns, and diverse regions (TWF, 2022) for numerous refugees. So, the paper touches on both Türkiye's actions in Syria and those relating to refugees in the context of humanitarian aid.

While performing this function, it is meaningful to consider the population statistics of Syrians within Türkiye's borders. Accordingly, according to the Ministry of Interior's annual statistics, the Syrian population in Türkiye was approximately 3 million 700 thousand by 2024.. As of December 8, the number of returns to Syria has increased, primarily due to the fall of the Assad regime. Before this, returns were already taking place to a certain extent, driven by the economic difficulties faced in Türkiye. In this context, it is important to see the change in Syrians in Türkiye over the years.

Year Syrian Population in TR

2011	14,237
2012	224,000
2013	500,000
2014	1,300,000
2015	2,500,000
2016	2,900,000
2017	3,500,000
2018	3,586,679
2019	3,570,352
2020	3,763,565
2021	3,643,769
2022	3,663,014
2023	3,214,780

Source: *UNHCR, Türkiye Ministry of Internal Affairs*

According to the figures provided by relevant ministries and official institutions in Türkiye, as of January 9, 2025 (Refugees Association):

- The total population of Syrians is 2,888,876.
- 74.5% of this population consists of women and children.

- The percentage of young Syrians (aged 15-24) is 18.3%.
- The average age of Syrians is 21 years.
- The ratio of registered Syrians under temporary protection to the Turkish population is 3.28% nationwide.

Services are provided to ensure the social and economic integration of Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye. In this context, Syrians under temporary protection can benefit from educational services with a foreign identity document, and the schooling rate reached 70 per cent in 2019-20 (Çatakli&Taşdoğan, 2024:243). Again, the number of temporary work permits granted over the years has increased steadily (Çatakli&Taşdoğan, 2024:245).

3.1. Coverage and/or Sufficiency

A study on the subject revealed that in places with inadequate logistically and dangerous conditions, humanitarian staff were not severely served compared to wants (ALNAP, 2018).

Security Issues

Security problems have constantly been occurring in the field in Syria. For example, one staff member of the Red Crescent was killed, and both were injured in El-Bab was the basis in the North of Syria during relief operations (TICY, 2021:105). This also confirms the information from the field (ALNAP 2018 cited in Stites and Bushby, 2017). According to a report by the Syrian Human Rights Network, 109 aid workers have been killed since the start of the Syrian war in 2019 (AA, 2019). It seems that although there may be many reasons for coverage deficiency, for Syria, it is security-based, and this is both for all actors and especially for Türkiye the same. In addition to the security issue, it has been observed that rapidly growing procedures such as Covid-19 have an impact on Türkiye's performance in this respect.

Covid-19 Pandemic

In the light of predictions that new pandemics will have an impact on the humanitarian relief system (Bakhit, 2014:5), it can be said that the COVID-19-related applications implemented at distribution centres and service distribution lands impacted service delivery timeliness and raised operating expenses and has a negative effect on humanitarian aid and its design and development projects. (TICY, 2021:104). Again, the pandemic has exacerbated an already rigid state of Syrian refugees and diversified their needs (OCHA, 2020). However, with the coordination of International agencies such as UNOCHA and collaboration with foreign associations like the Qatar Charity Association, operations continued: 14 Isolation centres were built, and 2,840 cases were accepted in Northern Syria (TIYC, 2021:104). So, the pandemic can be said which has had a direct impact on Türkiye's Coverage, and field operations have reduced Türkiye's effectiveness.

Projects Financing by Türkiye

Türkiye directly finances certain projects while others receive funding from international organizations like the EU. Given Türkiye's contributions to these organizations as part of its membership and commitments, it can be considered an indirect funder of some projects. However, quantifying this indirect financial support is challenging. In this context, the following are some key projects in which Türkiye plays both a direct and indirect funding role:

- The Social Cohesion Assistance (SUY) Program, funded by the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO), offers financial support to vulnerable foreigners under temporary or international protection. In 2024, eligible individuals receive a monthly cash allowance of 500 TL per person, distributed through the Turkish Red Crescent's KIZILAYKART system (Refugees Association, 2024; UNHCR, 2024).
- Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations (SYDV), operating under the coordination of governorships, offer various forms of support, including one-time cash assistance, non-food aid, coal distribution, as well as assistance in education, housing, and healthcare (UNHCR, 2024).
- General social services affiliated with Ministry of Family and Social Services, these centers offer psychosocial support, education, and counseling services. They also provide socioeconomic assistance and home care services for individuals with disabilities (UNHCR, 2024).
- Municipalities depending on their resources, municipalities can offer various forms of assistance, including coal, food, clothing, and other non-food items. The type of aid and eligibility criteria may vary from one municipality to another (UNHCR, 2024).

It is necessary to mention the impact of the current socio-economic situation on the aid system as the pandemic has done. In general, current economic conditions and social welfare system (Volkan, 2019), natural disasters and Syrian refugees have been affecting Türkiye's performance in the humanitarian system. Moreover, Türkiye has to face the opposition against refugees in addition to these conditions since tension has been rising against refugees (Yitmen&Verkuyten, 2018), and economic problems/relations deepen (Simsek, 2021). So, these internal factors also affect Türkiye's performance in the system.

Türkiye has continued providing these services until the end of the civil war in Syria, while also addressing adaptation challenges within the country. In the next phase, as conditions in Syria become safer, the possibility of return for Syrians is expected to increase. Türkiye is likely to play a more effective role in addressing the challenges associated with this process. While the Red Crescent provides assistance to more than 1.2 million Syrians, Turkmens and people from various ethnic groups in Syria, it has taken the initiative to build 35 thousand houses in this region (Toktaş etc. 2023).

3.2. Complementarity and/or Connectedness

It is stated that today's humanitarian aid system should keep local actors more central and care about a framework in which they are supported by their internal dynamics and held accountable (Gingerich&Cohen, 2015:44). International players should only intervene when necessary, in systems where local countries are at the centre (DFID, 2017:18). Based on this, it is possible to say relations between global humanitarian actors and countries have improved in the last few years (ALNAP, 2018). Nevertheless, it seems the occurring responsiveness/timeliness better performs for responding to 'natural 'crises rather than other ones like conflict (ALNAP, 2018).

In this regard, Türkiye sustains its aid in Syria with NGOs, official institutions like AFAD, Red Crescent, and development agencies like TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), with around 8 bn US dollars which include both developmental aid and humanitarian aid where 90% was given in the context of Syria in 2018 (Sen, 2020:146). Supporting Türkiye's humanitarian aid by TIKA, the development agency, can also be considered an excellent example of connectedness. In the context of connectedness, in addition to official institutions and NGOs, the private sector is also pointed out in Türkiye's case (Yüksel, 2019:43). Also, it is critical to enhance collaboration between development and humanitarian agencies to lessen the need for humanitarian help (DFID, 2017:19). Hence, it is critical that TIKA participate in the process as a development institution.

Although there was lacking support from the International community and coordination with Türkiye at the beginning of the process, then particularly after 2015, when the refugee influx rose, a legal basis for international coordination was established, and UN agencies INGOs have more had effective coordination: with the leading of Türkiye, there has been close partnership AFAD, WHO, UNICEF, WFP and regional institutions have engaged in coordination more actively (Gray, 2021:17). For example, Türkiye has received 8.2 billion dollars from the international community since 2017 and substantial additional payments with the purpose of such as response to the refugee crisis and conditional cash transfers (Gray, 2021:20). Another example is the The Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), aiming to meet the daily need of the refugees with the collaboration of the Red Crescent and Governmental Institutions (European Commission, 2021). Examples such as donating funding and working in coordination in the field demonstrate that the global increase in humanitarian aid cooperation has also been observed in the example of Türkiye. It is conceivable to claim that Türkiye's effectiveness is also being harmed indirectly.

4. In the Context of Türkiye: What should be done? or Priorities

The security issue in crisis zones is one of the major concerns that affect coverage and effectiveness, requiring more collaboration (Bakhit, 2014). Robust agreements/frameworks, in particular, may be required to supply humanitarian relief to critical locations in these issues and a collaborative portal for stakeholders (Muguruza, 2015:60-5). Again, when unexpected global problems like Covid-19

exacerbate an already problematic situation and reaching the people in need becomes much more difficult. In this regard, it is possible to argue that a much larger labour force and investments in the field of humanitarian assistance are necessary (ICAI, 2018:13). During regular times, national and international organizations can prepare considerable financial resources, educate critical individuals, and expand and implement crisis scenarios (Gingerich&Cohen, 2015:6) by referring to connectedness to increase coverage and effectiveness.

Although the international community has supported the governments (like Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan in the case of Syria), their internal problems inside those countries rendered crisis in the regions may exacerbate the situation both for "host countries" and "refugees" (OCHA, 2020:180). With the highest number of refugees (European Commission, 2020), Türkiye has to perform in the case of Syria to solve both diversified problems domestically and in the field. Given the magnitude and persistence of the crisis and the increased international cooperation, Türkiye-like countries in the long-term crisis will always need additional help.

As a result, the countries' domestic problems may make it challenging to manage the process's continuity, coordination, and future crises. The government's attitude to the Syrian scenario is influenced by Türkiye's economic concerns and local people's discontent (Ayvazoglu et al., 2021). Thus, it is vital to inform the people of those countries and illustrate that the problem is worldwide. Therefore, it is critical to contribute to constructing a domestic agenda that does not affect coverage.

Although the humanitarian system's lack of coordination has been solved, it may be stated that it should be more substantial. Additionally, as a complementary institution: the "private sector" played a crucial part during COVID-19, so "greater collaboration" is required to effectively incorporate it into the humanitarian system (OCHA, 2022:9). And it is significant to be prepared for such disasters through catastrophe warning systems that efficiently employ digital and evolving technologies, risk analysis, and effective and multidimensional collaboration with local governments (Bakhit, 2014:9)

While new players are involved in the humanitarian aid system, it is critical to keep humanitarian aid principles on the table, and conflicts and challenges in delivering humanitarian help also necessitate a global legal framework (Muguruza, 2015:25). It is evident that the current difficulties are not limited to one country and that a flexible, effective, and complementary humanitarian system is required (Bakhit, 2014:4). Despite the growing capacity of several Muslim and Arab nations, notably Türkiye, in humanitarian help, their contribution to the multilateral system is not currently at a desired level (Muguruza, 2015:31; Bakhiti, 2014:7). As a country coping with one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, Türkiye must enhance its participation in a global multi-stakeholder humanitarian relief system. Thus, as the humanitarian system faces new difficulties, a multifaceted and integrated structure including new partners, capacity-building nations, and local communities is required (Bakhiti, 2014:10).

Because “integrated” and “locally owned” aid programs are considered to be the most effective in this regard (Konydyk, 2019).

Conclusion

For over a decade, Syria has remained one of the most pressing issues within the global humanitarian aid system. While the system as a whole responds to crises and challenges, Türkiye has emerged as a key player in humanitarian efforts related to Syria and Syrian refugees, given its geographical proximity and active international contributions.

One crucial aspect of humanitarian aid that all stakeholders must carefully assess is "coverage." Various factors, including Türkiye's domestic economic and political landscape, as well as global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, influence the practical implementation of this principle. To minimize the impact of internal challenges on humanitarian crises, it is essential for the international community to recognize these issues as shared global concerns. Raising awareness at the individual, national, and international levels is a crucial first step in addressing the problem.

Furthermore, to prevent new crises—both within Türkiye and the global system—from exacerbating existing ones, it is vital to engage in comprehensive planning and ensure adequate staffing in advance. Unexpected crises often have far-reaching consequences, and Türkiye has faced numerous economic and political challenges while managing the crisis concerning Syria and its refugees.

To enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, solutions such as strengthening collaboration among stakeholders, empowering local actors, and utilizing digital tools for better predictability can be beneficial. In addition to risk assessment and strategic planning, integrating private sector participation, adhering to international principles, and implementing comprehensive legal frameworks should be prioritized in addressing humanitarian crises. These elements collectively contribute to improving both the "coverage" and "effectiveness" of the humanitarian aid system.

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ETİK ve BİLİMSEL İLKELER SORUMLULUK BEYANI

Bu çalışmanın tüm hazırlanma süreçlerinde etik kurallara ve bilimsel atıf gösterme ilkelerine riayet edildiğini yazar(lar) beyan eder. Aksi bir durumun tespiti halinde Toplumsal Politika Dergisi’nin hiçbir sorumluluğu olmayıp, tüm sorumluluk makale yazarlarına aittir.