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Syrians and Labor Market Integration: Dynamics in Turkey and Germany

By Omar Kadkoy

When the conflict broke out in Syria, the first to cross the Turkey–Syria border was a group of 252 Syrians in April 2011.¹ In the almost six years since, more than five million Syrians have sought refuge in neighboring countries and the European Union member states.² The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) classifies the Syrian case as a protracted refugee situation, which on average last 26 years.³ As such, Syrian hosting countries may still be considered in the beginning phase of this period. Recently, especially with the curbing of the flow of Syrians to Europe following EU–Turkey Migration Agreement of March 2016, governments’ approaches with regards to the refugee crisis have begun to shift from “crisis management” to “sustainable integration.” Simultaneously with this shift, policy discussions have also been transitioning from temporary solutions to empowerment of refugees for harmonization, integration, and ultimately, self-sufficiency. In some countries, this shift has already started to translate into actual implementation of policies, whereas in others, policy formulation is still underway.

Without a doubt, the most critical aspect to empower refugees toward attaining self-sufficiency is to enable them to access labor markets. However, it is also the most politically-charged policy area, as granting entry to labor markets to refugees often means paving the way for the local labor force to be displaced by foreigners, if no further

job-creation initiatives and mechanisms are introduced. In the two non-Arabic speaking countries that host the largest number of Syrians, Turkey and Germany, labor market integration processes have followed contrasting paths and yielded different results. Germany has highly advanced institutions of its own, as well as a history of integrating immigrant and refugee populations into its labor force. Turkey’s migration management institutions are neither as strong nor as experienced as those in Germany’s. It is a rare case of a middle-income country that has had to accommodate a large influx of a foreign population.

Germany transformed into a country of immigration after World War II. The needed human capital for reconstruction led Germany to sign bilateral agreements with countries such as Italy and Turkey under the *gastarbeiter* program. The “guest” workers built the country back to its industrial glory, turning Germany to a country of immigration; “*Einwanderungsland*.” This meant integrating populations of different socio-economic backgrounds. Decades of painful debate ensued, with multiculturalism on one side and the country’s cultural homogeneity on the other. That is why the sheer number of newcomers in last year’s wave and the unpreparedness triggered alarm bills in Berlin. The pre-existing migration management and integration framework was not flexible enough to meet the scale of newly arrived people to Germany. The result of the political debate in Berlin was adopting a milestone integration act which entered into force in August, 2016.⁴

Considering Germany’s experience, the new integration law is based on pull and push factors to create an optimum

1 ‘Suriyeli mülteciler hatay’da’ [‘Syrian refugees in Hatay’], t24 30 April, 2011, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/suriyeli-multeciler-hatayda--hatay-aa,142211>.

2 Directorate General of Migration Management, sited on 28 November, 2016, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik.

3 Global trends, forced displacement in 2015, UNHCR <http://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/576408cd7/unhcr-global-trends-2015.html>.

4 ‘Integrationsgesetz’ [‘Integration Act’], Bundesgesetzblatt [Federal Law Gazette], 5 August, 2016, http://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBI&jumpTo=bgbl116s1939.pdf#_bgbl_%2F%2F*%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl116s1939.pdf%27%5D_1480431556011.

environment for integration. First and foremost, the bill introduces obligatory integration classes for asylum seekers. The message is that refugees are not only expected to learn German, but also to adapt to their new society's norms and values. Second, a 'Refugee Integration Measure' creates 100,000 low paying job opportunities. The goal here is to prepare asylum seekers for the labor market. Third, if a refugee finds a training opportunity in a firm, they are offered a vocational training grant. Fourth, to favor the employment of new arrivals, a labor market priority check — favoring Germans or EU citizens — is suspended. Fifth, to ensure effective integration measures, German states assign a place of residence to newcomers who are getting public benefits for the duration of three years. This exercise aims to share the burden of providing and preventing ghettoization.⁵

The German model, shaped by decades of experience in dealing with foreign, often Muslim immigrants, is a tight institutional grip on the incoming population. It can only work, however, if the number of refugees arriving at your borders can be controlled; a luxury Germany now has with the Turkey–EU Migration Agreement.

In contrast, Turkey's generous open door policy, which ended in 2016 when Turkey imposed visa requirements on Syrians, meant that the country had no barriers for entry to those fleeing violence in their homelands. The government initially delegated the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) to set up camps and accommodate arriving Syrians with basic needs. Soon, however, it was realized that the volume of arrivals required institutional and policy arrangements far beyond AFAD's capacity. The government took two important steps to bridge the gap between reality and policy in 2014. The first was ratifying the Law on Foreigners and International Protection and through this law establishing a civil institution to deal with foreigners' affairs, including forcibly displaced persons. The Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) staff grew from 10 personnel in 2014 to 3,000, covering all 81 provinces in Turkey by the end of 2015. The second step was the Temporary Protection Regulation which was also issued in 2014. The law oversees the legal status of Syrians and facilitates their access to public services such as health, education, and to a lesser extent, employment.

However, up until early 2016, only about 7,700 work permits were issued to Syrians in Turkey. The vast majority of Syrians who worked (estimates range between 500,000 and 1,000,000, with no official data), did so irregularly. A further step forward was taken when the Ministry of

5 'Integrationsgesetz' ['Integration Act'], Bundesgesetzblatt [Federal Law Gazette], 5 August, 2016, http://www.bgbl.de/xaver/bgbl/start.xav?startbk=Bundesanzeiger_BGBl&jumpTo=bgbl116s1939.pdf#_bgbl_%2F%2F%5B%40attr_id%3D%27bgbl116s1939.pdf%27%5D__1480497117038.

Labor and Social Security issued a decree in January 2016 to further facilitate Syrians' access to the labor market.⁶ Following this decree, according to the Ministry's statistics, 13,298 work permits were granted to Syrians in 2016.⁷ Despite the implementation of the January 2016 regulation, Turkey still lacks a roadmap and complementary policies and mechanisms to facilitate labor market integration of its Syrian population. Vocational education and training (VET) of Syrians is a topic that is frequently mentioned in Ankara and Southeast Turkey, but efforts to deliver VET remain mostly sporadic, uncoordinated and limited to one-off projects at the local levels. Similarly, cash-for-work programs are carried out by foreign donors in provinces with high numbers of Syrians, but their coverage often does not exceed more than a few hundred refugees. Obviously, one important point is that compared to 4.1 percent unemployment in Germany,⁸ Turkey's unemployment rate has been recently on the rise and is now above 11 percent. The figures are even higher in Southern and Southeastern Turkey, where 7 of the top 10 Syrian hosting provinces are located, exacerbating already existing challenges for the labor market. Hence, even though the government's attempts to design and implement a legal framework was an important first step, the short and medium term trajectory of the Turkish economy and its job generation capacity will have the final say with regards to labor market integration.

Civil wars usually occur in low-income countries, which are themselves surrounded by other low-income countries. Therefore, most of the time, displaced persons seek asylum either in low-income countries due to reasons of proximity or in high-income countries such as the EU member states due to economic pull factors. Turkey's experience in the past five years has been an exception to this. In many ways, the case of a middle-income country hosting this scale of a refugee influx is unprecedented.

As reported by an officer who was recently stationed in Ankara while working for an international aid organization, "we're used to going to a country, talking directly to a minister, or even the president, and then just doing what needs to be done on the ground. But Turkey isn't like that. There are already institutions in place, so you can't just do whatever you want." She said, "We respect that of course, but it also means that you have to work with an entirely

6 'Geçici koruma sağlanan yabancıların çalışma izinlerine dair yönetmelik', [Work permit regulation for foreigners under temporary protection], General Directorate of Legislative Development and Publication Information 15 January, 2016, <http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/3.5.20168375.pdf>.

7 'Türkiye 73 bin yabancıya iş kapısı oldu', [Turkey issued 73 thousand work permits for foreigners], Milliyet 18 January, 2017, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/turkiye-73-bin-yabanciya-is-kapisi-ekonomi-2380640/>.

8 [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment_rates,_seasonally_adjusted,_November_2016_\(%25\)_F2.png](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/File:Unemployment_rates,_seasonally_adjusted,_November_2016_(%25)_F2.png).

new set of bureaucracy which can be very difficult.”

Indeed, Turkey’s experience with the Syrian crisis has been shaping its migration management institutions and state capacity on the fly. In this sense as well, Turkey is certainly no low-income country, but it is not Germany yet either. However, the government’s long-term vision for the country’s Syrian population remains murky at best. In contrast to the German example, the concept of “integration” is rarely used by high-level officials in Turkey. Similarly, laws and regulations refrain from using the i-word and instead conceptualize the process as one of “harmonization.” The difference may be trivial for many, but it would be curious to know if the choice of words is deliberate, and if so, contemplate on its implications.

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