

# The influences of Syrian refugees on the cities of Turkey: Gaziantep case

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## Abstract

One of the Turkish cities where the “Syrian Guests” crowd is Gaziantep. It is one of the most important industrial cities of the country located on the historical Silk Road. Gaziantep is a large urban site housing 1,800,000 inhabitants as well as urban and archaeological protected areas. Today, there are 34,000 “Syrian Guests” in the camps and almost 160,000 of them spread through the city. In the context of this paper, the conditions of the “Syrian Guests” that migrated to Gaziantep during the civil war, and the current profile of the city will be discussed. The focus will particularly be on the effects of the Syrian population on Gaziantep’s traditional city center and urban and archaeological protected areas as well as the protection of these areas, and the negative effects of the Syrian Guests on the city’s identity. In the context of this paper, the risks and threats, as well as the observed results of the current incidents will be analyzed and shared.

*Keywords: Syrian refugees, defectors, migration, traditional city centre, Gaziantep city.*

## 1 Introduction

As the public witnesses, the Syrian civil war, which has been going on for the last three and a half years, produced many sad results for humanity. Unfortunately, this situation still exists. This dilemma, which I assume that all considerate people all around the world watch in sorrow, carries a deeper meaning for Turkey since it is Syria’s frontier neighbor. Many problems that usually bothered the border cities before are spread all over the country today. Syria, neighboring with the cities of Şırnak, Mardin, Urfa and Gaziantep on a stretch of land from east to west, gave



and continues to give migration to our country through 12 border crossings that connect Turkey to the region during the civil war.

Syrian refugees are sheltered in 22 camps constructed in 10 cities; and as the capacities of these camps become inadequate while illegal migration snowballed, they spread through the entire country, particularly in the border cities. It is still not clear if their inhabitants are “refugees”, “defectors” or “guests”, a conundrum that has no legal explanation; nevertheless, the dire fact is that the number of Syrian refugees has already reached over 2 million and counting with each passing day. The “open gate” policy that our country embraces is the reason for this number to soar, making it difficult to tackle the challenges of giving them education, health service, shelter and even employment under “temporary protection” scheme.

The term migration is almost as old as the history of the mankind, yet we just started to confront the thorough migration discussed in today’s world as a fact as late as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main reason for confronting the migration dilemma in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the fact that the newly emerging nation-states which were being built on ethnical and cultural unity, have determined the boundaries of their lands and sovereign right to dominate the people living on those lands in the clearest way, and this notion has found great acceptance internationally. (Hamar, 1990). In this way, the process of determining the national frontiers and identification of those who pass through these frontiers as “citizen” and “foreigner” has started. Carrying passports would soon become widespread at that time. Distribution of residence permits and work permits to foreigners by government agencies have now been an institutionalized obligation. For all intents and purposes, the term we call international migration today, was born in this era. [1].

The background of the political landscape to which capitalism, modernization and liberalism distinctly approaches and focuses on, is actually very clear. The common term, to which the production areas that get “identical” and “consumption areas” gave birth to with the global perspective, is the “free circulation” principle. This process, that has been hotly debated, particularly in light of the EU’s expansion process and policies is a structure that affects and gets affected by the entire world with varying perspectives and dimensions. A manner that is pretty far away from terms like equality, freedom, creating common space is the structures and the approaches towards international migration. On one hand, the philosophy of limitless circulation of labor, people in other terms, is produced – which is an approach that started to be considered as part of international human rights, on the other hand, on a political level, the understanding of keeping the frontier transitions under control and delimitation of the borders related to domination rights is embraced [2].

With such a background, modern Turkey has confronted international migration and refugee movements in different shapes at differing times since its foundation. Many detailed studies have analyzed the properties and locations of these migrations and immigrants.

Geneva Convention Regarding the Legal Status of Refugees (1951) is the basis of the refugee legislation in Turkey. According to this Convention, Turkey parties

with “geographical delimitation” and gives “refugee” status only to those who migrate from Europe to Turkey. Those who migrate to Turkey are called “defectors” and they have the right to take shelter in Turkey temporarily. Thus, those who escape from Syria to Turkey have the status “defectors” instead of “refugees”. Since the “defector” status does not include some of the natural rights that were granted by migration, Turkey has enforced some special applications in favor of Syrians with regulations and circulars.

Turkey gives temporary shelters to Syrians whom it granted the defector status according to the Migration and Shelter Regulation (1994). Syrians, under temporary protection, have legal permission to stay in Turkey for a “reasonable duration” and the right to have temporary shelter until a third country accepts them as refugees [3].

In Temporary Protection Regulation, the statement used for Syrians is “temporarily protected”. According to the regulation, Syrians are given a “temporary protection identity document” and these people are provided social help and services, health, education and working opportunities as well as services like translation. In this content, one of the most important regulations is the right of Syrians who possess this identity to work in certain fields. The exact application of the regulation sustains a great importance regarding both protection of the rights of Syrian immigrants and providing efficient work by social workers in solving the problems of these people [4].

## **2 The short story of migration wave from Syria to Turkey**

Turkey has accepted those who fled from Syria because of the chaos caused by the violent intervention waged against the dissident since April 2011, and because of the civil war, by doing what international law and conscience suggests within the framework of “open gate policy”, and offered “temporary protection” to those in need. This policy is compatible with the principles of international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Geneva Convention (1951) [5].

At first, the authority has considered the time of stay of the Syrian immigrants to be 1–2 weeks and the number of people as 5,000–100,000; however, the residence time of those in Turkey continues to augment each day. The on-going war and terror in Syria could result in an accumulation of thousands of people at the border of Turkey, as experienced in Kobanî. The path to follow against these instant flows is extremely complicated and full of uncertainties.

There are almost 2 million Syrians who are given “temporary protection” today. 13% stay in 22 camps opened in 10 cities and the rest is spread through Turkey outside the camps. More than 53% of the Syrians who stay in Turkey are composed of children and youths under the age of 18 – considered as children by the UN – and more than 75% are children and women in need of special protection. Plus, it is guessed that the number of Syrian babies that are born has passed 60,000 in 3.5 years. There are serious signs indicating that there will be no established peace and security in the near future and thus the sheltering plan will remain intact. The security aspect of the subject is another important dimension. The explosion in the Cilvegözü border gate on February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and those who lost their lives



in Reyhanlı – more than 50 people – indicate the threat to the internal security and border of the illegal groups that come with the Syrian immigrants.

The extreme effort and cost for the Turkish government and Turkish society about the Syrian defectors, the “model” it applied has to be shared with the public. A country, which has spent over \$4.5 billion and has accepted 1.6 million defectors in 3.5 years, and Turkish society, who has showed a great acceptance and hospitality based on human rights, deserve all kinds of praise and pride [6].

### 3 City of Gaziantep and Syrian defectors

Gaziantep is one of the closest cities to the Syrian border. This city has 2 border gates opening into Syria. In this area, there are 5 tent-cities organized for Syrian defectors and there are 62,214 Syrians in there. In addition, there are 252,926 Syrians staying outside the camps in different regions of the city. It is estimated that 40,000 Syrians are currently waiting for registration [7]. One of the districts that live with this migration in the heaviest way in Gaziantep, in which Turkey places most of the Syrians, is the Şahinbey district. It would be right to give some information about Şahinbey district and Gaziantep, which both will be examined in this paper.

Gaziantep is located in south-eastern Turkey at the Syrian frontier and is the eighth most crowded city in Turkey. It is one of the most ancient metropolitan cities in Turkey and has a population of 1,800,000 people. Dülük (Dolike or Doliche), close to Gaziantep today, is the oldest city in the area. Archaeological excavations suggest that there are proofs of human life in the area since the Paleolithic Era. Dülük was able to become a continuous settlement area after the Early Bronze Age. This city has been developed substantially since it was on the Silk Road.

When it was first founded, Babylon had ruled the city. But, around 1700 BC, domination was transferred to Hittites. After, Hittites came to Egyptian rule. The city that has been the host of many civilizations still bears very valuable marks. The city, carrying the traces of civilizations such as the Romans, Byzantium Empire, Seljuk, Mongolians, etc. has left a great mark in the close Republican history with its defense in Turkish War of Independence. This “Silk Road” city is at the top of the industrial cities called “Anatolian Tigers”. The city, thriving in machinery industry, textiles and the food sector, has recently come to fore by creating its local brands.

Gaziantep has an extremely important place in Turkey’s industry and tourism. The reason for that is the location of Gaziantep, which is between Anatolia and the Middle East, and its closeness to towns that have sea ports. Gaziantep is a very important city with symbols like Gaziantep Tower, local architecture, the greatest mosaic museum on earth named “Zeugma” and precious handicrafts like coppersmithing as well as its renowned gastronomy that has a great value all by itself.

This unique urban site has confronted an exterior dilemma, and has been dragged to a new life by opening its gates to those who escape from the neighbor country Syria for the sake of human honor. The city that lived population growth,



which is almost impossible to cope with, physical problems, sheltering problems, socio-cultural and economic problems including security one by one, also entered into a destruction process that is almost impossible to compensate. Should Gaziantep work on its growing dynamics since it has critical assertions in terms of branding, or should it deal with a series of problems this indefinite residence problem has brought forward? This city, dragged into a quagmire, unfortunately does not have many choices as to how it will manage the foregoing problems in the near future. The bad fate of cities pushed into devastation by wars, paucity and poverty is obvious just like the uniquely beautiful cities of the neighboring country, such as Aleppo. However, cities such as Gaziantep have to deal with incredible problems in this process. It would be beneficial to shortly address these problems.

People in Gaziantep both open their hands to help the Syrian population that took shelter in their city, but also started to take a negative stand against the issue because of socio-cultural and economic problems. The unemployment has become a critical issue. In Gaziantep, those who work in almost all of the small and large businesses are Syrian workers. Syrians take half of the minimum wage at their work places. They also work without insurance, which lead the employers to hire Syrians. In particular, it causes the younger population to become unemployed.

Social issues, security problems, conflicts and terror are some of the most controversial subjects nowadays in Gaziantep. We hear the roaring battle and flying bullets that sometimes reach the settlements close to the borders of the neighboring country as the main factors that disturb the residents. Some of the factors that threaten the social peace and quality of life are the non-registered vehicles; inability to provide traffic security, transmitted illness cases, there is a concern that the transmitted illnesses will spread among the locals.

These problems cause the rents to skyrocket; and even the jerrybuilt houses or outbuildings are rented for very high prices. This creates a balloon in the real estate sector and naturally aggrieves the native inhabitants. Citizens state that they cannot rent a house that was worth TL 150 before Syrians, for TL 600 today. Another problem related to physical space is the protected areas and the city centers where the poor defectors particularly choose to stay. Families settled in the vacant spaces or in the subsidized areas affect the area in different ways. Firstly, these groups try to maintain their lives under very bad conditions for their health with almost no reinforcements (heat, light, etc.). They also cause danger for the environment they live in. From a different angle, it is obvious that they destroy the local culture of the area, considering that the city is a unique cultural heritage center.

One of the most important examples of this is the fires happening in these settlement areas. Another example would be the Gaziantep City Committee for Protecting the Cultural Entities and the defectors who settled in the registered buildings situated just at the back of its archives. Here, considering the damage the defectors might have done to archives would have consequences including the disappearance of a city's history. According to the official numbers, there are 300 businesses belonging to Syrians in Gaziantep. The number of unofficial businesses is not clear. Syrians mostly open small businesses such as restaurants, phone services, jewelry stores, etc. generally in Şahinbey district, where greater numbers



of Syrians are settled. They also shop from each other in the mentioned region. Syrians, who cannot eat the bread produced in Turkey, bake their own bread, drink Syrian tea and smoke Syrian cigarettes. Their clothes are again coming from Syria. Although their social life is close to none, their greatest activity is to watch Syrian TV and hang around the city parks [8].

This structure is one of the clearest examples of two-way social conformity and social unification problem.

#### **4 As a result...**

War brings forth mandatory migration, poverty, martyrs, hunger, transmitted diseases, losses, ruthlessness, cruelty, inhumaneness, and unbearable and dire conditions. Syrians are unfortunately still suffering from many of these evils after the civil war is waged in Syria.

Amongst these, we can list the problems that the immigrants that migrate mandatorily confront and the changes they introduce where they migrate. In this report, what should be highlighted the most intensely is none other than the changes introduced after mandatory migrations, which should be accepted as a human tragedy, transformation processes and an indirect result, the problems that the settlement experiences.

Gaziantep, as mentioned before in this report, has experienced a mass population movement since April 2011 because of the Syrian civil war. This rapid, mandatory population growth augmented the spatial and socio-economic problems in legal dimensions as well as economic, commercial and security, of Gaziantep, which is a city that is on top of the list in terms of population growth.

It is possible to summarize these in this way. Gaziantep has a vision of becoming a uniquely branded city. Being one of the “Anatolian Tigers” [9] and exporting to almost 150 countries, Gaziantep has achieved an export figure of \$4 billion. 38% of the exports go to Iraq. The city enjoys an important place especially in the Middle Eastern markets. It has reached a size that offers work to 50,000 people in the industrial sector with its 5 organized industrial zones. With all this data it is in an area that is exposed to migration, however with the sudden population slump, it lost control in many areas and it became unable to systematically administrate its growing strategies.

In this context; it started to experience blockages in the path to being a “Branded City”. The city faces serious security problems (increasing robberies, arson, acts of terrorism, etc.). It can be summarized as alienation to the city, socio-economic disparity in between the low regions, insufficient urban reinforcement areas (particularly health reinforcements), unemployment, and uncontrolled wages, unqualified workers replacing the qualified workers, the domination of speculative price index in the real estate market, inability of the native residents to find housing, the invasion of open and public areas, devastation and invasion of the historical city center, the destruction of the original texture belonging to the protected areas (due to additions, neglect, impossibility, inability to adopt, uncertainty, etc.), particularly the fires happening in the protected areas, life safety, loss of historical crafts, identity loss of the socio cultural structure, the birth of a



belonging problem in the city, the environment contamination, contagious diseases, unregistered vehicles in the traffic, increasing traffic accidents, etc.

Without a doubt, at the top of the list there is a “loss of life”. However, it should be accepted as one of the factors that trigger the transformations in a bad way and is also summarized in this paper is the fate of these cities, is very critical for the residents because of its identity. As in the Gaziantep case, loss of many important values causes results such as destruction of the quality of life, environmental values, historical texture, cultural structure of the city, and its identity, making many services like health insufficient, causing loss of a secure and peaceful environment, and eventually creating “discomfort”, “unhappiness”, and an “inclination of native population towards moving to other regions”.

It is known that 50% of those who had to migrate to wealthy regions from poor regions because of war and similar disasters settle in the place where they migrate even after the conditions get better. According to this data, it is apparent that this population migration to Turkey is going to be permanent. On the other hand, the only reason for the instant population growth, its aftermath and the indirect problems encountered is not the immigrants. The road maps of strategic administration, including the risk and crisis administrations, are responsible for administrating such chaotic environments considering the sustainability principles of the cities. Thus, instead of matching the problems with the immigrants who are already devastated by the war, the main purpose of the municipal authorities must create permanent, long term and constructive strategies and taking these cities under protection in terms of socio-economic and physical conditions. Here, a fragile balance should be found that does not aggrieve any sides of the issue, and that does not destroy the cities. Searching for a side to blame should be the last thing to do indeed.

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- [7] <http://www.gaziantepafad.gov.tr/upload/duyurular>.
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- [9] “Anatolian Tigers” is a definition for a group of cities in Turkey. It is also used for the entrepreneurs and their commercial and industrial firms which production augments very rapidly in such regions. Anatolian Tigers, as a term, is inspired from the “Asian Tigers”, a term used for rapidly growing East Asia Countries.

