

Syrian Refugees of the Mediterranean

The civil war in Syria is now in its fifth year. It is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time, with no end in sight. The conflict, which began as anti-government protests, claimed the lives of more than 250,000 Syrians in due time and half of the population-22 million before the war-have been forced to flee their homes. While more than 4.8 million Syrians have been forced to leave their country, 6.5 million are internally displaced within Syria.

Syrians have scattered throughout the region, either struggling to survive inside Syria or trying to make homes in the neighboring countries. The main country of asylum is Turkey with more than 3.1 million registered forced migrants from Syria. Turkey is followed by Lebanon (1.04 million), Jordan (655.217), Iraq (247.339) and Egypt (117.702) (ECHO, 2016; UNHCR, 2016a). According to several commentators, in addition to these registered refugees, there are more than a million unregistered Syrian refugees in these countries (The Economist, 2015). Apart from these countries, northern Africa is reported to host some 30 thousand Syrian refugees.

Map.1. Syrian Refugees in the Mediterranean



Source: UNHCR, 2016a.

Many others, on the other hand, have risked their lives to reach Europe. Syrians' mass flight to Europe became one of the main defining events of 2015 (Genç and Şirin-Öner, 2016, 127). Hundred thousands of Syrian, men, women, accompanied and unaccompanied children, determined to take the sea journey to Greek islands, sailed from Turkish coasts. They tried to reach Europe at all costs. According to UNHCR (2016b) 1.015.078 refugees (Syrians but also Afghans, Iraqi, etc.) arrived to Europe by sea in 2015. The main points of arrival were the Greek islands, Italy and Spain. More than 850.000 refugees arrived to Greek islands. And many migrants went missing, while more than 3771 died in the Mediterranean in 2015 (IOM, 2016). Though European Union has taken effective steps to curtail the refugee movement, the flow and its fatality continues. In the first six months of 2016, 224.033 refugees arrived to Europe with leaving 2886 dead and/or missing migrants behind.

Following this movement, asylum applications in Europe skyrocketed. According to Eurostat (2016), the number of asylum seekers rose to 431 thousand in 2013, 627 thousand in 2014 and to 1.3 million in 2015. Though Syrian asylum-seekers made up the majority of applicants (363 thousand, 29% of all first-time applicants) in 2015, they were accompanied by Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, Kosovars and Albanians, Pakistanis and Ethiopians. Eurostat (2016) reports the total number of Syrian asylum applications in Europe between April 2011 and April 2016 as 1.037.760. Most of them have lodged their asylum applications in Germany, Hungary and Sweden.

Turkey's Syrians: The largest refugee population in the world

Among all the countries mentioned, Turkey has received the highest number of Syrian refugees. Turkey's new migration management bureau, Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM) (23/06/2016) within the Ministry of Interior reports the number of registered Syrian Arab Republic nationals in the country as 2.733.850. According to European Commission (2016), their number in Turkey already reached to 3.1 million. In addition, there are still many unregistered refugees from Syria.

Due to the specificities of Turkish migration and asylum regime, refugees from Syria are not granted refugee status in the country (Soykan, 2012). A Temporary Protection Regime (TPR) applies to them- all registered Syrian Arab Republic nationals and stateless persons from Syria are under temporary protection. In theory, TPR provides the rights of access to health, to education, to social assistance and to the labor market for them. However, the implementation of many of these rights still needs to be clarified by the relevant Ministries. Uncertainties in the regime and its application make forced migrants of Syria more fragile and vulnerable (Şirin-Öner and Genç, 2015; 4-5).

According to DGMM, Syria's forced migrants are now in every city of Turkey. There are 26 accommodation centers in 10 cities along Turkey's border with Syria. However, the accommodation centers can offer shelter and housing for only 256.230 refugees, leaving more than 2.5 million refugees with no choice but self-settlement. The cities along the border and the metropolitan ones host the largest number of refugees.

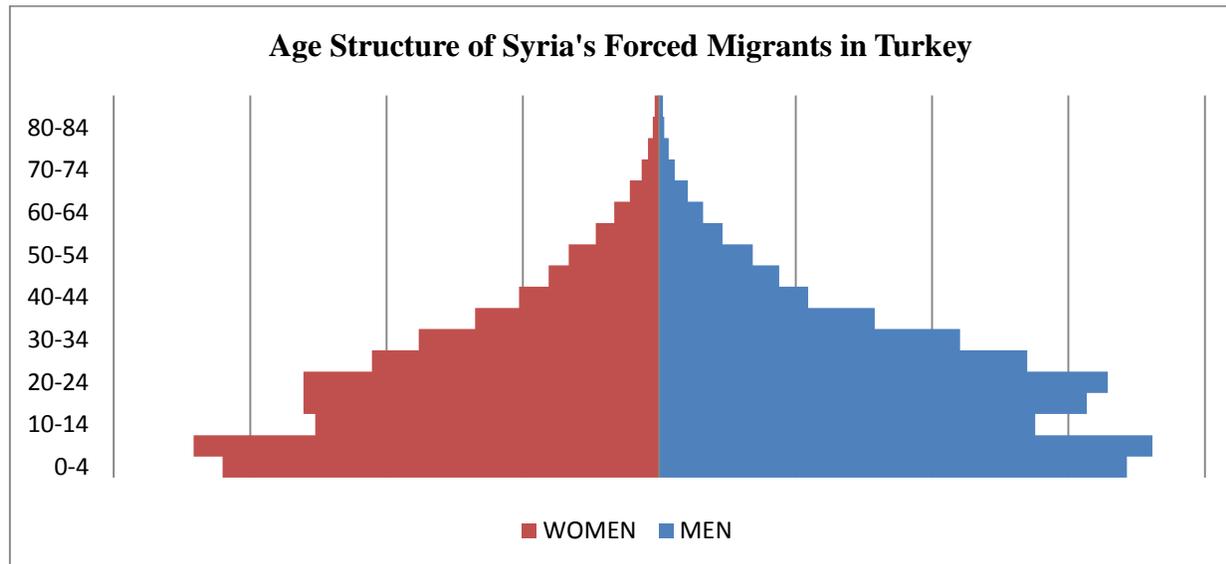
Table 1: Turkish cities with the highest number of Syrian refugees

Şanlıurfa	398.612	Kilis	125.751
İstanbul	392.682	Bursa	96.902
Hatay	379.126	Mardin	95.026
Gaziantep	321.157	İzmir	91.237
Adana	149.942	Kahramanmaraş	84.131
Mersin	138.579	Konya	68.582

Source: DGMM, 2016.

Moreover, demographic data of the Syrian refugees in Turkey urge the government to prepare itself for a large, energetic, young group of Syrian inhabitants. As Figure 1 on age structure of the refugees displays, more than 700 thousand of this population is made up of Syrian children, toddlers and babies of ages between 0 and 10. The Syrian youngsters or teenagers aged between 10 and 19 are not less numerous, their population is 602,723.

Figure 1. Age Structure of Syrian Population in Turkey



Source: DGMM, 2016.

References

- DGMM. 2016. "Migration Statistics." (Accessed 30/06/2016) http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik
- European Commission. 2016. "ECHO Fact Sheet: Turkey: Refugee Crisis." (Accessed 29/06/2016). http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf
- Eurostat. 2016. "Asylum and Migration Statistics." (Accessed 29/06/2016) http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics
- Genç, D. and Şirin-Öner, N. A. 2016. "Stuck in the Aegean: Syrians leaving Turkey face European barriers." In I. Sirkeci and B. Pusch (eds.) *Turkish Migration Policy*, 127-149, London: Transnational Press London.
- IOM. 2016. "IOM Counts 3,771 Migrant Fatalities in Mediterranean in 2015." (Accessed 29/06/2016) <http://www.iom.int/news/iom-counts-3771-migrant-fatalities-mediterranean-2015>
- Soykan, C. 2012. "The New Draft Law on Foreigners and International Protection in Turkey." *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration*, 2(2): 38-47.
- Şirin-Öner, N. A. and Genç, D. 2015. "Vulnerability leading to mobility: Syrians' exodus from Turkey." *Migration Letters*, 12(3): 251-262.
- The Economist. 30/09/2015. "Syria's drained population." (Accessed 29/06/2016) <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/09/daily-chart-18>
- UNHCR. 2016a. "Syrian Regional Refugee Response." (Accessed 29/06/2016) <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>
- UNHCR. 2016b. "Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response Mediterranean." (Accessed 29/06/2016) <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>