

SITUATION REPORT Syrian Refugees in Turkey, 31 August 2013

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY

The “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” passed by the Grand National Assembly in April 2013, which will come into effect next year, presents a step forward in setting up a proper domestic legal framework and administrative infrastructure for asylum in Turkey. Despite this development, the statute of non-European refugees remains unchanged, as Turkey has chosen to not lift the geographical limitation it applies to the signed 1951 Refugee Convention. Syrian refugees, being non-European, are granted “conditional refugee status”, which is temporary and does not allow their transfer to third countries, legal employment, or education. But Turkey has been flexible and has delivered a few residence permits, has turned a blind eye to the establishment of Syrian schools, allows Syrian students to attend universities as guests, and continues to provide free medical care to all Syrians since January 2013.

As of 26 August 2013, the number of Syrian refugees registered with the Turkish authorities or awaiting registration amounts to 458,837 ([UNHCR](#)). The refugee population in Turkey has more than doubled since January 2013 and the UN estimates this number to reach one million by the end of the year.

As of 26 August 2013 (Source: UNHCR Turkey Syrian Refugee Daily Sitrep)	
NUMBER OF REFUGEES REGISTERED AND WITH REGISTRATION APPOINTMENTS	458,837
Total number of refugees in camps	200,551
Total number of refugees outside the camps	243,985
Total number of refugees with registration appointments	14,301
Estimated total number of refugees in Turkey	500,000-600,000

As of the end of August, 200,551 Syrians are hosted in refugee camps that are established along the border provinces. The Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) continues to provide assistance in the 20 camps for Syrian refugees in 10 provinces, of which 4 were opened in 2013. All camps are operating at full capacity, except for Midyat tent camp in Mardin province, with a capacity of 6,000 refugees and currently hosting 2,000 refugees. The Turkish refugee camps for Syrians are known to be of high-standard, providing shelter, food, water and sanitation facilities, non-food items, education and health services.

On 6 August 2013, UNHCR Representative to Turkey announced that the number of refugees living outside the camps exceeds those living in camps. The Turkish government started registering Syrian refugees outside the camps in March 2013 in Gaziantep. This might be one of the reasons non-camp population figures are the highest in this province. Unconfirmed sources of information estimate the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey to be as high as 600,000.

As of 26 August 2013 (Source: UNHCR Turkey Syrian Refugee Daily Sitrep)	
Registered refugees outside the camps	243,985
Gaziantep	98,855
Sanliurfa	33,685
Hatay	46,302
Kilis	25,200
Mardin	33,418
Kahramanmaraş	9,630
Adana	3,000
Adiyaman	190
Osmaniye	2,006
Other	481

OPEN-DOOR POLICY RECONSIDERED?

Turkey has an 880 kilometer-long border with Syria, and 10 official land border crossings in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Mardin and Sanliurfa. With the outbreak of violence, the Turkish government opened its doors to conflict victims in April 2011, and since then escalating numbers of Syrians have found refuge in the country. With the conflict in Syria in its third year, Syrian refugees are increasingly moving inland, beyond the border provinces where they initially settled.

As the Turkish government sees no hope of an end to the conflict in the near future, it is realizing the financial burden of the provided assistance to the Syrian population in the refugee camps. When coupled with steadily inflating number of refugees, increasing tension between the local community and the Syrian refugees, the security incidents reported inside Turkey, and the escalating fighting between Islamist radical and Syrian Kurdish groups in border areas, Turkey is forced to reconsider its policy towards Syrian refugees. At any given point in time, there is no transparent information on the status of border crossings, whether they are open, closed or restricted. It is difficult to claim that Turkey has a defined policy and clear quotas, with the Turkish authorities adjusting as events unfold.

Already in October 2012, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported Turkish border closures to regulate the flow of refugees. There is an estimated 100,000 people living in makeshift camps at the Syrian side of the border, awaiting entry into Turkey, but are stuck because of border closures. In July 2013, HRW reiterated its warning against Turkey's policy of restricting access to Syrian refugees by the strict management of its borders, claiming that Turkey sporadically allows small numbers of refugees from the makeshift IDP camps on the Syrian side. Aid workers reported the Turkish border guards oftentimes allowing only those with urgent medical needs to cross into Turkey.

Bab al-Salam border-crossing is for now closed. In Bab al-Salam city in Syria, thousands of Syrian IDPs live in a camp, some of them since August 2012. On 25 July 2013, the camp was targeted by airstrikes. Turkey allowed the 7 injured people to cross the border to receive medical care. Some crossed irregularly and set up makeshift shelters in a public park in Kilis. Atma crossing is also strictly regulated. There have been instances of Turkish authorities refusing to admit Syrian families to cross into Turkey giving the excuse that nearby refugee camps are full.

However, Ankara denies reconsidering its open-door policy. Borders are not sealed. Even though the Turkish government called them "smugglers", on 12 August 2013, 3,000 Syrians entered Turkey₂

through Akcakale border crossing, following the intensification of the fighting between Syrian Kurdish and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups in the border areas.

In one year, according to a study carried out by the UN, Turkey moved from 59th place to 10th on the ranking of countries hosting refugees. As of July 2013, Turkish government officials stated that the country has already spent \$1 billion of its own money while international assistance has not exceeded \$100 million. The Turkish government claims it costs \$2 million per camp per month to keep these sites running well. During the same month, UNHCR High Commissioner called Syrian neighboring countries “to keep borders open and receive all Syrians who seek protection” but also urged European countries to take “a more generous and consistent approach to Syrians seeking shelter and asylum in Europe” to share the burden. Indeed, only 40,000 refugees have been resettled in Europe since the beginning of the conflict, including two-thirds in Germany and Sweden.

Hosting such a number of refugees presents a financial burden for Turkey with the number of refugees continuing to increase and international funds being insufficient. The protracted conflict decreases chances of seeing refugees returning to their homes. Turkey sees the situation as a threat to its national stability and security as high numbers of refugees go back and forth between Turkey and Syria, many of them smuggling oil, arms, and other items. Turkey is also worried that the presence of refugees might trigger sectarian tensions among Sunnis, Alevis, Turkmens and Kurds in the country.

Therefore, the Turkish government is cautious with its open-door policy. Behind the political rhetoric showing Turkey as a committed country to support Syrian refugees especially in the refugee camps, the government has been reluctant in its support to Syrian refugees settled outside the camps, designating a certain area in the southern part of the country in which assistance to Syrian refugees can be delivered. For a long time, the government tried to conceal the presence of Syrian refugees out of camps and in inland areas, including Istanbul, and has refused to allow non-camp Syrian refugees to receive assistance.

Since early summer 2013, the Turkish government has been making progress in terms of registering international NGOs, keeping track of relief goods and services delivered, and coordinating the humanitarian effort. The needs of out-of-camp yet registered Syrian refugees are entered into an electronic database system called EYDAS (Elektronik Yardim Dagitim Sistemi - Electronic Aid Distribution System), established by AFAD in early July 2013, to which national and registered international NGOs enter their assistance data. An accreditation system, for both national and international NGOs, is also in the last stages of being set up by AFAD. Aid agencies providing support to Syrian refugees in Turkey will be signing bilateral MoUs with the Turkish government.

Similarly, Turkey does not openly facilitate humanitarian assistance beyond its borders in Northern Syria. Aware of the presence of IDP camps beyond its borders, the Turkish government provides “zero-point” aid on the Turkey-Syria border, but this support is difficult to quantify, and is for sure not enough to meet the needs of those in need. Supplies sent by Turkey are driven to the no man’s land, where they are unloaded and transferred to the Syrian side. Much of this assistance is received by Syrian aid groups, which is then distributed inside the country.

TURKISH MILITARY ON ALERT

As the chances of an international military intervention in Syria are growing, Turkey has put its armed forces on alert. The Turkish army reinforced its presence along the Syrian border, deploying in a very

visible manner canons and ground-to-ground missiles, in addition to the 6 defensive patriot missiles batteries deployed by NATO in February 2013.

The tension that has been growing in the border areas between Turkey and Syria in the past couple of months are further reasons for Turkey to consider being a part of military intervention into Syria. Some of the security incidents occurring in the area in last months have sometimes caused loss of lives.

17 August 2013: Two mortar shells fired from Syria landed in Hatay province, causing a forest fire. Two hectares of forest were damaged.

12 August 2013: 3,000 Syrian people, reported to be smugglers, tried to cross into Turkey near Oğulpınar border crossing. Turkish military used tear gas and fired warning shots in the air.

29 July 2013: Turkish soldiers shot into the air and fired tear gas to disperse a crowd of around 1,000 “fuel smugglers” trying to cross from Syrian into Turkey.

22 July 2013: A Turkish border guard killed one of 8 civilians trying to cross irregularly into Syria from Hatay province. According to the Turkish army, the group of civilians started to fire on the Turkish patrol after they received a warning.

19 July 2013: Turkey deployed military units along its border with Syria following clashes between a Syrian Kurdish armed party and al-Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front.

17 July 2013: Four people, including 2 teenagers, were killed in Ceylanpınar, Turkish border city facing Ras al-Ain in Syria by stray bullets and mortars from inside Syria.

GATEWAY TO ISTANBUL

The recent threat of a military intervention in Syria has resulted in thousands of new arrivals in Turkey. One group of Syrian refugees are Alawi Turkmen who have found themselves sleeping in parks in Istanbul. On 30 August 2013, around 120 Syrians of 35 Alawi Turkmen families have settled in a park in Fatih district of Istanbul, which hosts up to 25,000 Syrian refugees ([Radikal](#)). These new arrivals are only a few of the 80,000 estimated Syrian refugees currently residing in Istanbul.



According to data collected by Support to Life (STL) team in Istanbul, there are up to 15,000 Syrian families in Istanbul, most of them having arrived since the second quarter of this year. The main concentration of Syrian refugees in Istanbul is in Fatih, Zeytinburnu, Bayrampasa and Esenler

districts, with Syrians families having settled in Gaziosmanpasa, Bagcilar, Basaksehir and Kucukcekmece. The primary reason for the choice of location for settlement is linked to the existence of support mechanisms as well as income opportunities. Community networks among Syrians is an important factor for the decision to settle in a particular location once families have arrived in Istanbul.

Syrian families choosing to settle in Istanbul have explained increased rents in the border provinces and a lack of opportunities for income as the two main reasons for their decision. Indeed, STL team has observed spacious flats with better conditions for the same amount of rents paid in Hatay by Syrian families. A family paying 400 TL (approximately 170 EUR) for a 3-room flat compared a 2-room flat for the same rent in Antakya. When coupled with higher chances of finding daily work, Istanbul is becoming more the choice of Syrian refugees, who have started losing faith in an end to the violence in their country and a safe return to their hometowns.

Some Syrian families have also indicated that one of the reasons behind their decision to settle in Istanbul was the possibilities of sending their children to middle and higher education facilities, both Syrian and Turkish. STL visited two kindergartens and four Syrian schools, namely the Syrian Jasmin Kindergarten in the district of Basaksehir, Sanabel Alnur Kindergarten in Fatih, Kademoon High School in Esenler, Dar Alfarah School in Basaksehir, Istanbul Alawael Suriye School in Fatih, and Al-amal Almushrek School in Zeytinburnu. Syrian schools in Istanbul host between 800 to 2,000 students with dozens of teachers.

There is a mix of Arab, Kurdish and Turkmen Syrians in Istanbul, having moved mainly from Aleppo and Afrin regions in Syria. Most families are intact, while STL has come across several separated families, with some family members living in Lebanon and some men working in the Gulf Arab countries and sending remittances to family members here. It is important to note that a significant number of visited Syrian families mentioned family members leaving Lebanon to join their families in Istanbul, given the increasing cost of living and limited resources and opportunities in Lebanon. There are different classes of Syrians currently settled in Istanbul, ranging from the relatively better off families to Syrian Roma groups whose children are begging on the streets of Istanbul, particularly in the Eminonu neighborhood.

STL team visited two Syrian families in Kucukpazar neighborhood near Eminonu. GOC-DER, working for the rights of the Kurdish population in Turkey, hosted STL team in a neighborhood whose inhabitants are mostly Kurds having migrated from eastern Turkey. GOC-DER explained Kucukpazar neighborhood to serve as a transit place for Syrian newcomers, mainly Kurdish, who oftentimes choose to move to the outskirts of Istanbul where accommodation standards are higher and work opportunities greater.

The first family visited in Kucukpazar composed of a mother and her 3 children, the father having stayed in Syria to continue their struggle. At the time of the visit, the family from Aleppo had arrived less than two months earlier. Being Kurdish Syrians, they were receiving ample help from the local Kurdish families. The mother and her 3 children were living in a single room of 9 square meters with a monthly rent of 350 TL (approx. 145 EUR). With sugar, rice, flour and water stacked in one of the corners, there was no direct access to running water in the flat, as the family was sharing a bathroom and kitchen with the other inhabitants in the same building.

The second family was an expecting woman with her 2 children and a mother-in-law. This family lived in similar conditions to the first family visited. Both families mentioned their children selling water on the street and begging as their source of income. Support from neighbors was stated to be an important factor in survival and paying rents. The reason both families moved to Istanbul was rumors about harassment in the refugee camps, which their husbands had heard were particularly dangerous for women and young girls. The Kurdish community here takes better care of them, one of the women said.

Apart from Kucukpazar, STL team visited a number of other districts in Istanbul where Syrian refugee families are settled. Of these districts, Zeytinburnu and Fatih are the ones in which most aid and services are delivered to Syrian families, both through self-help initiatives by the Syrians (Syrian-Turks in some cases) and through Turkish NGOs, mainly the faith-based aid agencies. Food and non-food relief goods have been supplied by aid agencies and the relevant public offices/municipalities, while schools have been established and being run mainly with the support of the Syrian diaspora. Many Syrian NGOs in Istanbul are based close to neighborhoods where Syrian refugees are settled, supplying food and non-food items, as well as providing medical services for free, developing skills trainings and Turkish language courses to facilitate entry into the job market.

STL team observed that neighborhoods in the Basaksehir district, such as Altinsehir, Guvercintepe and Ortamahalle, are home to a large number of Syrian refugee families who have received no assistance. There are no schools for Syrian students in this part of the city but newly arrived families have been able to find daily work as well as affordable rents for 2-room flats. The mix of Kurdish and Arab Syrians have managed to establish a connection with the local communities, that are mostly Kurdish migrants from Diyarbakir, Bitlis and Mardin, in search of work in the neighboring confectionary factories and small sized workshops in the industrial zone of western Istanbul. Local Kurds have been facilitating the Syrian Kurds in settling in and establishing connections with the non-formal economic activities in the area. Those managing to secure a monthly income earn 600-700 TL (250-300 EUR) per month, while Syrian men and women finding daily jobs earn between 10-20 TL (4-8 EUR) per day.

The district of Basaksehir seems to be an area which is becoming the more preferred choice of settlement for Syrian refugee families, both for those who have newly arrived and for others currently settled in the more central districts of Istanbul and who have seen more affordable rents and better income opportunities nearer to the industrial zone in the west of Istanbul. Despite the advantages, one area of concern for a number of Syrian families is the risk of drug abuse, crime and prostitution for Syrian youth. Kurdish hosts in Basaksehir also stated a similar concern over Kurdish youth from Syria getting involved in the drug dealing business, as the need for income becomes more pressing among the Syrian refugee community.

CONTACT INFORMATION

Gökhan Erkutlu, Senior Operations Manager
Support to Life / Hayata Destek Derneği
Katip Salih Sokak, No 48/1
Kosuyolu 34718, Istanbul, Turkey
gerkutlu@supporttolife.org
+90 532 706 4792
+90 216 336 2262