

THE IMPACT OF TURKEY'S POLICY ON REFUGEES (CASE STUDY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES)

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ABSTRACT. In the aftermath of World War II, the international community sought to establish a global order that guarantees the protection of human rights, formally declared through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Fundamental principles such as the right to life, the right to security, and freedom from torture became central to the international human rights regime. However, contemporary realities demonstrate that human rights violations persist, particularly in situations of armed conflict. The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has evolved into one of the largest humanitarian crises of the 21st century, forcing millions of civilians to flee their country in search of safety. Turkey, as Syria's neighboring country and a state party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, has become the largest host country for Syrian refugees. Through its open-door policy and temporary protection regime, Turkey admitted millions of refugees within a relatively short period. While this policy reflects a humanitarian commitment, it has also generated significant political, economic, and social consequences within the host state. This article aims to analyze the impact of Turkey's refugee policy on Syrian refugees, examining both its humanitarian dimension and its domestic and geopolitical implications. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach based on literature review and policy analysis. The findings indicate that Turkey's refugee policy represents a dynamic interaction between humanitarian responsibility and strategic national interests, producing multidimensional impacts on the country's socio-economic stability and political landscape.

Keywords: Human Rights; Syrian Conflict; 1951 Refugee Convention; Syrian Refugees; Turkey's Refugee Policy

INTRODUCTION

The refugee issue has become one of the major global challenges that has continued to increase over the past few decades. Armed conflicts, political instability, economic crises, and human rights violations have forced millions of people to leave their home countries in search of protection. The concept of *survival migration*, introduced by Alexander Betts, explains that many people cross borders not only for economic reasons but also because their states fail to guarantee their safety and basic survival (Betts, 2013). Refugee studies have also developed beyond a purely legal approach toward the broader framework of forced migration studies, as discussed by B. S. Chimni (Chimni, 2009) and comprehensively summarized by Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and colleagues (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014).

At the global level, migration and refugee governance are no longer understood solely as humanitarian issues but also as part of the political dynamics and power relations between states. Fiona B. Adamson (F. B. Adamson, 2023) argues that migration governance has undergone a process of "re-spatialisation," where migration control extends beyond traditional territorial borders through bilateral and regional cooperation. Together with Gerasimos Tsourapas, Adamson (F. Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019) introduced the concept of the *migration state*, referring to states that strategically use migration as

an instrument of both domestic and foreign policy. From a comparative political economy perspective, migration policies are often shaped by economic and political interests rather than humanitarian considerations (Afonso & Devitt, 2016).

In the context of the global refugee crisis, the Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has become one of the largest sources of forced displacement across borders. Millions of Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries, especially Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Among these countries, Turkey has emerged as the largest refugee-hosting country. Turkey's geographical position, directly bordering Syria and serving as a bridge between Asia and Europe, makes it a key actor in regional migration governance and in relations between the European Union and the Middle East.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey has implemented an open-door policy and established a temporary protection regime as the legal basis for the protection of Syrian refugees. Initially, this policy was presented as a humanitarian commitment. However, regional political developments later revealed more complex strategic dimensions, particularly in Turkey's relationship with the European Union.

The 2016 EU–Turkey Refugee Deal marked an important turning point in the governance of regional migration. Hafelach and Kurban (2017) argue that the agreement represents the externalisation of EU border control to Turkish territory. Rygiel, Baban, and Ilcan (2016) highlight

the tension between humanitarian rhetoric and the securitisation of migration practices. Furthermore, Saatçioğlu (2019) emphasises that the agreement is not only about refugee management but also part of broader political negotiations between Turkey and the European Union.

The existing literature has provided important contributions to understanding Turkey's refugee policy from legal, political, economic, and international relations perspectives. However, most studies tend to analyze policies in sectoral or institutional terms. However, few studies have explicitly integrated the humanitarian dimension with political power analysis within a comprehensive theoretical framework.

This is where the relevance of power theory becomes significant in this study. Refugee policy reflects not only an administrative response to a humanitarian crisis but can also be understood as a practice of power that shapes agendas, preferences, and political choices. Using Steven Lukes' three-dimensional concept of power decision-making, agenda-setting, and preference-shaping this study examines how Turkey's refugee policy can be interpreted as a combination of humanitarian commitment and strategic political interests.

Based on this background, the research question addressed in this article is as follows: To what extent does Turkey's refugee policy reflect humanitarian commitment, and to what extent does it function as an instrument of strategic political interests in managing the Syrian refugee crisis? By integrating the literature on global migration governance, the concept of the migration state, and the dynamics of the EU–Turkey Deal, this study aims to contribute theoretically to the understanding of refugee governance as a practice of power in both domestic politics and international relations. This approach also clarifies the study's position within the debate between humanitarian and political-strategic perspectives in contemporary migration research. This study applies a theoretical framework that integrates power theory, refugee governance, and theories of globalisation and international migration to understand Turkey's policy toward Syrian refugees comprehensively. In contemporary international politics, refugee management is no longer seen only as a humanitarian issue but also as part of global migration governance shaped by power relations, strategic interests, and negotiations between states.

From the perspective of refugee governance, Betts (2013) argues that global migration governance develops through formal and informal institutional networks involving states, international organisations,

and non-state actors. However, states remain the central actors with the authority to determine access, protection, and control over refugees. Earlier studies by Aristide Zolberg, Astrid Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo (1989) describe forced migration as a consequence of conflict and violence, especially when the state fails to protect its own population.

The power dynamics within modern migration governance can be further understood through the concept of migration diplomacy developed by Tsourapas (Freier et al., 2021) This concept explains how states may use migrant and refugee populations as instruments of political negotiations and international diplomacy. This perspective is reinforced by Freier and M. M. M. Micinski, and Tsourapas (2021) who introduce the idea of refugee commodification, where refugees are treated as political assets within interstate relations. In terms of accountability and migration control, Tan and Gammeltoft-Hansen (2020) show that migration control policies often raise questions about legitimacy and international legal responsibility.

Conceptually, the dimension of power in public policy can be explained through Steven Lukes' three-dimensional view of power: Lukes argues that power is not only about decision-making but also about controlling the agenda (non-decision-making power) and shaping public preferences and perceptions (ideological power). This framework is relevant for analysing how Turkey's refugee policy is not only an administrative response to a humanitarian crisis but also a political instrument that shapes narratives, legitimacy, and bargaining positions in international relations.

In addition to power theory, this study applies the theories of globalisation and international migration to explain cross-border interconnectedness. Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller (2005) in *The Age of Migration* argue that modern migration is an integral part of globalization, strengthening economic, social, and political connections between states. Hein de Haas (2010) emphasizes that migration has internal dynamics influenced by global structural transformations. Classical migration theory by Douglas S. Massey and colleagues (1993) also highlights that migration is shaped by structural factors, social networks, and global inequalities.

In the context of the modern state, James Hollifield (2004) introduces the concept of the migration state, which refers to a state that must balance sovereignty, economic needs, and commitments to human rights. This perspective aligns with Sassen's (2014) analysis of how globalisation

and socio-economic expulsions generate cross-border mobility while simultaneously reinforcing state territorial control. The tension between humanitarian protection and border securitisation is further discussed by Walters (2011) through the concept of the humanitarian border, which highlights the paradox between protection and control.

Furthermore, transnationalism theory developed by Steven Vertovec (2009) and Levitt, P., & Jaworsky (2007) explains that migration creates cross-border social spaces that connect origin and destination countries. This is relevant for understanding how the Syrian conflict is not only a domestic issue but also shapes the socio-political dynamics in Turkey as a receiving state.

As part of the regional political framework, the dynamics of Turkey–European Union relations on migration issues are analyzed through the work of Danış & Nazl, (2019) who examine the implications of Turkey’s migration policy for social and political integration. The external dimension of Turkey’s relationship with the European Union is further explained by Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber (2016), as well as by the policy report of Ahmet İçduygu, (2015) which outlines the transformation of Turkey’s migration policy in regional and international contexts.

By integrating power theory, refugee governance, globalisation theory, and the political dynamics of EU–Turkey relations, this study builds an analytical framework that enables an understanding of Turkey’s refugee policy as a practice of power operating at both domestic and global levels. Rather than viewing refugee policy solely as a humanitarian response, this framework conceptualizes it as a strategic instrument embedded within broader political, economic, and institutional structures. At the domestic level, refugee governance reflects the interaction between state authority, public opinion, electoral considerations, and socio-economic pressures. At the global level, it intersects with transnational migration regimes, international norms, and diplomatic bargaining processes, particularly in relation to the European Union.

This approach demonstrates that refugee policy cannot be separated from power relations, global structures, and strategic negotiations between states in the contemporary international system. It highlights how migration governance becomes a field where sovereignty, security, economic interests, and humanitarian principles interact and sometimes conflict. Consequently, Turkey’s refugee policy should be understood not merely as crisis

management, but as a dynamic political strategy shaped by both internal political calculations and external geopolitical positioning.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with a qualitative case study design to analyze Turkey’s policy toward Syrian refugees as a contextual and complex phenomenon in public policy. The case study method was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of a bounded system, namely Turkey’s temporary protection policy from 2011 to the period following its cooperation with the European Union. As explained by Robert K. Yin (2018) a case study is appropriate when researchers aim to understand contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly defined. This approach is also consistent with the qualitative research framework proposed by John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Poth (2017) emphasises the importance of exploring meaning, interpretation, and social construction in understanding policy phenomena. Furthermore, Sharan B. Merriam (2009) argues that case studies are effective for analyzing policies as specific, contextual units of analysis limited by time and setting.

The data used in this study were secondary data obtained through library research. These include academic books, reputable international journal articles, official policy documents from the Turkish government, European Union documents, reports from international organisations, and credible news articles to support the contextual analysis. Policy analysis was conducted using Carol Bacchi’s (2009) problem representation approach, which argues that public policies do not simply respond to problems but actively construct and represent them in specific ways. This approach is combined with William N. Dunn’s (2015) structuring framework helps identify how refugee issues are defined and positioned within the state’s policy agenda.

To examine the language dimension and power relations within policy narratives, this study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as developed by Fairclough (1995), who views language as a non-neutral social practice closely related to the production and reproduction of power. This perspective is strengthened by Maarten Hajer’s (1995) approach to political discourse, which views policy as a field of narrative struggle and legitimacy building. In addition, the argumentative turn in policy analysis proposed by Fischer and Forester (1993) is used to

highlight that policymaking is a space of contestation where arguments and meanings are constructed and negotiated.

Data analysis follows the interactive model proposed by Matthew B. Miles, A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña (2014), which includes three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification conducted in an iterative process. This process allowed the researcher to filter relevant data, conduct thematic coding, and identify patterns in policy documents and official narratives. To further strengthen theme identification, this study applies thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) enabling the systematic identification of key themes in policy construction.

The validity of the research was ensured through source triangulation by comparing different types of documents and literature, as well as through repeated interpretative verification to maintain analytical consistency. Through this methodological approach, the study provides a systematic and in-depth analysis based on case study, policy analysis, and discourse analysis frameworks without mixing substantive

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Condition of the Turkish State

Turkey has a highly strategic geopolitical position because it is located on two continents, Asia and Europe, and shares borders with the conflict-prone Middle Eastern region. This geographical position makes Turkey a key actor in regional security dynamics and a major route for cross-border migration flows. Its location also exposes Turkey to potential security threats from multiple directions, making national stability a primary state priority.

In terms of military capacity, Turkey ranks among the top 15 military powers in the world, with approximately 510,000 active personnel (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2011). This defense capacity demonstrates the state's commitment to maintaining domestic and regional stability, particularly given its proximity to conflict areas such as Syria, Iraq and the Caucasus region.

Economically, prior to the Syrian conflict outbreak in 2011, Turkey experienced relatively strong and stable economic growth. According to the IMF Data Set (2012), Turkey ranked 16th in the world in terms of GDP-PPP in 2011, reaching approximately USD 1,073,565 (Syafitri, 2017). This growth reflects Turkey's successful recovery from the global financial crisis and strengthens its position as an emerging market economy. The increase in

per capita income also contributed to a reduction in poverty and improvement in living standards.

Turkey's economic structure is supported by several key sectors, including industry, agriculture, mining, and service. Approximately 40% of the workforce is employed in the agricultural sector, while the service sector, especially tourism, has become one of the largest contributors to foreign exchange earnings. Natural resources also play an important role in economic development, including significant mineral reserves (Syafitri, 2017).

The relatively strong economic conditions in the early 2010s provided Turkey with the initial capacity to respond to the first wave of Syrian refugees. However, as the number of refugees increased significantly over time, the structural pressure on the country's economic, social, and fiscal systems also intensified. Therefore, Turkey's geopolitical position, military capacity, and economic strength form an important context for understanding how the country responded to the Syrian refugee crisis in both policy and strategic terms.

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The existing literature has provided important contributions to understanding Turkey's refugee policy from legal, political, economic, and international relations perspectives. However, most studies tend to analyze policies in sectoral or institutional terms. However, few studies have explicitly integrated the humanitarian dimension with political power analysis within a comprehensive theoretical framework.

The significance of power theory is particularly relevant to this study. Refugee policy is not merely an administrative response to humanitarian crises; it can also be conceptualised as a manifestation of power that influences agendas, preferences, and political decisions. Employing Steven Lukes' three-dimensional framework of power comprising decision-making, agenda-setting, and preference shaping this study explores how Turkey's refugee policy can be interpreted as a synthesis of humanitarian commitment and strategic political interests.

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The Beginning of the Syrian Conflict

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011 with protests in Daraa. The demonstrations were triggered by the arrest and torture of several students who wrote anti-government slogans on city walls. The government's repressive response, including the use of force against demonstrators, caused the protests to spread rapidly to other cities and eventually developed into a nationwide armed conflict (Fahham, A. M., & Kartaatmaja, 2014).

On 11 March 2011 large-scale protests erupted in Daraa after reports of torture during detention were made public. The security forces responded by opening fire on the demonstrators, resulting in casualties. Further demonstrations on 23 March led to at least 20 deaths due to police firing. In response, President Bashar al-Assad announced that the government was considering political reforms, including the revision of emergency laws that had been in place for 48 years. However, these promises failed to calm the opposition. By late March, mass protests intensified across the country, and violence between the security forces and demonstrators escalated.

Throughout April 2011, security forces continued to suppress protests using military force, killing dozens of civilians in various cities. The government also imposed restrictions on civil liberties, including requiring official permission for public protests. These measures have been widely criticised as human rights violations and perceived as efforts to maintain regime power. The conflict expanded to major cities, including Damascus, where military deployments, tanks, and armoured vehicles were used to control protest areas. In several regions, authorities cut electricity, communication networks, Internet access, and water supplies to limit resistance.

International reactions quickly followed this event. The European Union imposed travel bans and asset freezes on senior officials in Syria. During the same period, Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly condemned violence against civilians and later hosted meetings for Syrian opposition groups (Fahham, A. M., & Kartaatmaja, 2014). As violence intensified, reports of military defections and clashes between government forces and armed opposition groups emerged. In June 2011, military operations in northern Syria caused many civilians to flee across the border to Turkey.

Efforts at international mediation, including initiatives by the Arab League and later the United Nations, failed to stop violence. By early 2012, large-scale military operations were conducted

in opposition-controlled areas, such as Homs. Although a UN-brokered ceasefire briefly reduced violence in April 2012, it soon collapsed thereafter. The resignation of UN envoy Kofi Annan and the continued escalation marked the transformation of the crisis into a prolonged civil war.

By late 2012, the conflict had become increasingly international. Regional and global actors became directly involved: Iran and Hezbollah supported the Assad regime, whereas Turkey, Qatar, and other Middle Eastern countries provided various forms of support to the opposition forces. The complexity of the conflict deepened further in August 2013 with the reported use of chemical weapons, which killed hundreds of civilians in Ghouta. Although the Syrian government denied responsibility, the incident drew strong condemnation from Western countries and intensified international diplomatic tensions. Eventually, an agreement brokered by Russia and the United States placed Syria's chemical weapons under international control, reducing the likelihood of direct Western military intervention.

The roots of the conflict were closely linked to long-standing political, economic and social grievances. Since 1963, Syria had been governed by the Ba'ath Party, followed by the Assad family's rule first under Hafez al-Assad (1970–2000) and then Bashar al-Assad from 2000 onward. Limited political freedom, high unemployment, economic stagnation, and international sanctions have contributed to widespread dissatisfaction. The prolonged dominance of the Assad regime generated demands for political reform and regime change, which ultimately evolved into a violent confrontation.

As the conflict intensified, it produced one of the largest forced-migration crises in modern history. Millions of Syrians have been internally displaced or fled to neighbouring countries, particularly Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, seeking safety and protection from the ongoing violence.

The Arrival of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

The geographical proximity between Syria and Turkey made Turkey the primary destination for Syrian refugees. The Syrian conflict, which was influenced by the broader Arab Spring movements that had previously led to regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia, escalated into a violent civil war (R, 2017). As the situation deteriorated, including the rise of extremist groups such as ISIL and increasing destruction of infrastructure and civilian casualties, large numbers of Syrians began fleeing the country in search of safety.

Turkey shares a long land border with northern Syria, which facilitated cross-border movement. The relatively short distance and accessible land routes made Turkey a practical and immediate refuge for civilians escaping violence. Compared to other neighboring countries, Turkey initially adopted a more open and welcoming approach toward Syrian refugees, which further encouraged inflows.

Refugee flows began in 2011 and intensified significantly from 2012 onward as the conflict escalated. The increasing level of violence, involvement of regional powers, and prolonged instability led to a massive civilian exodus toward neighboring countries, with Turkey receiving the largest share (R, 2017). According to data from the Syrian Regional Refugee Response (2020), more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees were residing in Turkey as of October 2020.

During the early phase of displacement, the Turkish government established temporary refugee camps in border provinces to accommodate incoming populations. However, as the number of refugees continued to rise rapidly, the capacity of these camps became insufficient. Over time, the majority of Syrian refugees began settling in urban areas rather than remaining in camps. They are now distributed across almost all provinces in Turkey, with the largest concentrations found in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Hatay, Kilis, and Istanbul (Syukran, M., 2019).

The continuous arrival of refugees since 2012 marked the beginning of a long-term humanitarian and policy challenge for Turkey. What initially appeared as a temporary influx gradually transformed into a protracted displacement situation, requiring structural policy responses beyond emergency humanitarian assistance.

Issues of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

Refugees are individuals forced to leave their home countries due to conflict, violence, or threats to their safety (Syukran, M., 2019). In the Turkish context, the arrival of millions of Syrian refugees has generated substantial structural challenges, ranging from difficulties in social integration to increased pressure on public services and local resources.

In the early stage of the Syrian crisis, Turkey's response was widely perceived as a progressive humanitarian initiative through the implementation of an open-door policy. Initially, approximately 8,500 Syrian refugees were accommodated in temporary camps. However, as the conflict intensified and evolved into a protracted civil war, the number of refugees increased dramatically, eventually reaching nearly 4 million people. Turkey

became the primary destination largely because of its geographical proximity, accessible land borders, and comparatively more welcoming approach than other neighbouring countries.

According to Syukran and Ubaidullah (2019), Syrian refugees are now distributed across almost all the provinces in Turkey. The highest concentrations were found in Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Istanbul, Hatay, and Kilis. Many refugees originating from Aleppo settled in Gaziantep due to its close proximity—less than 100 km from the Syrian border—with more than 351,000 Syrians residing there based on earlier regional data (Syukran, M., 2019). This wide geographical dispersion transformed what initially appeared to be a temporary humanitarian situation into a national structural issue.

As the refugee population expanded, new socioeconomic challenges emerged. One major concern has been labour market competition, particularly in low-skilled and informal sectors, where refugees are often willing to accept lower wages. This dynamic has created tensions within host communities and raised concerns about unemployment and wage suppression among native workers. Additionally, the growing refugee population has increased fiscal pressure on the government, especially regarding the provision of healthcare, education, housing, and social assistance.

Security concerns have also entered domestic political discourse, particularly following the rise of extremist groups such as ISIL, which exploit regional instability. Although most refugees are civilians seeking protection, isolated security incidents have contributed to narratives of migration securitisation in political debates. Consequently, the refugee issue in Turkey evolved from a purely humanitarian matter into a complex socio-political and economic challenge with long-term implications.

The presence of millions of Syrians has reshaped Turkey's social and political landscape. Public perception of refugees has changed over time. Erdoğan (2018) notes that initial public attitudes were relatively supportive, framed by humanitarian and religious solidarity narratives. However, longitudinal data from the Syrians Barometer (Erdoğan, 2022) indicate a gradual decline in social acceptance, accompanied by increasing concerns about employment competition, social cohesion, and long-term integration prospects.

Tepe and Gomtsian (2018) argue that Turkey's refugee management reflects a delicate balance between humanitarian discourse and domestic political considerations. While the government consistently promoted a narrative of hospitality,

public anxiety intensified as the refugee presence became more permanent and structurally embedded within society.

From a legal perspective, the temporary protection regime grants Syrians access to essential services but is significantly structurally limited. Yıldız and Uzgören (2016) emphasise that although Turkey provides access to healthcare and education, it does not grant full refugee status under the 1951 Convention due to geographical limitations. This creates a form of semi-permanent protection status, offering security and rights in practice, yet lacking long-term legal certainty and full integration pathways.

Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that the Syrian refugee presence in Turkey has moved beyond an emergency humanitarian response and developed into a long-term governance challenge that intersects with legal status, public perception, economic pressure, and national security considerations.

Refugee Policy in Turkey

Turkey implemented an open-door policy in 2011, granting temporary protection to Syrian refugees (R, 2017). This scheme provides access to healthcare, education, and social assistance without granting full refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention. Instead of offering permanent legal status, the temporary protection regime functions as a flexible framework for managing large-scale displacement.

Cooperation with the European Union in 2015–2016 marked an important turning point in policy development. The European Union offered financial assistance, visa liberalisation, and the reopening of accession negotiations in exchange for Turkey's commitment to controlling migration flows toward Europe (Benvenuti, 2017). This development demonstrates that Turkey's refugee policy is not merely a domestic humanitarian measure but also has significant geopolitical and strategic dimensions.

Turkey as a State Party to the Refugee Convention and Protocol

As a country that has ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, Turkey has international legal obligations to protect refugees. Although Turkey maintains geographical limitations under the Convention, the principle of non-refoulement remains a central foundation of its protection framework.

In practice, the temporary protection mechanism serves as a domestic legal instrument that allows Turkey to balance its international obligations

with its national interests. This reflects an attempt to reconcile humanitarian commitments with concerns over state sovereignty and long-term migration management.

Political Impact on Turkey

Refugee policies have generated significant domestic political dynamics. The government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has faced criticism from opposition parties, including allegations that granting citizenship to some refugees could influence electoral outcomes and political configurations (Syafitri, 2017).

Simultaneously, the presence of millions of refugees has strengthened Turkey's bargaining position in negotiations with the European Union. The refugee issue has become an instrument of diplomacy, increasing Turkey's leverage in external relations, particularly in the context of migration cooperation and European Union (EU) accession discussions. In this regard, the 2016 EU–Turkey migration agreement illustrates how refugee management evolved into a strategic bargaining tool, linking financial assistance, visa liberalization prospects, and political dialogue to Turkey's role in controlling migration flows toward Europe. By positioning itself as a key gatekeeper between the Middle East and Europe, Turkey has been able to negotiate financial packages and political concessions, thereby transforming a humanitarian challenge into geopolitical capital. However, this strategy has also generated criticism, both domestically and internationally, as some observers argue that the instrumentalization of refugees risks reducing a humanitarian issue to a transactional political mechanism. Overall, the refugee crisis has significantly reshaped Turkey's domestic political landscape and its external diplomatic strategy, reinforcing the intersection between migration governance and power politics.

Economic and Labour Market Impact Turkey

The economic impact of the Syrian refugee influx is one of the most visible and debated consequences of this crisis. Government spending on refugee assistance has been estimated at approximately USD 6 billion (Syukran, M., 2019). Fiscal pressure increased significantly as the state expanded access to essential public services, including healthcare, education, housing, and social assistance for millions of refugees. This expansion required substantial budget reallocation and administrative adjustments at both the national and local levels.

In addition to fiscal strain, broader macroeconomic sectors were affected. The tourism sector, one of Turkey's main sources of foreign exchange revenue, experienced a decline due to heightened security concerns and increasing perceptions of instability. Tensions with Russia in 2015, which led to economic sanctions and restrictions on tourism flows, further worsened its trade and tourism performance (Syukran, M., 2019). These overlapping geopolitical and security factors compounded the economic pressures associated with refugee hosting.

At the labour market level, empirical research presents mixed but nuanced findings. Ceritoğlu et al. (2017) find that Syrian refugees had measurable effects on local labour markets, particularly in informal and low-skilled sectors. Similarly, Del Carpio and Wagner (2015), in a World Bank study, argue that although refugees increased overall labour supply, wage effects were largely concentrated among low-skilled native workers. This indicates that the impact was not uniform across the workforce but was unevenly distributed.

Tumen (2016) further suggested that the economic impact of Syrian refugees varies significantly across regions. In some provinces, the presence of refugees stimulated local demand and expanded the informal sector, creating short-term economic dynamism. However, these localised gains did not eliminate structural tensions within host communities, particularly in areas with fragile labour markets.

Demirkol's (2024) recent research highlights the persistent structural barriers to refugee labour market integration, including high levels of informality, skill mismatches, limited formal employment opportunities, and restricted upward mobility. These findings suggest that refugee incorporation into Turkey's economy remains fragile and highly dependent on regulatory frameworks and state policy interventions.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that the economic impact of the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey is multi-dimensional. While short-term fiscal pressures and labour market competition are evident, the presence of refugees has also reshaped domestic consumption patterns, informal sector dynamics, and regional economic structures. The overall economic consequences cannot be reduced to a purely negative or positive narrative; rather, they reflect a complex interaction between humanitarian obligations, labour market realities and broader geopolitical developments.

Social Impact on Turkish Society

From a social perspective, the presence of Syrian refugees has significantly reshaped public discourse and social dynamics in Turkey. Turkish society has become increasingly polarized over the government's refugee policy. While some segments of society support the government's humanitarian stance and emphasize moral responsibility, Islamic solidarity, and international obligations, other groups express growing concerns about employment competition, pressure on public services, security risks, and the preservation of national identity.

In particular, economic anxieties have intensified in regions with high refugee concentrations. Many local citizens perceive refugees as competitors in the informal labor market, where lower wages and limited regulation create tensions. Additionally, fears of extremist infiltration, crime, and demographic change although not always supported by statistical evidence have contributed to negative public sentiment. Social media narratives and political rhetoric have further amplified these concerns, deepening divisions within society.

Beyond economic and security debates, challenges of social integration remain central. Language barriers, differences in cultural practices, limited access to formal employment, and unequal educational opportunities have complicated long-term integration efforts. As the refugee presence has shifted from a temporary emergency to a protracted reality, questions about citizenship, return policies, and social cohesion have become increasingly politicized.

Overall, these dynamics demonstrate that the Syrian refugee crisis in Turkey is not solely a humanitarian issue. It is simultaneously a political, economic, and social phenomenon that reshapes governance structures, public opinion, and power relations within the country. The issue continues to influence electoral politics, policy priorities, and Turkey's broader regional strategy.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Turkey's refugee policy toward Syrian refugees cannot be understood solely as a humanitarian commitment or a political instrument. Rather, it represents a combination of both dimensions, which are closely intertwined. Since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Turkey has responded by implementing an open-door policy and a temporary protection regime, reflecting its initial commitment to humanitarian protection principles and non-refoulement. Turkey's

geographical proximity to Syria, along with its relatively strong economic and institutional capacity in the early 2010s, enabled it to receive millions of refugees within a short period of time.

However, over time, the policy became deeply embedded in domestic political dynamics and external strategic considerations. At the domestic level, the presence of millions of refugees has generated political polarisation, fiscal pressure, and significant social integration challenges. Issues such as citizenship grants, labour market competition, and security concerns became central to public debate and political contestation between the government and the opposition parties. This indicates that refugee policy functions as a political arena that affects governmental legitimacy and internal power configurations.

At the international level, the refugee issue evolved into a diplomatic instrument that strengthened Turkey's bargaining position with the European Union. The 2015–2016 migration cooperation demonstrated how refugee management transformed into strategic leverage in negotiations over financial assistance, visa liberalisation, and accession processes. Therefore, refugee policy operates not only as a protection mechanism but also as a component of foreign policy strategies.

Turkey's refugee policy can be analysed from three perspectives. First, concrete decisions are made regarding the acceptance and management of refugees. Second, agenda-setting in both domestic and international political arenas. Third, the construction of humanitarian and security narratives shapes public perception. This approach confirms that refugee governance functions as a practice of power, operating through institutions, discourse, and political strategy.

Overall, this study concludes that Turkey's refugee policy reflects a dynamic balance between humanitarian commitment and strategic political interest. This complexity illustrates that in the context of globalisation and modern migration crises, refugee governance is never entirely neutral; rather, it consistently intersects with values, interests, and power relations.

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