

## **SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF CIVIL WAR IN SYRIA TO TURKEY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Today, the civil war in Turkey's neighbor Syria started in 2011 is still going on and the national and international problems it caused progressively increase. This situation of Syria, which is an important Middle Eastern country, did not influence only its people but also many countries mainly the neighbouring country Turkey and Russia, Iran and the US have either directly or indirectly been involved in this war. Today, Syria is still a Middle Eastern country, where the destruction between the people and the regime continues and international interests are foreseen and plans are made. The situation in Syria affects even other countries in the world on a global scale, so it is inevitable to influence the bordering country Turkey. Turkey's strategical geopolitical position makes it an area open to probable attacks from the Middle-East. Turkey experienced problems in its religious, military, commercial, and political relations with Syria because of this war and took measures against this war to protect its border security. After this civil war, Syrians began to come to Turkey in an increasing number and still live in Turkey. Of course, the number of these refugees (3 million) is not a small figure and has caused the effects of the civil war to be experienced in Turkey. The social, economic, administrative problems and of these refugees and problems related to accommodation occurred over time. Those refugees who live in almost all cities of Turkey have both had negative impacts on the city structure, the residents' social structure, family arrangement, job opportunities, and social issues and caused them to react. To investigate the sociological reflections of the Syrian civil war on the world in general, and on Turkey in particular, is the major aim of this study. Political, social, economic, cultural and military reflections of the Syrian civil war on Turkey will be examined. In this context, in this article the main frame of sociological reflections of the Syrian civil war on Turkey will be tried to be drawn.

**Keywords:** Syria, Civil-war, Middle East, Turkey, Sociological Reflection

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Arab Spring started in 2010 after a young man named Bouzizi set himself on fire in against police violence in Tunisia. At the beginning, it was widely believed that the Arab Spring would yield fruitful results; nevertheless, as time went by, the uprisings have led to calamity. The ongoing civil war in Syria caused great tragedies. The events in Syria had a negative impact on Turkey, as they did on other countries. Due to its neighbouring position, following the civil war, a wave of mobilization took place fostering a process of migration.

Syrians migrated in Turkey were sometimes referred to as refugees or asylum-seekers. After the outbreak of war in 2011, the "Temporary Protection Regulation" of October 13, 2014 was published. Although the document paved the way for Syrians to obtain a residence permit, it did not constitute a ground for permanent residency. The Syrians were aware that they would have to go back to their countries in the aftermath of the civil war. In the report obtained, it turned out that approximately 2.5 million Syrians migrated to Turkey. Today, in 2019, it is estimated that there are 3.7 million Syrians in Turkey.

The arrival of Syrians in Turkey had both sociological and political implications. From time to time, serious arguments would outbreak in political and social mediums, between those who were in favor of welcoming the Syrians and those who were against it. As the number of asylum-seekers increased, those who opposed Turkey's open-door policy defended their position on legitimate grounds. In light of this information, this paper will analyze both positive and negative sociological repercussions of the civil war in Syria on Turkey since 2011.

### **2. A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE TERMS REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKER**

The term asylum-seeker refers to a person who has entered the national borders of a country who has yet to take legal action or has taken legal action but a final decision has not been issued regarding his/her status. Refugee, on the other hand, is someone whose request for asylum-seeking has been approved, is allowed to stay in the host country and therefore, possesses certain legal rights. For a

person who flees his/her country of citizenship to obtain the right to protection from another country, he/she has to gain refugee status. On the contrary, asylum-seeking is a temporary phase that does not constitute a legal ground. (Yavuz, 2015:3). Therefore, it is possible to refer to Syrians in Turkey as asylum-seekers, because the Syrian Civil War has been deemed temporary in Turkey and as such, opportunities have been provided for a better standard of living under the current circumstances.

### **3. THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR ON TURKEY**

Geographically speaking, Turkey is a neighbouring country of Syria. The political and social turmoils in Syria had an economic impact on Turkey as well. In this respect, we see the negative effects of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey's economy. Prior to the outbreak of the war, Syria was part of an essential trade network with its neighbouring countries, led by Turkey. Moreover, the civil war in Syria has led to great economic losses in Turkey.

The shipping of goods from Turkey to the Middle East and Africa has been at risk since the outbreak of the civil war as transportation is mainly done via lorries. This has led to a decrease in Turkey's export rate. Since connections and commercial transfers were carried out by land, serious risks were posed to the safety of life and property whilst passing through zones that were impacted by the war. It is evident that the presence of Syrians in Turkey constitutes more of a risk than an opportunity. These risks can be classified as societal, individual and urban. An area of opportunity could be the contribution that has been made by Syrian refugees to Turkey's demand for a larger labour force. The number of firms in business in Gaziantep was 25 in 2009; this number has reached 279 in the years following (www.aljazeera.com, 2015).

Nevertheless, the economic situation of Syrians and locals living in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Urfa and İstanbul has deteriorated as a result of the increasing migration flow. It is not uncommon to find unqualified Syrians working for lower wages across a variety of sectors such as food and textiles. While those who approach the current situation as an opportunity believe that Turkey's need for unskilled labour has been met, they also think that the practice of hiring Syrian refugees has caused locals to become unemployed. There has been an increase in the unemployment rate as a consequence of Syrian migrants working for lower wages. As the Syrian population spread to other provinces of Turkey, so did unemployment. The economic structure of the provinces has been altered and hefty sums have been paid in order to accommodate the refugees.

The policy of violence carried out by the regime not only affected the Syrian economic sector but also brought economic and commercial relations involving Syria to a standstill. In addition, Syrians fleeing war zones had an economic impact on Turkey, an impact that has been beneficial to some extent but in part detrimental as well. Since 2011, Syrian refugees have been showing up at the borders of Turkey, and their basic necessities resulted in further economic obligations on the part of the Turkish state. Camps that would provide basic needs were set up in areas close to the Syrian-Turkish border; however, as the numbers increased and spread to other provinces of Turkey, economic problems have grown.

Turkey has been burdened with the heavy economic load of covering most of the expenses arising from the presence of Syrian refugees. A balance has been created through the engagement of local firms in dealing with these necessary expenses (Özdemir, 2017:3). The arrival of refugees in cities such as İstanbul, Ankara and Gaziantep has had a direct consequence on rental and housing prices. Neighbourhoods such as Fatih have turned this situation into an opportunity by nearly doubling rental prices.

In general, asylum-seekers have caused an increase in rental prices across nearly all provinces of Turkey. Evidently, landlords have been pleased with this situation, but there have been complaints on the part of those seeking rental properties. Complaints have been mainly raised against the recognition of refugees as a source of cheap labour, based on the claim that there has been a strong preference for Syrians in the industrial and agricultural sectors, a fact that has been supported by shopkeepers as well (Orsam, 2015:17). Even though the practice of hiring cheap labour has been convenient for employers

themselves, it has stirred a reaction among those seeking employment. The hiring of cheap labour is not exclusively reserved for Syrians. From time to time, we see that immigrants of Central Asian and African descent are also working for half the minimum wage. Meanwhile, employers find it difficult to hire staff due to an increase in the number of educated individuals, and in cases where they are successful in hiring staff, they do not believe them to be capable of performing those jobs. On the other hand, those seeking employment complain about the lack of opportunities due to Syrians willing to compromise on lower wages.

The economic situation of Syrians in Turkey presents risks and opportunities alike. While the asylum-seekers' need for shelter is driving rental prices up, it has become common practice for shopkeepers to seek out illegal employment opportunities. The local population in provinces where there is an overwhelming majority of Syrians believes that the unemployment rate is fueled by their presence. In the meantime, the demand for hiring unskilled workers has been met to a certain extent, which was created in the first place by the local population's refusal to take up employment in these sectors. In this regard, Syrians have contributed to the growth of small businesses and an increase in investments. Nonetheless, the fact that these small businesses are unregistered and as such, except legal obligations such as taxes, creates an environment of unfair competition (Öztürk ve Çoltu, 2018:197).

Since the day Turkey welcomed Syrian asylum-seekers into its territories, it has spent 5.7 billion on aid. Even though the European Union and the United Nations have covered 394 million of these expenses, Turkey's expenditure greatly exceeds these numbers (Öztürk ve Çoltu, 2018:8). Even if they were welcomed in Turkey for a temporary purpose of stay, a significant portion of the Syrian population has settled in the country and started receiving aid from municipal governments. A fraction of the general public complains about this situation, while another group supports it. As a matter of fact, a statement made by the newly elected mayor of Bolu following the elections of 31 March 2019 has been met with criticism both on mass and social media, after he proposed to cut back on aid to Syrian refugees. Those who believed that the practice constituted a form of humanitarian aid and that it should have continued raised their voices in the eyes of the public.

#### **4. THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR ON TURKEY**

Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that Syrians living in Turkey had an impact on the political environment of the country, while simultaneously being affected by the existing political environment themselves. The emerging conflict between the Turkish community and Syrians along with the increasing population of refugees creates the illusion of a security threat. From another perspective, political thoughts might affect attitudes towards Syrians in a positive or negative way. Reactions against the presence of Syrian refugees might be further aggravated by provocations. There is a possibility that the events resembling those in Gaziantep and Kahramanmaraş in 2014 might repeat themselves, especially in provinces situated close to the Syrian border. In response to this, asylum-seekers started seeking out ways to mobilize and organize among themselves. Insignificant legal events sometimes cause reactions even among those who look favourably upon refugees (Orsam, 2015:19). Following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria and the resurgence of terrorist organizations, a security threat has emerged, which prompted Turkey to take immediate action and to make certain political and military decisions in order to secure control of the border. Operations such as Zeytindalı, Afrin, İdlib and Fırat have been carried out.

#### **5. THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR ON TURKEY**

Following the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the balance of power in the Middle East has started to shift. In Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, the governments in power have been overthrown and replaced by new regimes. However, the conflict between the existing regime in Syria and public opposition has caused problems both on a local and global level. The impact on Turkey as a neighbouring country was one of the inevitable consequences of the civil war. Even though at first the Syrian Civil War was considered to be a repercussion of the Arab Spring, after further analysis it was understood that the scale of the conflict was quite different than others preceding it (Özdemir, 2016: 82)

Syrian refugees who came in large numbers to Turkey in 2011 do not have a proper legal arrangement. The Syrian-Turkish border is 911 kilometers. Therefore, there has been an influx of refugees into provinces situated near and on the border. It is predicted that 50% of the migration flow from Syria is directed towards Turkey. Furthermore, Turkey has become a zone of transition for those intending to end up in Europe. The migration phenomenon has brought problems associated with education, health, language, and psychological compatibility. Issues regarding shelter have emerged, alongside a need for basic necessities.

Congregational communities need to be closed off in order to sustain their internal dynamics, but also accepting in order to increase their societal value through networking (Karaca, 2011:175). If we consider Turkey to be a congregational community, it can be argued that in a society where there is a strong sense of community with interpersonal relations that are built on feelings of belonging, it must not have been easy to accept nearly 2.5 million Syrian refugees. A social structure based on the congregation is not very accepting of ethnic and sectarian differences, and therefore, it should be of no surprise that there have been challenges regarding the integration and acceptance of Syrian refugees into every corner of the society. In this regard, even though Syrians have been granted protection on a temporary basis, waves of tension are expected to continue as a direct result of the congregational structure of Turkish society.

On the basis of the universal rights of the refugees, Syrians in Turkey have been provided with opportunities such as admission under humane conditions, benefit from healthcare and freedom to travel, all of which should be classified as opportunities as opposed to rights. Syrians are free to travel and reside in Turkey without being subject to restrictions. In this way, protection against the possibility of a forced return to Syria is established under the temporary protection regime (Tunç, 2015: 41). Turkey's policy regarding Syrian asylum-seekers is based on the belief that the Assad regime will end and that refugees will be able to return to their home countries. Notwithstanding, Turkey has to take into consideration the possibility that Syrians may not leave the country even if the Assad regime falls, and therefore, should start planning ahead for structures intended for the integration of Syrian asylum-seekers. It has been reported that the desire to learn Turkish is positively correlated with one's duration of stay in Turkey (Öner, 2014: 45).

The fact that Syrians bear a resemblance to the local community in terms of ethnic roots and religious sects has accelerated the process of social acceptance. Marriage has spread widely as a means to accelerate the rate of social acceptance. The notion of multiculturalism and the institution of marriage have been further strengthened by migration flow (Tunç, 2015: 17). The increasing rates of second marriages in Şanlıurfa and other provinces of the Southeast have been fueled by the aforementioned multicultural environment (Orsam, 2015: 23).

The conditions of Syrian refugees in Turkey should be understood primarily as a social integration problem. This integration problem arises from differences in lifestyle, language, culture, rising divorce rates resulting from an increase in polygamous relations, and sexual abuse of children and women (Orsam, 2015:18). Those who choose to marry Syrian women are especially old and widowed. In provinces such as Gaziantep, Urfa and Kilis, locals complain about the rising rental and housing prices that are above average by Turkish standards due to heavy demand and an increase in a squatter settlement.

It is reported that Syrians who fled the civil war have been panhandling in large and mid-sized provinces such as Istanbul and Ankara. In neighbourhoods such as Fatih where there is an overwhelming conservative majority, on the one hand, there is the doubling of rental and housing prices fueled by the influx of refugees; on the other hand, there are Syrian citizens who are found begging alongside their family members on every street corner. The intolerance against the presence of Syrians that manifests itself in action and speech might be understood as an indicator of Turkey's current congregational societal structure. The characteristic "we-feeling" associated with congregational societies enables the marginalization of Syrian asylum-seekers (Çetin, 2016:5).

It is not uncommon to find Syrians living in city centers cohabiting with other families due to financial difficulties, further contributing to a rise in a squatter settlement in metropolitan areas. The locals in downtown areas also resort to illegal housing next to their existing properties as a source of income and profit. As a result, the current problems associated with unplanned urbanization in metropolitan areas are further aggravated. Another social impact stemming from this situation is that men are prone to drug abuse trying to sustain their lives under precarious conditions while women are vulnerable to prostitution (Orsam, 2015: 16). Moreover, the local Turkish communities try to rent out their properties to Syrians at extremely high prices. Landlords who refuse to rent out to Syrian refugees perceive them as a risk.

Child labour is another serious problem created by the presence of asylum-seekers. Only a small number of children who live outside the designated camping areas have access to education. There are two reasons for that. First of all, not enough opportunities are provided by the state or the CSOs. Secondly, child labour becomes a viable alternative for families who are in need of money, and children are employed in every area of work including panhandling. In addition to street trading, children are employed in production factories at low wages (Orsam, 2015: 19). The fact that children who are at the age of education are panhandling, trying to earn money, or being employed in workspaces is frowned upon by the general public. Syrian children who are panhandling on the streets are another cause of concern for the local community.

Following the population increase in provinces bordering Syria, hospitals have started to struggle meeting the increasing demand for medical services. The local community has been complaining about the lack of medical attention that is mainly caused by the transfer of those who have been wounded at the borders. Cases of polio have been reported and polio vaccines had to be reintroduced despite having been previously abolished nationwide. In this respect, we see that Turkey has been socially impacted in the aftermath of the Syrian Civil War.

Even though some of the Syrian asylum-seekers coming to Turkey choose to return, there is an increasing tendency among refugees to stay in Turkey after their provisional residency. As long as there is the opportunity of settlement in Turkey Syrians will be less inclined to return to their home countries, but differences in culture and language will complicate the process of integration. In order to mitigate this situation, certain legal arrangements had to be made and social adaptation policies were introduced (Özdemir, 2017: 3). Medical services have been a particular concern for Syrians because those who have crossed the border without their passports were unable to avail themselves of their legal rights. Centers of registration were set up in order to facilitate the process of having access to medical services. At the same time, epidemic outbreaks have been insight. The language problem has been another social barrier. The introduction of courses in order to accelerate the process of language education has failed to offer a substantial solution.

Except for those who are living in camps set up at various areas of the border, asylum-seekers cannot benefit from the services and aid of the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority in Turkey despite being under a regime of protection, since they are not in possession of state-issued identity cards. Furthermore, urban asylum-seekers have restricted access to various forms of aid provided by local and international CSOs. The state has taken notice of these criticisms and has started working on a solution that would allow Syrians living outside of the organized camps to benefit from medical services. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security is working to prevent the illegal employment of refugees by the issuance of work permits. However, precise information on whether or not Syrians can actually obtain a work permit has not been found. The hiring of Syrians as seasonal workers for lower wages without insurance continues in sectors such as textiles and construction. While the news concerning forced marriages involving Syrian female asylum-seekers in provinces close to the Syrian border and Syrians living in crowded apartments with high rental prices or parks who are obliged to panhandle in order to go on with their daily lives reveal the urgent need to register asylum-seekers, it is safe to say that the temporary protection regime will prove to be insufficient if the civil war in Syria and the increase in the number of refugees continue (Gülfer ve Öner, 2014:45).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The civil war in Syria started in 2011 following the protests of a group of young people and has spread to the rest of the country over time. It is evident that the Syrian Civil War has had a negative impact economically, politically, militarily and socially on neighbouring countries including Turkey. Refugee camps have been set up in provinces bordering Syria at the beginning of the migration flow; however, as the number of migrants has increased over time, their presence has spread all over Turkey.

While Turkey has been getting involved in the war in Syria through military operations in order to keep its border secure, it has also provided Syrian asylum-seekers with many opportunities with the aim of establishing humane living standards. Today, it is not known when exactly the civil war in Syria will end. At the beginning, the possibility of Syrians' return was being considered; however, the fact that the war has been going on for nearly ten years makes predictions regarding the future increasingly difficult. The fact that approximately four million Syrian asylum-seekers are in Turkey brings into existence the fact of their social compliance problem to be resolved. Although there are ongoing efforts in an attempt to address this issue, the current situation requires a novel approach.

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