

# Stranded and Trapped: The Growing Syrian Refugee Crisis in Turkey and the Disaster of International Inaction

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This article discusses the Syrian refugee crisis triggered by the outbreak of conflict in Syria in March 2011, and its impact on neighbouring Turkey. Over 1.6 million Syrians are currently residing within Turkish borders, and Turkey, like other countries in the region, is beginning to reach the limits of its capacity. The article argues that Turkey's asylum policies as well as the dismal international response to the crisis are pushing increasing numbers of Syrians to risk their lives, fleeing the country via dangerous and ever diversifying human trafficking routes. Evidence has shown that the European response of tightening border controls and trying to deter migrants from reaching its shores by cancelling of maritime rescue operations is failing. This approach only pushes traffickers to use riskier methods, likely to result in more deaths of those trying to reach the safety of a third country. The international community urgently needs to rise to its responsibilities towards the Syrians fleeing violence in their country, both in order to prevent the humanitarian crisis from further spiraling out of control, and to alleviate the pressure on Turkey and other countries in the region.



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*A steadily growing crisis*

In almost four years war in Syria, over 3.6 million men, women and children have fled the ongoing violent conflict, persecution and threats of violence in their home country, hoping to find safety outside of Syria's borders.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of those who have fled Syria since March 2011 have found refuge in five countries in the region - Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt- who together host 97% of the total refugee population.<sup>2</sup> Resources and tolerance amongst the local populace have been stretched to breaking point by the large influx of Syrian refugees. The countries bordering Syria bear the brunt of the crisis, and are increasingly struggling to cope with what human rights groups call "one of the worst refugee crises that the world has seen in decades".

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Turkey alone hosts over 1.6 million Syrian refugees, almost half of those who have fled Syria since the war began in March 2011, and there is no end to the conflict in sight. According to the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), around \$5 billion dollars have been spent on Syrian refugees since the start of the crisis - a bill that Turkey has had to foot almost entirely on its own.<sup>3</sup> While it is true that the Turkish government refused any outside assistance at the beginning of the war in Syria for various political reasons, such as the unwillingness to cede control over refugee camps on Turkish soils to third parties, Ankara changed course in 2012 and joined the UN's Regional Response Plan. While this move made Turkey eligible for UN-raised funds, only 29% of the \$497 million earmarked for Turkey had been received by the end of last year.<sup>4</sup> Turkish government officials have repeatedly asked the international community for assistance in dealing with what might soon grow into a serious social and political crisis at the national level.

But the response by the rest of the international community to

<sup>1</sup> Amnesty International (2014) *Struggling to survive: Refugees from Syria in Turkey* Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/017/2014/en> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Haberleriz.com (2014) *Suriyeli mülteciler için ne kadar para harcandı?*

Available at: <http://www.haberleriz.com/ekonomi/suriyeli-multeciler-icin-ne-kadar-para-harcandi-h12503.html> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR (2014) *Syria Regional Response: Inter-agency Sharing Portal*

Available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (Accessed: 2 January 2015).

the Syrian refugee crisis has been dismal. In a recently published report, the human rights group Amnesty International declared it “an abject failure,” calling it the “world’s worst refugee crisis in a generation”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Regional Response Plan drawn up by the UN remained underfunded by more than 40% at the end of 2014<sup>6</sup>. Similar funding shortfalls have forced the UN to reduce the amount of food supplies within Syria, where it is trying to alleviate the plight of 4.25 million people.<sup>7</sup> In December of last year, the World Food Programme (WFP) had to announce that it would stop supplying food to 1.7 million Syrians both inside and outside Syria because it was unable to raise the \$64 million necessary to do so.<sup>8</sup> A last minute emergency fundraising campaign averted the crisis, but funding fatigue and inadequate funding commitments by donor countries will likely be a recurring issue that will impede sustainable and efficient help for displaced Syrians.

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The inadequate funding is only one way in which the international community is failing to address the Syrian refugee crisis. According to Amnesty International, only 1.7% of the total numbers of refugees from Syria have been offered sanctuary outside the region. Wealthier countries, including the Gulf States and members of the European Union (EU), are refusing to open their borders.<sup>9</sup>

Things are unlikely to improve. Amidst increasing atrocities and brutal human rights violations committed by both the al-Assad government and numerous armed factions fighting for dominance in Syria, people are continuing to flee.

### *Stretched to the limit*

The countries that are hosting the largest numbers of refugees, such as Turkey, are beginning to reach their limits. The strain

5 Amnesty International (2014) *Struggling to survive: Refugees from Syria in Turkey* Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/017/2014/en> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

6 *Ibid.*

7 The Guardian (2014) *1.7m Syrian refugees face food crisis as UN funds dry up*, 1 December. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/01/syrian-refugees-food-crisis-un-world-programme> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

8 *Ibid.*

9 Amnesty International (2014) *Struggling to survive: Refugees from Syria in Turkey* Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/017/2014/en> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

*The countries that are hosting the largest numbers of refugees, such as Turkey, are beginning to reach their limits. The strain on public services such as healthcare and schools is considerable, and in towns close to the Syrian border, where the number of Syrians sometimes exceeds that of the local population, tensions are on the rise.*

on public services such as healthcare and schools is considerable, and in towns close to the Syrian border, where the number of Syrians sometimes exceeds that of the local population, tensions are on the rise. While Turkey officially maintains an open door policy, the rules for Syrians wishing to enter Turkey have been tightened considerably. Syrians who do not carry official passports are now routinely denied entry into the country. Exceptions are generally made for refugees who are severely wounded and cross the border in ambulances. However, according to recent reports from members of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), even those with injuries are now occasionally turned back at the border.<sup>10</sup> During the second half of 2014, after the Eid holiday following Ramadan, Turkey started to refuse entry and exit to anyone without a passport, even at some official border crossings, such as Reyhanli and Kilis, where Syrians had previously been allowed to cross with an identification card.<sup>11</sup>

These increasing restrictions are forcing desperate refugees to pay smugglers to help them across irregular, and often dangerous, crossing points. Long stretches along the border are currently manned by militants of the Islamic State (ISIL) on the Syrian side, and passing those checkpoints can prove extremely dangerous, as ISIL fighters sometimes stop people going to Turkey, which they deem an “apostate” country.<sup>12</sup>

Despite these serious shortfalls, Turkey has long been lauded for its swift response to the refugee crisis. About 220,000 Syrian refugees are living in 22 government-run camps where they are provided with food and basic services such as free healthcare and education. However, with the camps running at full capacity, the remaining 1.38 million – more than 85% - are living outside of the camps, often in cities and towns close to the Syrian border.<sup>13</sup> While the Turkish government aims to provide them with at least basic care, many are struggling to survive, with an increasing number of facing homelessness, illness and hunger. According to

<sup>10</sup> Interview 10 October 2014, Yayladagi, Turkey.

<sup>11</sup> Interview 11 October 2014, Reyhanli, Turkey and on 12 October 2014, Kilis, Turkey.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International (2014) *Struggling to survive: Refugees from Syria in Turkey* Available at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR44/017/2014/en> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).

a recent study conducted by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), among Syrian refugees living outside refugee camps in the province of Hatay, 86% of families struggle with unemployment and the resulting lack of resources. Around 4% said that they did not have enough to eat.<sup>14</sup>

### *The rise of discontent in Turkey*

On top of this, in many Turkish cities and towns bordering Syria, tensions are on the rise due to the increasing Syrian population. In some places, such as the Arabic-speaking town of Reyhanli in Hatay province and Kilis in Gaziantep province, the number of Syrians now exceeds the local population. In many of these cities house prices and rents have doubled - sometimes tripled - and many complain that Syrians, more vulnerable to exploitation, often work for much less than local employees. On the other hand, local shop and restaurant owners in cities like Reyhanli and Gaziantep have been complaining about the fierce – and sometimes untaxed – competition from Syrians who have opened businesses in their host country.

Another serious issue is the increase of child labour: according to the UNHCR, about half of the million Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey are children. Whereas more than 60% of children in refugee camps are enrolled in school, 73% of those outside the camps – the overwhelming majority of refugees – do not go to school. A recent UNICEF report estimates that one in ten Syrian refugee children is working, in agriculture, restaurants and shops, as mobile vendors or begging on the street.<sup>15</sup>

Local organizations such as the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce have been rallying for clearer regulations concerning the employment of Syrians in Turkish businesses. In a report prepared in 2014, the Chamber suggests issuing temporary work permits and imposing a quota for the number of Syrians allowed to work in any Turkish business (specifically in relation to Turkish citizens).<sup>16</sup> According to Turkish media reports, the govern-

14 Milliyet (2015), *Suriyelilerin yüzde 4'ü aç*, 4 January. Available at: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriyelilerin-yuzde-4-u-ac-gundem-1993771/> (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

15 The Guardian (2014) *Syrian refugees trigger child labour boom in Turkey*, 2 September. <http://www.theguardian.com/law/2014/sep/02/syria-refugees-child-labour-turkey> (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

16 Interview with Eyüp Bartık, Head of the Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce, October 2014.

ment in Ankara is currently outlining a draft law on the rights of Syrian workers in Turkey.

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Thus far, Syrian refugees have spent four years as “guests” of Turkey, living under temporary protection. However, under the new measure passed by the Council of Ministers in October, they receive new identification cards that grant them a more secure status and free access to basic social services such as education and healthcare.

However, Syrians in Turkey have not received official refugee status yet, which would entitle them to legal protection by the UN as well as to an array of benefits inside Turkey, such as housing, public relief and various social services.

But neither Turkey nor the other countries in the region bearing the brunt of this humanitarian catastrophe are able to deal with it on their own. Wealthy countries must rise to the challenge and accept a much larger number of refugees than they currently do.

### *International inaction*

While the UNHCR’s goal to resettle 30,000 refugees by the end of 2014 was met – and indeed slightly exceeded due to Germany’s commitment to take in 20,000 Syrians - the agency’s hope to resettle a further 130,000 in 2015 and 2016 currently seems a daunting goal. At a pledging conference held by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNRA) in December 2014, 28 countries made firm commitments to accept 66,254 Syrian refugees, eventually bringing the total number of those resettled since the start of 2014 to over 100,000. However, even these pledges will be little more than a drop in the ocean, and insufficient to ease the pressure on the states that currently host the estimated 3.6 million displaced Syrians, 3.2 million of whom are registered with the UN. According to UN numbers, just under 191,000 refugees

<sup>17</sup> The New York Times (2014) *Turkey Strengthens Rights of Syrian Refugees*, 29 December. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/30/world/europe/turkey-strengthens-rights-of-syrian-refugees.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C{%221%22%3A%22R1%3A8%22}&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/30/world/europe/turkey-strengthens-rights-of-syrian-refugees.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Ar%2C{%221%22%3A%22R1%3A8%22}&_r=0) (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

have been resettled since the start of the conflict in March 2011. However, speaking at the conference in December, António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said that at least 300,000 more Syrians will need to be resettled either for health reasons, or because they will be unable to return safely to Syria even if the civil war ends.<sup>18</sup> This number is likely to rise as the conflict rages on.

For Syrians applying for resettlement to a third country while staying in Turkey, the country's outdated asylum laws – despite having been amended in 2013 – impose some complications. Despite being one of the original signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Turkey remains one of the countries that keeps a geographical limitation on the origins of the refugees it will accept. According to the legislation passed in 2013, only people who arrive from European countries are eligible for full refugee status, whereas those who arrive “as a result of events from outside European countries” will only be granted so-called “conditional refugee” status. The lifting of this geographical limitation has become a major condition for Turkey's EU membership, but negotiations have stalled since formal accession talks began in 2005.

Turkey's asylum laws leave non-European refugees in a legal limbo while they wait to be resettled in a third country by the UNHCR, a process that can often take many years. Applying for asylum in Turkey is equally impossible for those fleeing Syria, since such claims made from residents of the countries outside of Europe are not accepted under the current Turkish asylum law.

Given the immense strain on local public services and the general lack of legal employment opportunities for many Syrians in Turkey – and therefore the limited options for building a sustainable future –, it is understandable that they want to leave and be resettled elsewhere.

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<sup>18</sup> The New York Times (2014) *More Nations Pledge to U.N. to Resettle Syrian Refugees*, 9 December. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/10/world/middleeast/united-nations-wins-government-pledges-for-resettling-syrian-refugees.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias&&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/10/world/middleeast/united-nations-wins-government-pledges-for-resettling-syrian-refugees.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias&&_r=1) (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

*Increasingly diverse and dangerous attempts to breach Fortress Europe*

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The reluctance of wealthy nations to formally accept a higher number of refugees and the long waiting times for refugees to finally be resettled has given cause for alarm. An increasing number of Syrians are resorting to irregular – and often very dangerous – ways to reach a third country, and trafficking to Europe, especially via the Mediterranean, is on the rise.

According to newspaper reports, more than 45,000 migrants tried to reach Italy and Malta via the Mediterranean Sea in 2013, and 700 lost their lives doing so. In 2014, the number of those killed at sea rose dramatically: 3,224 people died trying to reach European shores, amongst them Syrians who had boarded trafficking vessels in Turkish ports.<sup>19</sup>

Some Syrian refugees said that it was relatively easy to make contact with traffickers, and that the main problem was finding the funds to pay them. According to one man, aged 29, from Idlib, the fee to reach Italy stood at \$6,500 per person. He added that his family had only been able to find the money for his older brother, who had made the journey successfully and now runs a small Syrian restaurant in Brussels, Belgium. Boarding a small vessel in the Turkish coastal city of Mersin, he had been at sea for eight days. Many Syrians living in Turkey confirmed that they would risk the journey, if they were only able to raise the necessary funds.<sup>20</sup>

Traffickers have told journalists that they paid hefty bribes to border guards, police chiefs, immigration officers and consular staff of several European countries and Canada, in order to bring migrants across the sea. One smuggler claimed to work in direct cooperation with the Italian mafia, which, according to him, “controls all the Italian ports”.<sup>21</sup>

19 The Guardian (2014) *Arab spring prompts biggest migrant wave since second world war*, 3 January. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2015/jan/03/arab-spring-migrant-wave-instability-war> (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

20 Interview in Yayladagi, 4 August 2014.

21 The Telegraph (2014) *The international smuggling ring paying off Western border officials to bring refugees into Europe*, 19 December. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/turkey/11292208/The-international-smuggling-ring-paying-off-Western-border-officials-to-bring-refugees-into-Europe.html> (Accessed: 28 December 2014).



European governments hope to deter migrants from choosing the maritime route simply by abandoning rescue missions, such as the Italian-run Operation Mare Nostrum, which carried out proactive search and rescue across 27,000 square miles of sea and was therefore able to save over 100,000 migrants from death at sea. Politicians feared that the prominent rescue scheme was a major reason that traffickers chose the Mediterranean route to reach Europe. However, last October's cancellation of Mare Nostrum, a one-year operation with a budget of \$10.5 million, showed that the smuggling of migrants to Europe has not ceased.<sup>22</sup>

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In response to repeated demands from the Italian government, the European Union has now deployed the contracted EU border agency Frontex on a mission that does not focus on search and rescue like Mare Nostrum, but rather on border surveillance. This new operation – called Triton – only covers 30 miles off of the Italian coast and is supposed to intercept ships carrying migrants.<sup>23</sup>

But recent trafficking incidents show that smugglers are still finding ways to get close enough to the Italian shore to force coastguards to rescue the migrants. At the beginning of this year, coastguards had to intervene on behalf of a “ghost ship” – the cargo ship *Ezadeen* that had set sail from a Turkish port carrying an estimated 450 migrants, most of them Syrian refugees. It was abandoned in dangerous waters by its crew of traffickers just 40 nautical miles off the coast of Italy. Leonard Doyle, a spokesman for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) told reporters that this tactic took “the smuggling game to a whole new level”.<sup>24</sup>

The *Ezadeen* was the second “ghost ship” carrying migrants to Italy in less than a week. In late December, 800 people were rescued from the *Blue Sky M*, a Moldovan-registered Cargo vessel

22 The Guardian (2014) *Italy: end of ongoing sea rescue mission 'puts thousands at risk'*; 31 October. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/31/italy-sea-mission-thousands-risk> (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

23 *Ibid.*

24 The Guardian (2015) *Smugglers abandon migrant ship off Italy in new tactic to force rescue*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/02/smugglers-abandon-migrant-ship-italy-ezadeen> (Accessed: 4 January 2015).

after the Italian coast guard found it sailing without a crew approximately five miles off the Italian coast.<sup>25</sup>

Some European politicians are already calling for stronger deterrents than the cancellation of Mare Nostrum. Despite harsh criticism, the UK government decided to opt out of all Mediterranean rescue missions, saying that they encouraged migrants to risk trying to come to Europe.<sup>26</sup> However, the spiraling violence in Syria and elsewhere, as well as the rapidly increasing numbers of those who are dying at sea, is clear evidence that these arguments fail to respond to the reality on the ground.

### *Conclusion*

The Syrian refugee crisis has become one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades. Analysts say that the conflicts that emerged from the so-called Arab Spring have triggered the biggest wave of migration since the Second World War. It becomes increasingly clear that neither Turkey, nor any of the other countries in the region that have had to bear the brunt of the refugee crisis, can shoulder the burden alone. Deterrents employed by wealthier states to prevent refugees from entering their territories – such as increasing border surveillance, the cancellation of maritime rescue missions and fences – are only increasing the risks for those fleeing violent conflict and trying to reach safety elsewhere. These mechanisms are not succeeding in stemming the flow of refugees. The international community urgently needs to step up and implement meaningful and serious policy changes that will allow for the resettlement of larger numbers of Syrian refugees. Resettlement processes should be more transparent and accessible, in order to reduce the long waiting times that sometimes stretch into years, robbing those affected of the possibility to build a sustainable future.

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> BBC (2014) *Mediterranean migrants: EU rescue policy criticised*. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30020496> (Accessed: at 2 January 2015).