



Discussion Paper (6)

## **Turkish experience with refugees returns to Syria**

Başak Yavçan,

TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Ankara

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## **Başak Yavçan**

An associate professor at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara, Yavçan received her BA in Political Science and International Relations from Boğaziçi University and her MA and PhD in Comparative Political Behavior from the University of Pittsburgh, Department of Political Science. She has conducted research at Michigan University's Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, at New York University and most recently at the Northwestern University Buffett Institute's Keyman Modern Turkish Studies. Focusing on inter-group relations and public opinion, in particular regarding refugee integration, impact of immigration attitudes on Euroscepticism, immigrant acculturation attitudes and the impact of media framing on the public opinion, Yavçan has conducted field research using surveys, experiments, focus groups, in-depth interviews and content analyses. Currently she is working on the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey, inter-group attitudes, institutional trust, effectiveness of policies and interventions on promoting integration as well as politics of educational and social integration of Syrians in Turkey.

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## **Introduction:**

Turkey hosts the majority of the Syrian refugees, with 3, 636 617 registered Syrians<sup>1</sup>. From 2015, Turkish authorities moved from a policy of temporary protection, to one of integration, while also promoting voluntary return. According to statistics from Directorate General of Migration Management of Turkey (DGMM), in 2018, 254, 000 Syrians voluntarily returned to Syria. This was thought to be the effect of new government policies promoting return, such as permits for holiday visits and family reunion. However, 194, 000 of these re-entered Turkey, casting doubt on the actual impact of these policies as well as the security and economic conditions inside Syria, which would accommodate return.<sup>2</sup>

## **Turkey's Return Policy**

The strategy of the Turkish state regarding Syrian refugees, as stated by the head of DGMM, includes both integration and voluntary return. However, it can be argued that the Turkish government and state institutions do not view voluntary return as a top priority. Part of this relates to the country's recent experience with Syrian returnees, the majority of which return to Turkey after voluntary return to Syria, and the relocation of a small number of Syrians in Turkey to safe zones. Despite the low priority of returning Syrian refugees, Turkey has taken measures to ease the process of return.

First, the Turkish government has allowed visit permits to Syria. These allow refugees the flexibility of mobility (re-migration) during religious holidays. It aims to mitigate the concern that refugees, and asylum seekers have about return. When refugees have the opportunity to return to their country of origin, but are denied re-entry to the host country, they tend to avoid taking the risk of return. Turkey allows Syrians to visit Syria on holidays, for family, education or work visits, with the guarantee of keeping their original status upon return. This way, refugees can assess the conditions in their hometowns and have a more informed view about return. Part of the expectation with the visit allowance is to promote a voluntary return option where the refugee can freely assess costs and benefits of return. However, the border records of Turkish state indicate that these returns are infrequent and about 76 percent of the returnees came back to Turkey in 2018, implying that the conditions for Syrian returnees back home are not sufficient for re-integration, and that any policy promoting return will be futile unless the conditions inside Syria are addressed.

Second, the Turkish government has closed border/registry for non-permitted visits. Since the 2016 EU-Turkey Refugee Deal, Turkey no longer maintains an open border policy with Syria, where those who exited the country would give up their temporary protection status in Turkey, and re-registration upon return to Turkey not guaranteed. According to interviews conducted for this research, certain governates used this opportunity to lower their number of registered Syrians and deny registration to new arrivals if they voluntarily gave up their status in Turkey and returned to Syria. However, after months of conducting this procedure, policy makers resumed registering new arrivals given the high number of returnees from Syria.

Third, the Turkish government established safe zones. While economic incentives facilitating return are effective in the initial decision, a prerequisite for an effective and sustainable return is perception of the security situation in the home country. Thus, the perception of the security situation in Syria is of utmost importance. One could also include the security perceptions of the safe zones created by Turkey in places such as Jarabulus and Efrin to

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma\\_363\\_378\\_4713\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik) as of January 24th, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Numbers are not public but obtained from the head of the DGMM with permission to use for this research

this equation. It is therefore important to provide credible information regarding the safety conditions in these regions and inside Syria via domestic and international reports.

Those interviewed for this study, as well as reports and news stories underline the increasing safety conditions in the safe zones created by Turkey. Yet, the interviews conducted with experts also attest that Syrian refugees prefer to return to their hometowns in Syria rather than to the safe zones. As a result, these safe zones, while important hubs for Syrian IDPs, are not preferred by Syrians in Turkey. Nonetheless, some municipalities (such as Esenyurt municipality in Istanbul), partly out of political concerns, created incentive mechanisms for the return of Syrian refugees, such as covering transportation to these regions. Yet, the numbers are small, and there is little to no evidence regarding the sustainability of this return.

### **Returnees to Syria: Security, Economy and Education**

The interviews conducted with experts who have direct access to returnees, such as NGO representatives and protection officers, as well as field surveys, support these comparative findings on integration for the Turkish case, in that those who elicit higher belonging to Turkish identity with better Turkish language skills are less interested in return. This is also supported by surveys conducted with Syrian university students in Turkey. While the majority of the students were interested in contributing to the restructuring of Syria, many even choosing their field of study based on this priority, most are reluctant to return to Syria in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, supporting the findings on economic integration, those who are more educated and have a higher income are not necessarily less interested in return. Yet, those who are most likely return (or end up returning) are ones with existing familial ties in Syria (family reunification is an important reason for return), as well as those who complained about discrimination against them in Turkey. Furthermore, for the returnees who came back to Turkey, their reasons for reverse migration were the poor infrastructural conditions in their hometowns and limited room for economic activity, poor educational opportunities, and general security concerns.

Overall, regarding Turkey's return policy, although the introduction of visit permits was a creative policy tool, they were not as effective as expected. The same was true with the creation of safe zones. Given that there is no policy of economic support upon return, applied in most 4R programs (Repatriation, Reintegration, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction) in the form of small loans or cash assistance, combined with limited economic opportunities in Syria, there is no actual economic push for refugees to return home. However, Turkey's integration policy, vocational training and educational opportunities provided to refugees could be considered important assets for refugees upon return to Syria. Yet, the lack of an effective strategy of formal employment in Turkey is likely to limit the impact of Turkey's integration policies, leading to major underemployment of Syrians in the informal economy.

The second dimension of sustainable and successful return relates to the attitude of the source country on refugee returns, and its relationship with the host countries in coordinating this process. Unfortunately, cooperation between source and host countries is rarely possible when voluntary return programs are adapted, which potentially creates problems with the efficient transfer of resources. The exception to this was the EU-Afghanistan Return Treaty in 2016. It may be advisable for Turkey to sign such an agreement with Syrian regional or central authorities in the future. However, given the extent of diplomatic hostility, this kind of a treaty could only be possible with a stable political situation in Syria, and after international acknowledgment of safe conditions for refugees inside Syria.

When the representatives of several national institutions, NGO and INGOs, journalists as well as international organisations with direct access to refugees were interviewed, the main reasons for re-return to Turkey were lack of economic opportunities, lack of legal and security protection and lack of access to services (especially health and education). Another issue that hinders

return, especially of young males, is the continuing conflict in many areas of Syria and the potential to be recruited to the army. This is also evident in surveys conducted with Syrians in Turkey, where young males show the highest reluctance to return. Another issue is the future economic prospects in Syria once refugees repatriate. As the expectation for building a life in Syria is low among young and working age populations, mostly older refugees with limited economic activity express interest to/or pursue return to Syria. For most, the main interest in return lays in family reunification. However, as indicated by officials who re-register returnees, the majority do not find what they are looking for back home and only a small percentage decide to stay in Syria.

### **Conclusion:**

These findings indicate that, at least from the perspective of the majority of Syrians, the prerequisites of return (security, economic stability, infrastructure and legal guarantees to their physical integrity and private property) have not been met. Of course, another missing component of a safe and sustainable return is a direct political dialogue, which is dependent on security conditions and a resolution to the instability in the region. The limited nature of the dialogue between the Turkish state and the Assad government further complicates the communication of intentions and priorities of both sides for a sustainable return. This point has been underlined by interviews with representatives of state institutions.

To conclude, from the perspective of UN institutions and the IOM, the security conditions in Syria are not suitable for return, and hence these institutions do not promote or assist in the return of Syrians from Turkey. Therefore, as a signatory of the UN Convention of Refugees, Turkey is bound by its commitment to non-refoulment, hence cannot follow a policy of forced return/deportation. UNHCR and IOM in Turkey assist in the return of other nationalities that are captured in Turkey, or while crossing the Aegean, such as Afghanis and Iraqis. Yet, the records of state institutions indicate that even though these assisted returns are to safe areas/countries of origin, most of the voluntary or involuntary returnees come back to Turkey when circumstances allow. This finding alone casts doubt on the success of a return policy for Syrians as long as the security inside the country remains a concern.