

## Policy Brief 2

# Reception and Integration of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

## Executive Summary

This Policy Brief focuses on reception and integration policies, practices and humanitarian responses to refugee immigration between 2011 and 2017 in Turkey. Protection under international law is limited for migrants, since Turkey does not grant refugee status to non-European refugees (instead granting “conditional refugee status” or “temporary protection status.”) This Policy Brief addresses the main challenges of reception and integration for migrants under temporary protection (mainly Syrians) in Turkey and offers some policy recommendations for different stakeholders. Our research is primarily based on interviews with stakeholders and forced migrants conducted in İstanbul, İzmir, Şanlıurfa and Ankara in 2018.

Overall, Turkey’s forced migrants face a very challenging situation, as they are frequently subject to new regulations due to the country’s rapidly changing, polarized political climate; policy shifts; securitization; they are pressed into the lowest social classes, making due with sub-standard living conditions and suffer from mental and physical health conditions brought on by their journeys and on-going daily struggles. Yet, they do make a home in Turkey, finding ways to support their families, enrol their children in schools and access healthcare. They become integrated even without a coherent national policy. Most wish for greater political and social rights, the possibility of long-term, secure settlement, as well as increased societal acceptance in their communities.

Recent geopolitical developments as well as the start of the global pandemic, Covid-19, make the possibility of attaining these basic goals seem further away than ever before.

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**RESPOND** is a Horizon 2020 project which aims at studying the multilevel governance of migration in Europe and beyond.

This policy brief is based on analysis of reports, political speeches, legal documents and interviews.



## Reception Governance

In Turkey, Syrians were first registered by the camps authorities under the surveillance of the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) in collaboration with the Directorate General of Migration Management. From the very beginning of the Syrian civil war, Turkey had a state-centric model of reception. All Syrian nationals, Palestinian refugees, and stateless persons living in Syria are under the temporary protection regime in Turkey. Initially, Turkey established camps for the most vulnerable groups and has generally been supportive of self-settlement. The camps are now almost completely closed down. As of May 2020, only 1,7% of Syrians reside in the camps. Since the beginning of mass migration in 2011, Turkey adopted a flexible, but controllable, approach by making residence permits tied to a certain province. The reception of Syrian refugees in Turkey is mainly based on a discourse of tolerance and benevolence driven from path-dependent ethno-cultural and religious premises dating back to the Ottoman Empire of the late 19th century as well as to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the 1920s. It is known that harsh reception policies become a tool to ensure the temporary nature of refugee stay. The Turkish camps offered power, hot water, schools, playgrounds, and job training courses to the migrants. Turkey's camps were even praised by international media as the "perfect refugee camps". Irrespective of the conditions within, however, 98% of refugees in Turkey have chosen self-settlement mainly in urban areas, rejecting the camp option. The Turkish case, therefore, suggests that there was a restriction of movement, isolation and a passive life inside the camps.

## Integration Governance or Non-Integration Governance?

Syrians are gradually integrating in all major areas. However, integration is far from uniform, but varies according to gender, age, life stage, social class and other factors. Among the three regions of Turkey in which we conducted research (Şanlıurfa, İzmir and Istanbul), integration seems to be slightly smoother for migrants due to shared linguistic and social ties in Şanlıurfa and slightly more challenging for migrants due to host community reception in İzmir. But, in general we observed only slight differences in service provision between the three cities.

Syrians have established formal and informal grassroots organizations for humanitarian relief, socio-religious services and empowerment via employment, particularly in the border cities and in Istanbul. They actively participate in activities organized for social cohesion by municipalities, local NGOs or faith-based actors. However, their participation often remains tokenist manner, as they are rarely able to make rights claims. Some organizations, having socio-economic capital are able to collaborate with organizations of the Syrian diaspora elsewhere. Also, some Syrian community leaders and grassroots organizations emphasize Arabic teaching, literature and art among the refugee community to maintain Syrian identity.

## Labour Market

At the heart of self-sufficiency is the ability for individuals to earn a living and provide for their families. Under temporary protection, refugees do not have the right to work without obtaining a hard-to-get work permit. Before the enactment of Law 8375 in January 2016, which allowed Syrians under temporary protection to have work permits only under certain conditions and with certain restrictions, there were only 7,351 work permits issued to Syrians. They were mostly issued to those who started a business. The number of Syrians who received work permits in 2019 was around 65,000. This is still a low number compared to the total number of Syrians in Turkey who have no way to support themselves besides working and who are provided just a small amount of cash-transfer- the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), known as "Kızılay cards". In Turkey, around 1.7 million of the most vulnerable refugees receive these monthly cash-transfers of 120 Turkish liras financed by the EU in collaboration with the World Food Programme, the Turkish Red Crescent and Turkish government institutions. The cards have been distributed by Turkish authorities since 2016.

Without easy legal channels to access the labour market, the informal sector becomes the only option for most individuals to earn a living. Jobs are mostly found in the textile, construction, service and agricultural sectors. Wages for Syrians are generally reported to be only half of the minimum legal salary and some participants reported making as little as 30 TL a day. It should be mentioned of course that none of these jobs provide job security, occupational safety, or social security benefits.

## Education

With regards to education, around two thirds of Syrian children are now in school, and urgent steps are needed to ensure that the remainder enrol as soon as possible. New programmes supported by the EU and the Ministry of National Education have been implemented to smooth the transition of Syrians into Turkish schools and to improve educational outcomes of Syrians. Our research shows that there are still barriers to access and tensions in schools, among children and between children and teachers. There is a strong need for more cohesion programming and diversity education. Adult language education is also an urgent need, particularly an increased number of courses and more Turkish-language teacher training is required.



## Housing

The average size of a Syrian refugee family is just above 5 people, with an average of 2 families in each household. Housing and living costs are higher for Syrian refugees due to abuse by landlords, and they are generally higher in Istanbul than in other parts of the country, resulting in multiple families living under the same roof. A majority of Syrians navigate their way in Turkey with overwhelmed public and support services, coupled with a language barrier. Even though assistance and protection are being sporadically provided by a number of aid agencies to the refugee population settled in urban areas, urban refugees struggle to secure a minimum of social and economic rights, such as education, housing and healthcare. Many families live in abject poverty, often in unsanitary, even dangerous, housing conditions. Despite all of their difficulties, they are managing to create spaces of comfort through furniture purchases and personal decorating choices. They generally speak positively of their neighbourhoods, and our research has shown that they are emplacing themselves vividly in their cities through newly opened restaurants, shops and cultural centres.

## Healthcare Services

Refugees face significant physical and mental health difficulties, including hypertension, diabetes and depression. Some health issues are due to the aftermath of war while others can be directly attributed to living at or below the poverty line. Legally, if they are registered under the TPS system, Syrians have access to Turkey's public hospitals free of charge. However, they are impacted significantly by difficulties in registration, thereby impacting access to healthcare services. Many interlocutors during the field research reported a lack of access to healthcare facilities able to provide Arabic speaking staff and doctors. They attributed this as a major concern and barrier for access of Syrians to basic services. Due to the size of big cities such as Istanbul and Izmir, local transportation is also reported to be another major barrier in terms of accessing services. Since the very beginning of the mass migration, it has not been easy for Syrian refugees to travel in the country from one city to another. Domestic travel was subject to permission (travel permit) to be granted by the local authorities. This difficulty impacts both physical and mental health. International travel is impossible and travel to Syria is subject to specific permissions given during religious festival times or for funerals and trade purposes.

## Citizenship, Belonging and Gender

Most migrants claim that they want citizenship; Syrians do not find their Temporary Protection Status to confer sufficient rights. The Turkish state has been bestowing citizenship on some migrants, seemingly on an invitational basis and according to the refugee's educational or class qualifications. While Syrian businessmen who received citizenship are pleased as it facilitated their business transactions and travelling, some others who recently acquired citizenship felt disadvantaged as they lost access to social assistance and men are now subject to compulsory military service. More information about the requirements and process is needed. Migrants are eager to participate in the political process, but this is not possible in today's Turkey, even the possibility of having a Syrian candidate in elections sparked heated tensions in 2018.

In general, Syrian migrants feel a strong belonging in the country due to historical, cultural links, but in local communities, tensions are at an all-time high.

Syrian women's entry into the labour market in Turkey is low, but still creating significant changes in terms of social relations within families and the broader Syrian community. For some women, migration has led to a welcome evasion of traditional roles, while others feel more burdened by new challenges and responsibilities. Traditional family roles are under pressure, leading to divorce and a rise in domestic violence. Many men are unable to maintain their status of being the sole breadwinner that they held in Syria, leading to family tensions.

## Methodology

The policy brief is based on RESPOND reports comprising data from different sources in order to provide comprehensive insights regarding policies, regulations, practices and experiences of border management, reception, protection and integration in Turkey. The discussion of politics and legal regulations is based on a document analysis of policy and legislative documents. In addition, the reports draw from 84 semi-structured interviews conducted with different meso level stakeholders in four cities, namely: Istanbul (17), Izmir (29), Sanliurfa (34), and Ankara (4). The meso level analysis is based on total 84 interviews conducted in Istanbul (17), Izmir (29), Sanliurfa (34), and Ankara (4) by members of the Turkish research team between July 2018 and November 2018. Interviews were conducted with high level state officers, including representatives from ministries, and directorates, local government bodies (municipalities, city councils), law enforcement agencies, provincial civil servants, experts from international organizations (IOM, UNHCR), representatives of international, national, local non-governmental organizations and lawyers dealing with cases about migrants.

Micro level interviews were conducted by the same research team in Istanbul (40), Izmir (43), and Sanliurfa (20) to understand the ways in which refugees respond to the policies, regulations and practices of reception at local and national levels. 103 refugees of mostly Syrian origin, as well as some Iraqis and Afghans, were interviewed in the summer of 2018. The data was analysed on the basis of a qualitative content analysis approach which combines deductive and inductive elements. The software, Nvivo 12 Pro, was used as an essential tool in the study for the processing of data.



## Policy Recommendations

**1. Making use of our migration knowledge to develop a sustainable migration policy:** Turkey has a long history of accommodating refugees since the 19th century of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey also has a long history of outgoing labour migration since the second half of the 20th century. It is by combining these two migration experiences – the reception of various mass migrations and the Turkish labour emigrants – that Turkey can build the intellectual foundation for its own migrant/refugee reception and integration policies.

**2. Managing public opinion:** Engaging with the public and managing public opinion is of essential importance. There is a need to build a specific migrant/refugee reception and integration policy with the main purpose of reducing tensions between what the government does and how the society may interpret the government's actions.

**3. Engaging the media:** The role of the media is clearly an integral part of public engagement. The DGMM should work on a communication strategy to appeal to the mainstream media promoting solidarity and human protection values, with biographies and refugee testimonials, and an explanation of how they relate to all of us.

**4. Improving reception on arrival:** Reception facilities at borders, including airports, should include all necessary assistance and the provision of basic necessities of life, including food, shelter and basic sanitary and health facilities. Even for a short stay, family unity and privacy are essential. Single men and women should be accommodated separately, and families should have the possibility to stay together in the same premises.

**5. Ensuring better accommodation:** In most instances, refugees are destitute. Many depend on the solidarity of friends or relatives who may host them temporarily. Even when they can afford rented or hotel accommodation, owing to language difficulties, hostility of landlords or racial prejudices, asylum-seekers often encounter difficulties when trying to find private accommodation. This proves even more difficult when asylum-seekers are not permitted to work or cannot find employment. The state should develop programmes of quality control to ensure that all refugee housing meets minimum quality and safety standards. The government should allow migrants to move freely between Turkish cities without the need for travel permission.

**6. Access to health services:** Most refugees suffer from health problems, including emotional or mental disorders that require prompt professional treatment. Arabic translators should be available at all state hospitals and government offices, and hospital staff should be trained regarding refugee needs. The state, IOs and I/NGOs should increase awareness about psychosocial health services among refugees, and provide greater access to services.

**7. Access to education:** Following the departure from the country of origin, children asylum-seekers suffer from the forced interruption of their education. In order to restore a semblance of normality, it is essential that children benefit from primary and secondary education of a satisfactory quality. The state should also increase childcare access and language course opportunities and incentives so that adults are better able to attend language courses.

**8. Improving employment opportunities:** It is widely accepted that dependence on the state is reduced when refugees are working. Apart from the financial aspect, the right to work is an essential element of human dignity, particularly in the case of lengthy stay pending the outcome of the asylum procedure. As is already the practice in many countries, refugees should, preferably, be granted permission to work when the length of the asylum procedure exceeds a certain period or where the "package" of support offered to asylum-seekers requires independent financial self-sufficiency to maintain an adequate standard of living. The state should simplify and standardize the process of ensuring recognition of qualifications and university degrees earned in Syria.

**9. Citizenship and Political Participation:** The state should ensure a clear path to long-term residence and citizenship, with openly publicized procedures and requirements.

**10. Protecting unaccompanied and separated Children:** Reception standards should address in particular the special educational, medical, psychological, recreational and other special needs of children, in accordance with relevant international human rights law, UNHCR guidelines and Executive Committee Conclusions. A legal representative should be designated for the handling of the social and legal rights of separated children throughout the asylum procedure, and otherwise to ensure that the child's best interests are represented throughout the child's stay in the country.

**11. Addressing the needs of elderly refugees:** The vulnerability inherent in advanced age makes prompt access to medical and health care an essential condition for this group. Also, lack of mobility, a sense of isolation and abandonment, as well as chronic dependency are factors, which the host authorities will need to take into account when designing adequate reception policies for this group.

**12. Supporting female refugees:** At the initial stage of the asylum procedure, female refugees need to be counselled on their rights, including the right to submit an individual application when family members accompany them. As is the case in many countries, female staff using female interpreters should interview women asylum-seekers. To the extent possible, efforts should be made to arrange female staff to carry out the determination of refugee status. Academics should conduct more gender-sensitive research in Turkey to inform policy development. The state should increase the number of women's shelters and provide training to police, DGMM and other government staff on the topic of gender-related violence.



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## Project Identity

<b>Project name:</b>	RESPOND: Multilevel Governance of Mass Migration in Europe and Beyond
<b>Acronym:</b>	RESPOND
<b>Project coordination:</b>	Uppsala University   Önver Cetrez and Soner Barthoma
<b>Website:</b>	<a href="http://www.respondmigration.com">www.respondmigration.com</a>
<b>Funding:</b>	Horizon 2020 Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2014-2020), H2020-SC6-ENG-GLOBALLY-2016-2017
<b>Project no:</b>	770564
<b>Duration:</b>	December 2017 – November 2020 (36 months)

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*Further readings:*

1. RECEPTION POLICIES, PRACTICES & RESPONSES: TURKEY COUNTRY REPORT  
<https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-reception-policies-practices-responses-turkey-country-report>
2. REFUGEE PROTECTION REGIMES: TURKEY COUNTRY REPORT:  
<https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/refugee-protection-regimes-turkey-country-report>
3. BORDER MANAGEMENT AND MIGRATION CONTROLS IN TURKEY REPORT  
<https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/border-management-migration-controls-turkey-report>
4. TURKEY – COUNTRY REPORT: LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK OF MIGRATION GOVERNANCE  
<https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog/2018/8/1/comparative-report-legal-and-policy-framework-of-migration-governance-pclyw-ydmzj-bzdbn-sc548-ncfcp>
5. INTEGRATION IN TURKEY REPORT (FORTHCOMING)  
<https://www.respondmigration.com/wp-blog>

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