Understanding Migration Management and its Impact on Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Turkey is traditionally characterized as a “sending” country of migration, particularly due to the large number and high profile of labor migrants and refugees in Europe in the 1970s-1980s-1990s. However, in reality, Turkey is also a transit country and a country of immigration and asylum. In 2010, for the first time, net immigration to Turkey surpassed net emigration from Turkey (İçduyu 1: 1). Today, Turkey’s migration policies are changing to reflect these new migration patterns as well as to align with EU migration policies that must be met to complete Turkey’s EU accession process. At the same time, Turkey is now facing its highest influx of immigration in the Republic’s history as Syrians are welcomed in Turkey as “guests” under the legal clause of “temporary protection”. As a result, Turkey is responding with a new means of managing migration.

Despite Turkey’s new adoption of migration management discourse as evidenced in new migration policy (Law No. 6458) and the establishment of a Directorate General for Migration Management, this paper questions the extent to which Turkey’s migration management is a distinct phenomenon from migration control. It further critically analyzes whether this new migration management in Turkey is currently fostering effective cooperation among the management system’s various actors and in doing so, meeting the needs of Syrians in the country. These aims are outlined in the paper’s two subsequent parts. First, I outline the influencing factors on Turkey’s reform of its migration policies, noting that the reform has not resulted from internal initiatives, but instead reflects global discourse and EU pressure to conduct such reforms. Simultaneously, I problematize the extent to which the new discourse of migration management actually differs from migration control. Due to the importance of decentralized and diverse actors in the new migration management system, I overview the actors involved in the management of Syrians in Turkey in the second part of the paper, and conclude that Turkey’s current migration management does not yet result in
an effective response to Syrian “guests” in Turkey and their needs; instead the
decentralization of the new migration regime threatens to squander resources and does
not necessarily translate into more efficient responses. I argue that Turkey’s current
migration management is not yet an effective response to Turkey’s new migration patterns
and the reality of the estimated 1.5 million Syrians residing in Turkey.

I. Migration Reform

Today’s governments – together with the UN, IOs, NGOs and migrant networks – seek to
manage migration. In the absence of a global regime for international migration, filling
the gap between national governance and international policies today remains largely a
responsibility of NGOs and migrant networks. Therefore, national governments, IOs,
NGOs and migrant networks are all important actors in managing today’s global
migration. Due to the diversity of these actors and the various practices and discourses
that they advocate regarding migration, understanding how these actors attempt to
manage migration requires examining each actor, their practices and discourses at all
managerial levels.

Turkey, like many other countries, has also now adopted the discourse of “migration
management” as part of a larger global shift and as a result of Europeanization efforts
away from migration control. With a new decentralization and delegation of management
among various actors, it remains unclear to what extent today’s “migration
management” constitutes a break from traditional migration control or offers a more
effective and appropriate response to today’s migration patterns.

II. Turkey’s management of Syrian migration

Turkey’s migration reform also comes at a time when Turkey is being forced to respond
to immigration in a new way. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in the spring of
2011 on its southern border, Turkey has become “the third largest receiver of Syrian
refugees after Lebanon and Jordan” (İçduyu et al. 2014: 4), and has been welcoming
Syrian nationals since its announcement of an open door policy on immigration and the
guarantee of “temporary protection” in October 2011 (Kirişçi 2014: 1). Under Article 91 of
the Law 6458, temporary protection is granted “for foreigners who have been forced to
leave their country, cannot return to the country that they have left, and have arrived at
or crossed the borders of Turkey in a mass influx situation seeking immediate and
temporary protection” (Law No. 6458, Article 91). As such, under “temporary protection,”
Syrians’ admission to Turkish territory is unobstructed, forced returns are not permitted
and basic needs, including shelter, food and medical support, are being granted (RSN
2014).

As the highest immigrant influx in Turkey’s history, the immigration of Syrians and the
Turkish government’s facilitation of an “open-door” policy in response are
unprecedented in Turkey’s history (Kirişçi 2014: 8), yet are in line with today’s
international standards (RSN 2014). According to the UNHCR 2014 Syria Regional
Response Plan on Turkey, as of May 2014 there were “roughly 220,000 Syrian refugees
housed in 22 camps along the Syrian border with another 515,000 registered urban
refugees” and the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is estimated at 900,000; by
the end of this year, this number is expected to approach 1.5 million (UNHCR 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan: Turkey, in Kırısci 2014: 1,10).

The Turkish national government has, as discussed above, issued a new national Law on Foreigners and has established a General Directorate on Migration Management. However, due to the reality of decentralized migration management in Turkey, other provisions and projects are also being implemented at other levels of governance and among national and international governmental organizations, civil society organizations and migrant networks. Therefore in understanding the reality of migration management in Turkey, the role of all these various actors is outlined in the full version of this paper. The main actors active in Turkey’s migration management of Syrian immigrants can be evaluated from the national, international, civil society and local levels. Therefore, the full paper outlines the discourses and practices of the Turkish government and its new Directorate General of Migration Management, as well as those of the UNHCR and IOM, ASAM, selected NGOs and migrant networks.

Conclusion

The full version of this paper provides an overview of the current actors involved in managing migration of Syrian nationals in Turkey and attempts to show if and how these organizations cooperate and compete with one another in their work with Syrian refugees. This initial analysis will be expanded with in-depth interviews with many of these actors in Turkey’s migration management in the coming months; the results will be compiled in my Masters thesis next summer.

Particularly as Turkey adopts new migration policies that rely on the notion of “migration management,” it is important to examine the extent to which these reforms are being implemented. In outlining a few of the actors involved in Turkey’s “migration management,” the complexity of Turkey’s new “migration management” regime is evident. With a decentralized approach and the Turkish government’s reliance on NGOs, civil society organizations, and migrant networks as main actors in responding to Turkey’s influx of Syrians into its borders, we are able to recognize the cooperation and interworkings as well as competition of the national, supranational and main civil society organizations. However, the aid and advocacy efforts of national (and local) NGOs seem disconnected from this higher-level network of cooperation, indicating that response efforts are not coordinated to the maximum and that aid is consequently not applied as effectively as it could be. As a result, the overall response to Turkey’s Syrian “guests” remains under-effective and, while an important step towards its EU accession process and its harmonization with global standards, Turkey’s new policies and migration management regime do not yet constitute an effective or holistic response to Turkey’s new migration patterns and the reality of the needs of the estimated 1.5 million Syrians residing in Turkey.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


INDEX

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