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After the EU-Turkey refugee deal: a perspective from Turkey

[European Union](#)

Turkey's feeling of being undervalued

While hosting nearly three million Syrian refugees, Turkey feels that its generous refugee policy has been undervalued by the international community, and particularly by its European counterparts. In fact, this feeling has prevailed since the outbreak of the refugee flows from Syria in 2011. But it had peaked in the summer of 2015 at a time when the country was hosting 2.5 million refugees, while the European countries, which were facing flows of a few thousand Syrian refugees, were in panic, closed their borders and blamed Turkey and criticised it for its loose border control. It appears that as far as the Turkish position is concerned, there has been a setting of “responsibility shifting” rather than “responsibility sharing”.

The uncertain EU-Turkey deal

The EU-Turkey deal was a product of “the crisis of summer 2015”. In order to limit the flows of refugees and irregular migrants, the EU and Turkey agreed upon a “one in, one out” deal in March 2016. Based on this agreement, all new irregular migrants who arrive on the Greek islands through Turkey as of 20 March 2016 would be returned to Turkey starting on 4 April 2016. For every Syrian who is sent back, one registered Syrian in Turkey will be resettled in the EU. The deal aims to prevent unauthorised migrants from entering Europe through improper channels. Moreover, Turkey has agreed to take any necessary steps to keep the passage into Europe under control.

In exchange, the EU has agreed to a payment of €3 billion to the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, which will fund the support and aid efforts including housing, food, employment, education and healthcare for the Syrian migrants. In addition, visa requirements for Turkish citizens were to be lifted by the end of June 2016, “provided that Turkey fulfils all benchmarks required for such a lift”.

Since the adoption of the EU-Turkey deal, the targeted aims are being critically questioned by many both in the EU and Turkey. There is only one somehow successful result of this deal, which partly satisfies the European side: there has been a considerable decline in the numbers of irregular border crossings between Turkey and Greece since March 2016. Apart from this, there has been very little progress with the other targets of the agreement.

The EU has not been so successful in returning the irregular migrants and Syrian refugees from Greece to Turkey. Only a very small portion of the promised €3 billion has arrived in Turkey. The EU's decision on the free-visa regime between Turkey and the EU has been continuously delayed, and consequently the political leadership in Turkey has begun to intimidate the European decision-makers, indicating that if the visa requirements for Turkish citizens are not lifted, Turkey might not fulfil its obligations under this deal. Hence, the future of the EU-Turkey deal seems to be quite uncertain.

Turkey's attempt to formulate medium- to long-term solutions

It is becoming clear that the temporary asylum of Syrian refugees is turning into a protracted refugee situation. Even if there is a political settlement in Syria, it is highly unlikely, at least in the short term, that many Syrian refugees will return home, due to residual societal tensions, infrastructure destruction and the weakened economy in Syria. A realistic recognition of the permanent medium- to long-term presence of Syrians in Turkey necessitates a structured set of economic, social and political measures to support the refugees. Turkish authorities increasingly acknowledge that coping with the question of Syrian refugees is not a question of halting refugees' flight and reversing their movement, but requires practical actions towards providing them with better settlement arrangements and opportunities to integrate into Turkish society.

Turkish policy makers have made certain concrete steps in order to enable integration. For instance, the scope and benefits of Turkey's temporary protection status were expanded by "the Regulation on Temporary Protection" passed in October 2014, which further facilitated access to humanitarian aid. In January 2016, "the Regulation on Work Permit of Refugees under Temporary Protection" took effect, allowing refugees to apply for work permits six months after their registration under temporary protection status. In July 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan stated that Syrian refugees living in Turkey could eventually be granted citizenship. Although the details of the government's announcement to grant citizenship are not yet known, the statement indicates that the Turkish authorities circuitously accept the likelihood of a process whereby the protracted displacement of Syrians turns into their long-term, and even permanent, settlement.

The need for cooperation beyond the EU-Turkey deal rationale

Nevertheless, there is a natural limit of absorption capacity for a mass movement and settlement of nearly three million foreigners. The country has no or little experience of this type of immigration to cope effectively in terms of administrative, legal, political and social arrangements. There is an enormous need for material and non-material resources which cannot be handled alone by a country like Turkey.

Consequently, international cooperation is very much needed in order to provide better living and integration opportunities for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. However, the ethos of this cooperation should not be centred on halting refugees' flight and reversing their movement as happened inappropriately in the context of the EU-Turkey deal. On the contrary, it should target various practical actions towards providing refugees with better settlement and integration opportunities.

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