

EDITOR'S CHOICE OF THE MONTH

ISSUE 8.2 | NOVEMBER 2024



**CENTRUL PENTRU STUDIUL DEZVOLTĂRII
INTERNAȚIONALE ȘI MIGRAȚIEI**
CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION



HEINRICH BÖLL STIFTUNG

ISTANBUL 30 YEARS

Editor's Choice

Syrian refugees in Türkiye: legislative particularities, integration strategy, and lessons learned

Interview with **Omar KADKOY**,
Program Coordinator at Heinrich Böll Stiftung Türkiye
By Alina TEODORESCU

Brief professional introduction of Omar Kadkoy

I am the Foreign Policy, Security and Migration Program Coordinator at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung İstanbul office. I started in June 2024. Previously, I was in Ankara for 10 years; I worked as a project manager at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Türkiye (TEPAV). Briefly, my expertise revolves around the foreign policy migration nexus. I am also interested in integration and naturalization policies for asylum seekers and refugees, particularly in the case of Syrians in Türkiye.

Overview of Heinrich Böll Stiftung (hbs) Türkiye and its mission

The Heinrich Böll Stiftung, as a part of the global green political movement, champions values such as ecology, sustainability, democracy, human rights, peace and justice. It advocates for gender democracy, equal rights for all, and societal participation, with a focus on cultural and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and non-violence. Based in Germany, it operates internationally, promoting democratic reforms, ecological policies, and social innovation.

hbs fosters dialogue and collaboration across politics, business, academia, and society, while supporting students, activists, and research. hbs values diversity, equality, and respect, both within its team and in its partnerships. Although affiliated with the Greens, hbs operates

independently and autonomously, ensuring transparent, efficient management of resources.

Inspiration behind specializing in refugee research and integration

I am from Syria, and when I started my career as an intern in 2014 at TEPAV, the arrival of Syrians had already begun, and it was very new to all of us as an economic think-tank. In addition, the topic was new to the country overall. Then I thought that I was from Syria, that I spoke the language, and that there was not much, at least back then, of an understanding of what was happening. So, I suggested following up on these developments. I gradually started by just following the publications on the subject, and then I fell in love with the field of migration.

Most impactful projects: understanding and supporting the Syrian refugee community

Two projects are very dear to me. The first project was about Syrian entrepreneurship and refugee startups in Türkiye, leveraging Turkish experience (Güven, Kenanoğlu, Kadkoy, & Kurt, 2018). I hold it dear because this research contributed significantly to understanding the opportunities Syrian businesses bring to the Turkish economy and their challenges, requiring policy interventions.

The second project, which is also dear to me, was one I worked on with my current employer, Heinrich Böll Stiftung. It was a collaboration with TEPAV on the ghettoization of Syrians. The report is called "Syrians and Post-War Ghetto in Türkiye" (Kavas & Kadkoy, 2018). It started with curiosity about the situation in Ankara, a neighborhood called Önder. There is a small furniture-making industry in a place called Siteler. That is where we learned that many of the Syrians who live in Önder work in informal conditions and are exploited, paid insufficiently and have poor working conditions.

As for the first part of your question, currently, within my program, we are collaborating with five NGOs in Istanbul, Izmir, and Mardin. Our partners are active in the humanitarian field, with a direct impact on the daily lives of asylum seekers and refugees is essential. They provide legal counseling, socio-psychological support, and educational activities

focusing on women and children. We hope to continue these collaborations, regardless of the political debates in Türkiye, because many people still need these services.

The legal framework for asylum applications of Syrians in Türkiye

In the 1990s and early 2000s, discussions about migration were not as focused on large-scale movements of people Türkiye would later experience after 2011—the idea of developing a migration and asylum policy revived in the mid-2000s when accession talks between Türkiye and the EU resurfaced. Back then, no specialized public institution oversaw migration and asylum affairs. The situation changed after 2011 when significant numbers of people fled from the MENA region, mainly from Syria.

The legal framework that Türkiye uses today began to take shape following EU *acquis*. In 2013, the Turkish parliament passed the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, marking it the country's first comprehensive asylum and migration policy. This law laid the foundation for how Türkiye would address migration, particularly its evolving role in managing regional asylum flows. It entered into effect in October 2014 and established a legal framework for managing migration, including temporary protection. The law reflects a spirit of the EU's Temporary Protection (TP) Directive, initially created in the EU after the Yugoslav Civil War, to manage large-scale asylum arrivals. Türkiye's law similarly addressed large-scale migration.

However, the law also highlights a critical difference between Türkiye's approach and the EU's. While Türkiye is a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees, it maintains the geographical limitation to the 1967 Protocol, which limits the ability to grant refugee status to individuals from the Global South, while those from the Global North are eligible for refugee status. This practice has led to a situation where only a few refugees have official refugee status in Türkiye today.

Key components of Türkiye's strategy for integrating Syrian refugees and its efficiency in addressing their needs

Regarding integration, Türkiye does not have a clear policy. Despite housing a large number of refugees, mainly from Syria, Türkiye's approach has not centered on a comprehensive integration policy. As a result, while the legal framework exists, addressing asylum seekers and refugees' full integration into society has not been a priority. The Turkish government abstains from using the integration or assimilation concepts, and instead, it advocates for harmonization or adaptation policy.

In theory, the harmonization policy aims to inform migrants about Türkiye's political structure, legal system, and socio-cultural heritage, teach them language, and inform them about the country's history. Undertaking similar activities requires integration courses at the basic level that need to be taught or through courses. However, these courses never materialized. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection says that the Presidency of Migration Management may plan harmonization activities to the extent of Türkiye's economic and financial possibilities, incorporating or taking suggestions from public institutions or bodies, local administration, and NGOs. There needs to be an overarching strategy for working on a harmonization policy. Then, the municipalities, the ministries, or other relevant actors, including NGOs and CSOs, will formulate activities to implement this strategy. In reality, Syrians under Temporary Protection integrate through interaction rather than design because Syrians do not have a framework to follow.

Progress of the naturalization process for Syrian refugees in Türkiye: criteria, success rate, and challenges

In 2014, the law on foreigners and international protection entered into effect. In 2016, Türkiye terminated its open-door policy, the EU - Türkiye deal came into effect and the work permit regulation. It is essential to mention that Syrians did not have the right to work formally for the first five years while in Türkiye and didn't have legal status during the first four years. By 2016 Türkiye found out that many highly skilled white-collar Syrians had left Türkiye for the EU. This phenomenon is inexplicable when you imagine being a doctor, an engineer, a lawyer, a professor, or a nurse who came from Syria to Türkiye, and when you are fleeing for your life, you

do not think of your diploma. You do not think of transcripts. Therefore, you come to Türkiye as a highly skilled Syrian and are called a guest, or “the brother and sister” of the Turkish people. You start looking for jobs, but there is no legal status for you, so no workplace has any idea how to deal with you. Then, you have legal status but are not allowed to work formally because there was no work permit regulation before 2016. Then, as a doctor, lawyer, engineer, nurse, professor, or teacher, you start realizing that you are working as a waiter in a restaurant, as a seasonal agricultural worker, or you are teaching yourself a new set of blue-collar skills to work in a factory, or in construction, so on and so forth. You stay patient for some years, but nothing materializes, and then you start realizing that if you cross the Aegean you actually can go and claim asylum in the EU where you can find jobs in better alignment with your skills.

In 2016, in Kilis, a border province with Syria, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced that the Turkish government would help Syrians by offering them the chance to acquire Turkish nationality (Aljazeera, 2016). And he said that it was going to be done in phases, with the Ministry of the Interior and the Presidency of Management leading the naturalization process, with a maximum capacity of 300,000 persons. There were no official criteria for the selection, but from the statements of the Ministry of the Interior, they are targeting highly skilled white-collar Syrians, the professors, engineers, doctors, business owners (T24, 2019). In addition, it is important to know that Syrians under temporary protection status do not have the right to apply for Turkish citizenship.

Contributions of Syrian refugees to Türkiye's labor market, economy, and society

In the report that we did on entrepreneurship (Güven, Kenanoğlu, Kadkoy & Kurt, 2018), we found out that the number of Syrian businesses that were established back then were employing 250,000 people directly. Unfortunately, we do not have enough studies, particularly on the impact of asylum seekers and refugees on the Turkish economy or the Turkish labor market. But at the same time, I remember that in the first years of the pandemic, there was an association of Syrian exporters in Gaziantep. They said that the volume of the association's exports represents 1% or 2% of Gaziantep's total exports. That year, the total value of Gaziantep exports was around 10 billion USD.

Toward the end of each academic year, at least some of the Syrian-run media outlets in Türkiye would cover the success stories of students who would score high marks on the university admission exam, or they would finish their undergrad studies on top of their classes. It's also essential because to graduate from a Turkish university on top of your class as a Syrian means their knowledge of the Turkish language is high, reflecting a successful integration example and a successful individual story.

Urgent measures to improve the living conditions of Syrian refugees in Türkiye

We need to have an integration policy in effect, not only well defined in theory but also implemented and continuously monitored and evaluated. The core of that integration policy should be to drive Syrians away from dependency on aid and towards self-resilience. By self-resilience, I mean a well-integrated person working in an area they have skills for and that allows them to provide for their family without needing anybody else, whether an institution or another person.

Also, that integration policy should draw a secure path for citizenship at the end of that process or progress.

Prospects for Syrian refugees in Türkiye in light of the attempt to normalize relations with Syria

I would say it's unrealistic to talk about normalization while the reasons that forcibly displaced Syrians remain and continue to dwindle and become worse. I would also add that normalization, and the voluntary repatriation of Syrians are not mutually exclusive.

So far, many Syrians who go back face life-threatening risks, such as being forcibly disappeared, tortured, and kidnapped. Similar practices exist in different parts of Syria.

On how the repatriation process could unfold, there is no time limitation to the Syrian temporary protection status, unlike the temporary protection directive of the EU. So, suppose the repatriation process happens after designating Syria as a safe country of origin; in that case, the Turkish government might initiate the repatriation process under a

timetable – much like the case with people who fled Yugoslavia and went elsewhere in Europe.

Lessons learned from Türkiye's experience with Syrian refugees that could be useful for other countries facing similar challenges

We need to be proactive and continuously monitor our migration and integration policies with a close dialogue with the hosting society and the immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, NGOs, and CSOs to see the impact or the results of these policies and change them when they are unproductive.

Bibliography

Aljazeera (2016). *Erdogan: Syrian refugees could become Turkish citizens* (July 3). Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/7/3/erdogan-syrian-refugees-could-become-turkish-citizens>. Accessed: November 2024.

Güven, S., Kenanoğlu, M., Kadkoy, O. & Kurt, T. (2018). *Syrian Entrepreneurship and Refugee Start-ups in Turkey: Leveraging the Turkish Experience*. Report of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

Kavas, A., & Kadkoy, O. (2018). *SYRIANS AND POST-WAR GHETTO IN TURKEY* (June 6). Available at: <https://www.tepav.org.tr/en/haberler/s/4362>. Accessed: November 2024.

T24 (2019). Süleyman Soylu: Bu güne kadar 76 bin 443 Suriyeliye vatandaşlık verdik (January 7). Available at: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/suleyman-soylu-bu-gune-kadar-76-bin-443-suriyeliye-vatandaslik-verdik,791996>. Accessed: November 2024.