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Turkey's Education Policies towards Syrian Refugees: A Macro-level Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the transformation of Turkey's education policies towards Syrian refugees in three major stages. It argues that education policies in these different stages reflect the general perception of and political vision for Syrian refugees by the Turkish state, and that they are also instruments through which this political vision is materialized and declared. The remarkable evolution of Turkey's education policies towards Syrian refugees, from early policies that aimed at temporary accommodation to later policies that have aimed at full integration, needs to be understood in this framework of a changing vision in addition to the security concerns. Lastly, the article argues that, while the current strategy of complete integration of Syrians into formal education system is certainly positive, it also brings about a number of significant challenges related to the political and legal context in Turkey that will have to be handled in its realization.

INTRODUCTION

The education of Syrian refugees is one of the most pressing public policy domains in Turkey, particularly concerning their social, cultural and economic integration in the society (Erdoğan, 2014, 2017; Bircan and Sunata, 2015; Culbertson and Constant, 2015). The significance of this issue is accentuated by the demographic and socio-economic profile of the Syrian community in the country (Yüceşahina and Sirkeci, 2017). While the importance of this issue seems to have been initially overshadowed by the expectation that the presence of Syrians would be only temporary, recent years have witnessed an increasing acknowledgement that the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey will be long-lasting and have far-reaching implications (Unutulmaz, 2017). This article argues that, as a result of this transformation in the way the Syrian presence in the country is understood, the education of Syrian refugees – which in the beginning was not considered to be a significant issue and was handled with a laissez-faire approach by the state – has become subject to complete governmental control through a dynamic process.

This study describes and discusses this evolution of Turkey's education policies towards Syrian refugees from early policies that aimed at temporary accommodation to later policies that have aimed at full integration (Bircan and Sunata, 2015; Emin, 2016). The article attempts to illustrate that these education policies reflect, or rather mimic, the general perception of and political vision for Syrian refugees by the Turkish state, and that they are also instruments through which this political vision is materialised and declared.

To achieve its goals, this article begins with a brief section on methodology and another on education policies towards Syrian refugees in different countries. The article then offers an analytical

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overview of the historical evolution of education policies towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. It argues that Turkey's approach to the education of Syrian refugees has gone through three separate, yet somewhat overlapping, stages. The subsequent section discusses how this transformation of education policies should be understood, and the final section discusses the future prospects for the current strategy of complete integration of Syrian refugees into the formal national education system and highlights several significant challenges that will have to be handled in its realization.

METHODOLOGY

This article draws upon data collected as part of a study entitled "Supporting Turkey in the Development of a National Harmonisation Policy". This research was conducted by a team of researchers and coordinated by the Turkish Office of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) for the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), between September 2016 and December 2017.

In terms of the methodology, a number of data-collection instruments were employed in the framework of this project. To complement the review of sources of secondary data, including academic literature, research reports, policy documents and relevant statistics, various methods of primary data collection were also used. These included a number of semi-structured in-depth interviews, which aimed to understand the general framework of education of Syrians and other immigrants in Turkey. As such, the interviews included questions aimed at mapping out the various actors as well as what they do concerning the education of Syrians, their respective agendas and objectives, and their general perspectives and experiences concerning education of immigrants. In order to achieve a comprehensive picture of the current situation, representatives from a diverse set of institutions were interviewed.

These included interviews with representatives of relevant public institutions such as the Migration and Emergency Education Unit of the Ministry of National Education (MoNE), the Turkish Higher Education Council (YOK), and various departments from the DGMM under the Ministry of Interior. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from international organizations including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Save the Children, as well as local and national NGOs. A last group of interviews were conducted with a number of prominent academics working in the field. In total, 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals. In addition, a workshop was organized at the DGMM headquarters in Ankara with the participation of representatives from the relevant units of all public institutions that carry out activities concerning the education of Syrians.

Lastly, in Hatay, one of the cities with the largest Syrian refugee communities, a brief fieldwork was conducted which included several in-depth interviews with local representatives of the MoNE, Syrian educators and NGO workers, as well as informal conversations and on-site observations at several Turkish schools and Syrian Temporary Education Centres (TECs). In total, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted in Hatay. The fieldwork was essential in including the experiences and perspectives of the Syrians themselves, in addition to acquiring a sense of more micro-level implementation of the national policies and strategies in a local context.

All the interviews and the workshop discussions were voice recorded, with the express consent of the participants after being informed about the purposes and the structure of the research. Although consent has been acquired to use the names and titles of all interviewees, their personal details are anonymized in this study to protect their privacy. The collected primary information, including the field-notes taken by the researcher, have been stored in and analysed using MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, through coding and running code-based queries. For the purposes of this study, data collected on education policies, their implementation and

perception, experiences of the educators and students, the national and local context, as well as more subjective visions, experiences, and attitudes concerning the present and future of Syrians' education in the country have been appropriated.

APPROACHES TO THE EDUCATION OF (SYRIAN) REFUGEES IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

A recent report released by the UNHCR in 2017 suggests that more than 3.5 million school-aged refugee children (5 to 17 years of age) had no access to education globally in 2016 (UNHCR, 2017, 8). This represents a significant increase from 2011 (UNHCR, 2011, 6), one due at least in part to the massive displacement caused by the conflict in Syria. In fact, by 2015, about 1.4 million Syrian children in this age range were out of school (UNHCR, 2016a, 11). There is a large and growing body of international literature on the education of refugees and immigrants (see, for instance, Rutter and Jones, 2012; SIRIUS, 2013, 2014). While a comprehensive review of this literature is outside the scope of this study, suffice it to say that the literature clearly demonstrates the importance of education for refugee children in terms not only of successful social integration but also of regional and global development (Menashy and Zakharia, 2017; Erdoğan, 2014; UNHCR, 2011, 2016a, 2017; SIRIUS, 2014).

It is, however, necessary for the present work to provide a brief overview of the education policies developed towards Syrian refugees by other countries that have, like Turkey, faced an unanticipated and mass inflow of refugees in a short period of time. Particularly relevant are the cases of Lebanon and Jordan, since both received significant inflows of Syrian refugees in the aftermath of the civil war that started in 2011. These countries have faced similar challenges concerning an unexpected mass migration inflow of a largely young and vulnerable population. They have produced very interesting and diverse responses in attempting to manage the ensuing crises, including the one related to the education of Syrian refugee children (Culbertson and Constant, 2015).

In Lebanon, over 1 million Syrian refugees have registered with the UNHCR. Half of these are school-aged children (UNHCR, 2016b), a similar proportion to Turkey. While Lebanon hosts only one-third as many Syrian refugees as Turkey in terms of absolute numbers, it has become the country with the highest per-capita rate of refugees worldwide. Although it is a legally recognized right of refugee children to enrol in public schools, only around 40 per cent of school-aged Syrian children in Lebanon were enrolled in school in 2016, also similar to the figure in Turkey, which was estimated to be around 39 per cent in the same period (UNHCR, 2016b). This figure needs to be considered in the context of a decentralized education system that is highly privatised and where the language of instruction is Arabic and English or French (Menashy and Zakharia, 2017, 3). While Arabic does not constitute a problem, the requirement of learning English or French certainly does (UNHCR, 2016b). The decentralized nature of the system has meant that non-state actors have been central to the education of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Shuayb et al., 2014; Culbertson and Constant, 2015).

In Jordan, where the language of education is Arabic alone, the schooling rate appears to be significantly higher, with 70 per cent of Syrian refugee children enrolled in school (UNHCR, 2016b). Out of the 600,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan, 226,000 were school-aged children in 2016 (HRW, 2016). The government has reportedly attempted to absorb all Syrian refugee children into the public school system; however, the insufficient physical infrastructure of the schools, financial problems and the "inhospitable environment" created by the tensions that have arisen with host communities have prevented full inclusion (UNICEF, 2015, 13; Francis, 2015).

Analyses of the education policies towards refugees of countries that have received significant numbers of Syrians highlight the importance of five challenges that have also been crucial in the Turkish case (UNHCR, 2016b):

- *The language barrier* seems to be a major reason preventing children from accessing education, except in Jordan where the language of education is Arabic.
- *The bullying, discrimination and hostility in the schools* that refugee children face on a daily basis also feature as a major cause of dropping-out and reluctance to enrol in public schools.
- *Resource gaps, including funding, physical infrastructure and human resources*, are another main common challenge in these neighbouring countries.
- *Too many state and non-state actors* at the local, national and international levels are trying to respond to the unprecedented challenges created by sudden refugee inflows. This creates, in the education sector as in many others, a significant problem of coordination as well as making it complicated for governments to choose which actors to engage and cooperate with.
- *Each context is different and has unique dynamics; there is no single solution to education-related problems* in different contexts.

These challenges have been particularly difficult for neighbouring countries in the region, which are not traditionally refugee-receiving countries with well-developed policies and institutions (Culbertson and Constant, 2015). In other words, while the issue of providing education for Syrian refugees has been an important challenge in a country like Germany as well, Germany was much better equipped and prepared to deal with the issue because it has been hosting refugees for decades. Countries like Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, however, were much less prepared to handle these challenges and other context-specific complexities. In the following section, the Turkish case will be reviewed.

THE EVOLUTION OF EDUCATION POLICES TOWARDS SYRIANS IN TURKEY: FROM TEMPORARY GUESTS TO FULL INTEGRATION

Turkey's approach to the education of Syrians in the country has evolved from one characterized by almost complete neglect and a laissez-faire attitude with respect to education provided by various civil society actors to one defined by a state strategy of full integration. This radical policy transformation in the domain of education took place in three overlapping stages, which paralleled the more general transformation of Turkey's perception of and political vision for Syrians in the country. Turkey's perception of and political vision for Syrians shapes, and is shaped by, the significant legislative and institutional/organizational changes as the driving force of the evolution of education policies.

Education policies towards Syrians in Turkey have gone through the following three major stages:

- Stage one: A laissez-faire attitude towards community-based education, shaped by a vision of temporariness, 2011-2014;
- Stage two: A mixed education model under strict government control with extensive involvement from local, national and international NGOs, shaped by growing security concerns about the increasing number of Syrians and by the emerging realization of the strong likelihood of their long-term presence in Turkey, 2014–present.

- Stage three: A strategy aiming to fully integrate all Syrians into the Turkish formal education system, shaped by the growing realisation that at least a significant part of the Syrian population in Turkey will be permanent, 2016–2018/2019 onwards.

The first stage resembles the context in Lebanon, where private actors play a pivotal role in providing education services to refugees. Similarly, in Turkey, the education provided to Syrians in this first stage was in Arabic, and therefore did not create any language barrier; also, the curriculum and teaching materials were not centrally controlled. The third stage, in turn, resembles the context in Jordan, where all Syrian refugees are eligible to enrol in public schools and their access to formal education is increased. A considerable increase in the schooling rate of Syrians in Turkey is already visible as a result of this third stage, and the continuing implementation of the policy will likely increase it further.

It needs to be emphasized that these stages are not completely distinct. Instead, several elements of each stage co-exist in different time periods, including today. But each period is marked by a dominant perspective that produces its major policies and programmes. This is particularly the case today where, although there is a clear strategy to integrate all Syrians fully into the national education system and significant steps have been taken in this direction, there are still many active so-called Temporary Education Centres (TECs) using foreign curricula and teaching materials in Arabic to provide education to approximately a quarter of a million Syrian students.

Stage one: community-based education and a vision of temporariness, 2011-2014

The initial few years following the arrival of first Syrians in Turkey in 2011 were marked by a vision of temporariness. In other words, the dominant perspective on the migration of Syrians to Turkey, one shared by both Turks and Syrians, was that the war in Syria would not last long and that the Syrians would soon return to their countries (Erdogan, 2014; Icduygu, 2015; Kirisci, 2014). This perspective was apparent in the fact that Syrians in Turkey did not have a recognised legal status until 2014 and were referred to as "guests" (Ustek-Spilda, 2017; Icduygu, 2015, 7).

In addition to the absence of any comprehensive national legislation on immigration until 2013, Syrians did not have any legal status arising from Turkey's international engagements, either. This was because, although Turkey was an original signatory to the Geneva Convention of 1951 on the status of refugees, it retained a "geographical limitation" on the implementation of this convention and its 1969 additional protocols. In other words, since Turkey had only committed itself to admitting asylum-seekers from Europe, Syrians – like Iraqis, Afghanis or Iranians in earlier periods – did not qualify to seek asylum or be recognized as refugees in Turkey (Kirisci, 2015, 8).

In fact, even after a formal status was given to them in 2014, through a legal directive deriving from the first modern Turkish legislation on "foreigners and international protection" in 2013 (LFIP, 2013), many people and institutions, including the most relevant public ones, continued to refer to Syrians as guests or temporary residents. The interviewees from Turkish public institutions in the framework of this research certainly reflect this pattern: a respondent from the MoNE, for instance, suggests that: "giving young Syrians a quality education is crucial in the long term, because these will be the people who will rebuild Syria *when they return*". It needs to be further highlighted, moreover, that the legal status eventually provided to Syrians is still considered to be temporary, i.e., "persons under temporary protection". This process is described with reference to the relevant pieces of legislation below.

In this initial period, therefore, the Turkish government does not appear to have felt the need to produce any major policy for the education of "Syrian guests" (Emin, 2016). While education facilities did exist in the camps that were set up and run by Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), these camps hosted only a minority of the Syrian communities in the

country. For the majority of Syrians that lived in the cities, however, the public education system did not seem to provide any reliable channels of access to education.

In such a context, these first few years witnessed the emergence of sporadic and isolated efforts from within the Syrian community to establish TECs, with significant support from local actors. These ad hoc and informal "schools" started to emerge in 2012 to provide education in quite adverse physical conditions (OSF, 2016, 20-21). The teaching was provided in Arabic by "volunteer teachers", who were Syrian refugees themselves, using teaching materials and curricula salvaged from Syria. These education centres remained largely outside of any control or auditing by Turkish authorities, since the students, teachers and administrators were all Syrians and all the materials were in Arabic. In addition, most of the "volunteer teachers" working at these centres did not have any teaching qualifications.

> "These centres were not really about quality education at first. It was an attempt to give our children a sense of normalcy, a sense that life was going on... Because we all had to leave everything behind... our homes, works, loved ones... our lives... We wanted them to continue to go to school so that they would feel that they didn't leave that behind. Like life was interrupted but still normal."
>
> (Interview with a Syrian voluntary educator, Hatay)

In this period of community-based education, the funding and physical infrastructure, as insufficient as it was, was provided mostly by local NGOs and the community itself. According to many interviewees, the attitude of the central government towards these centres was mostly positive and the local governments are said to have been largely cooperative, even enabling, with respect to the local actors that were involved. This seems to have been considered a pragmatic, temporary solution to the problem of the thousands of school-aged Syrians whose education had been interrupted by the war, and one that involved no significant economic cost or political risk. In fact, many interviewees appear to agree that the government intentionally remained aloof from the issue of refugee education at the time because of the potential costs and risks associated with it: "... there were a number of things... there was the economic dimension, there was the issue of required human resources, there was the matter of physical arrangements... And using Turkish formal schools could spark some reactions... Also, Syrians didn't want to send their children to Turkish schools. So, since they were expected to go back at any minute anyway, these schools [Temporary Education Centres] offered a good alternative for the state to support as they offered familiar teaching in Arabic" (Interview, Turkish Academic, Ankara).

Stage two: mixed education with NGO support under strict government control, 2014-present

As the number of Syrians increased and their stay in Turkey proved longer than expected, and with no easy solution to the war in sight, the community-based education described above started to appear unsustainable. The most significant problem was the inability of the government to control the education in these schools. The laissez-faire attitude of the government started to receive criticism from inside various public institutions, which stated that it was creating a major security vulnerability. One interviewee, a local civil servant with the MoNE in Hatay, said the situation was so open to abuse – by "radical militant organisations" seeking to recruit young Syrians or by various "foreign intelligence agencies" seeking to plant spies – that they had sent several petitions to the ministry in Ankara:

> "We don't know what they are teaching to these kids, or, if they teach anything at all... We don't know who these teachers are. Nobody asks what kind of teaching qualifications they have, they go through a very superficial security control, some don't even have that... In such a situation, if you

> are an organisation with bad intentions, you don't have to go house by house, they all send their children to you anyway. . ."

In addition to this growing concern with security, the content and quality of the education provided in these community-based centres also seems to have emerged as a concern. When explaining why the old system had to be changed, a respondent from the Migration and Emergency Education Unit newly formed under the MoNE stated that "Before, there was no oversight of the teaching materials or curriculum. Students were still reading the same material that contained 'pro-regime' ideological indoctrination. Also, the education programme was designed to prepare these students for the life in Syria, and give them skills that were in demand in that country. We needed to revise it to make it relevant for their life".

The year 2014 marked a momentous change in Turkey's education policies towards Syrians, mostly due to the reasons mentioned above, i.e., increasing numbers, a growing realization of the policies' longer-term effects, and concerns related to security and the content of the education. Several laws and regulations were enacted – as discussed in detail below – in an effort to address these concerns. These legal measures had two primary aims: to bring the education of Syrians under the control of the state and to clarify the education options to which Syrians' newly established legal status entitled them. Essentially, these legal measures were an acknowledgment that the vision of temporariness was now being replaced.

LEGISLATION CONCERNING THE EDUCATION OF SYRIANS

While a comprehensive review of all the legal measures affecting Syrians' position in Turkey is beyond of the scope of this study, it is necessary to provide a brief review of the major policy documents relating to the education of Syrians, since they are simultaneously manifestations of Turkey's changing political vision and the basic legal instruments shaping its education policy towards Syrians. The most important and comprehensive piece of legislation concerning all foreigners in Turkey is the Law numbered 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection, adopted in 2013 (LFIP, 2013). Article 34 of this law states that the children under 18 years of age of all legal residents in Turkey have the right to receive primary and secondary education in public schools.

This law did not contain any provisions specifically addressing the education of Syrians, as they did not have any legal status in the country at the time. This was addressed in 2014 by a regulation prepared by the Ministry of Interior based on Article 91 of Law 6458. This 'Temporary Protection Regulation' finally defined a secure, albeit still temporary, legal status for Syrians and the various rights to which individuals under temporary protection are entitled (TPR, 2014). In relation to education, this regulation states in its Article 28 on "Education services" that status holders have the right to educational access from preschool all the way to the level of a doctoral degree.

Following this regulation, the MoNE issued a circular the same year entitled 'Education services for foreigners' numbered 2014/21, which is still in force (CESF, 2014). This circular laid out the education rights of and procedures for foreigners in Turkey, including those under temporary protection, in some detail. In fact, the MoNE had issued two previous circulars back in 2013 to create some de facto channels through which Syrians could enrol in Turkish schools. It was only after the temporary protection regulation and 2014/21 circular that Syrian refugees obtained the de jure right to enrol in the formal schooling system. In addition, the circular brought about some institutional and organizational changes regulating the registration processes of foreigners. It authorized the provincial organization of the MoNE and the newly established provincial commissions to oversee the implementation of the legal measures described above. The same circular also regulated the issue of TECs, which are described in detail below, and brought them under the strict control and monitoring of the state.

The important provisions of this circular could be summarised as follows:

- A central Ministry Commission is defined that is to meet regularly under the presidency of an assigned Deputy Undersecretary to coordinate education processes nationally.
- A local Provincial Commission is to be set up under the provincial Director of National Education in each city; this is to be composed of at least a principal representing the education institutions at each level and relevant individuals to be chosen by the Province Governorate.
- The Provincial Commissions are to meet at least twice annually at the beginning of academic terms to carry out the following missions: (i) to decide on the procedures of accreditation and determination of education levels and to direct students to appropriate education institutions; (ii) to carry out necessary work concerning the establishment of TECs inside and outside of camps, which now requires approval from the governorates; and (iii) to carry out necessary work concerning the quality and content of the education provided by these TECs.

THE ORGANIZATION OF MANAGEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURES

In parallel with these legislative developments, the organisation of management and institutional structures concerning the education of Syrians has also undergone a significant transformation (see Figure 1). Most significantly, the MoNE has established a specific unit to coordinate the management of all educational issues related to Syrians (and other foreigners).

The mixed education model for Syrians until 2016

As a result, there emerged a mixed system of education for Syrians in Turkey. Between 2014 and 2016, Syrians under temporary protection had three alternative ways of pursuing education:

- To register in formal Turkish public schools (like all legal residents);
- To attend a TEC, inside or outside of camps, to receive an education in Arabic from accredited Syrian volunteer teachers following a MoNE-accredited curriculum; or,
- To attend a community-based education programme in Arabic, usually coordinated and financed by local, national or international NGOs.

According to the official figures provided to the author by the Migration and Emergency Education Unit, the number of school-aged Syrian children in Turkey was 833,039 as of November 2016. Of these, 155,852 were attending formal Turkish public schools and 328,642 were registered at TECs. Thus, while 484,494 Syrians had access to a form of formal education at the primary and secondary levels, the remaining 348,545 school-aged Syrians do not appear to have been receiving any formal education (see Figure 2).

It is noteworthy that the schooling rates of Syrian children display a significant variation depending on the stage of education. While the schooling rate is highest in primary school (over 70 per cent), it decreases at more advanced levels. According to the interviewees, the reasons are numerous:

> "Many of them drop out after primary school because of the system back in Syria. There, only primary education was mandatory and middle-school and high-school were optional. So, for many of the families there was no expectation for their children to continue to go to school after completing primary school"
>
> Workshop, MoNE representative, Ankara.

FIGURE 1
THE ORGANISATIONAL SCHEME FOR EDUCATION OF SYRIANS IN TURKEY

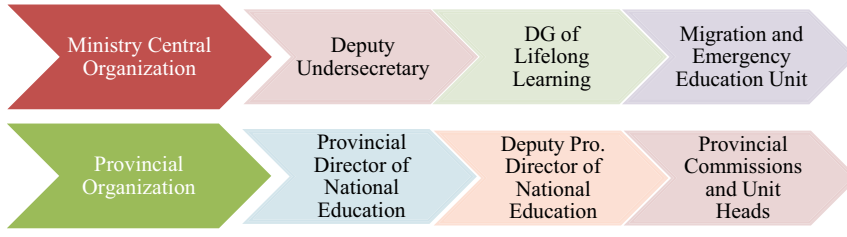
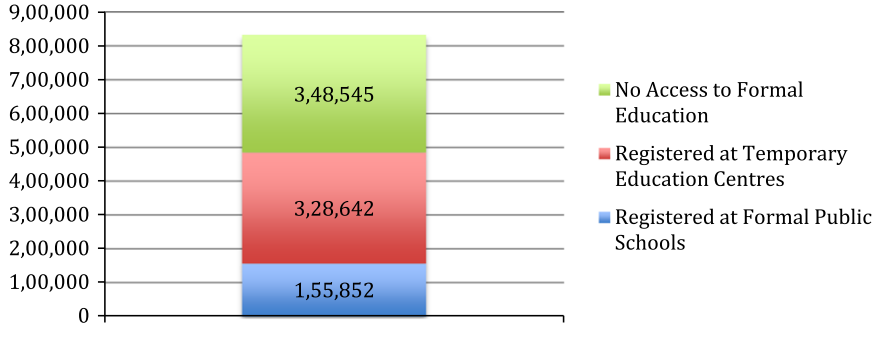


FIGURE 2
ACCESS TO EDUCATION OF SYRIAN SCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN, AS OF NOVEMBER 2016



"Even free education is not completely free! There are many costs and even if everything was completely free, a child in education means a child not working in paid employment. Many families depend on their young kids also bringing income as early as possible"

Interview, NGO representative, Ankara.

"What makes girls less likely to continue with their education is the social pressure on them to get married. For cultural and traditional reasons as well as because of the perceived additional threats to the safety of their daughters and to the family honour, families rush to marry off their daughters at a very young age."

Interview, NGO representative, Hatay.

The TECs at which the majority of Syrian children in Turkey now study emerged spontaneously as offshoots of smaller community-based centres. As a result of the growing number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the number of these centres and the number of students attending them grew exponentially in a matter of few years (see Figure 2). It was in this context, as described above, that the MoNE started to reckon with the existence of the education centres, which were almost completely outside of their control and even knowledge. According to the information provided by the Migration and Emergency Education Unit, there were 425 TECs active in 21 different cities providing education to 328,642 Syrian students as of early 2017. This figure means that an average of 770 students are receiving education from each TEC. While only 36 of these TECs are located within camps, the vast majority of them (389) are scattered across urban centres, mostly in the cities with

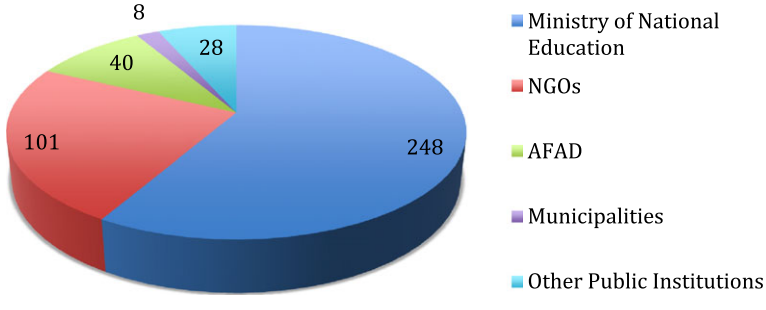
the highest concentration of Syrian refugee communities. While all the TECs now require the approval of the provincial governorate and MoNE, there is still a degree of diversity concerning the founders of the centres. Starting from 2014, the MoNE itself has opened a large number of TECs as part of its efforts to regulate education programmes catering to Syrians and to eliminate any potential security vulnerability by bringing TECs under strict control. Therefore, more than half (248) of TECs have been opened by the MoNE, while the second-largest founders of TECs are NGOs, which have established 101 centres (see Figure 3).

Those who teach at TECs are called volunteer educators, not teachers, and they are also Syrian individuals under temporary protection. By the end of 2016, the number of Syrian volunteer educators across Turkey was 12,630. Although their title suggests otherwise, these educators are paid a monthly salary, which is paid by the MoNE but funded by UNICEF. Until the end of 2016, the salary paid to the educators at TECs was quite low (600 TL to those working at TECs located in camps and 900 TL to those working at outside TECs). In 2017, however, it was raised to 1,300 TL, almost the level of the minimum legal wage in Turkey, for all volunteer educators irrespective of the location of their TECs. To repeat, the MoNE now has complete control over who is permitted to teach at these centres and provides "formation" training to those willing to work as educators at TECs. Those who successfully complete this training receive a certificate and become eligible to work as volunteer educators. The MoNE had distributed 18,691 certificates to Syrian educators by the end of 2016.

Stage three: full integration into the formal education system, 2018-19 onwards

The Migration and Emergency Education Unit has declared that their intention is to fully integrate all school-aged Syrian refugees into the formal national education system (MoNE, 2016). This will mean that the current mixed education system – where educational options in the form of TECs and community-based education centres exist alongside enrolment in formal Turkish schools – will come to an end. The strategy developed for this foresees a gradual transition that will take place over three years. During this period, the TECs will continue to provide education to their existing students but will not accept any new enrolment. In other words, all Syrian children who come to schooling age will be required to register at formal Turkish schools. In this way, the number of Syrian students who are enrolled at Turkish schools, which was 155,852 at the end of the 2016-2017 academic year and which has already increased to 328,399 at the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, is projected to rise to 834,833 by 2019. According to the projections of the MoNE, this number will mean that the schooling rate of Syrians will be approximately 100 per cent (all figures provided by the interviewees at MoNE to the author).

FIGURE 3
TEMPORARY EDUCATION CENTERS FOR SYRIANS IN TURKEY BY FOUNDER



The policy of not registering any new students for the first-year education provided at the TECs began to be implemented in the 2016-2017 academic year and it was continued in the 2017-2018 academic year. However, the eventual goal of fully integrating all Syrian students into the formal national education system is an ambitious one. Integrating around 500 thousand new students into an already crowded education system in a matter of few years will impose a significant financial cost. Based on the average number of students per teacher in Turkey, the MoNE calculates that adding an extra half million students will require around 28,000 new teachers. Similarly, considering the average number of students per classroom, which is 30, nearly 17,000 new classrooms will be needed, which in turn will require opening more than 700 new school buildings. In addition to these physical and financial challenges, there are also important organizational challenges concerning the training and re-training of teachers on issues such as teaching in multicultural contexts or pedagogical issues related to educating students with migrant backgrounds.

As mentioned above, education policies towards Syrian refugees in Turkey are in a transition phase from the second to the third stage. According to a document released by the MoNE, the strategy for realising this transformation involves prioritising the teaching of Turkish as a second language, allowing Syrian students to take additional courses in Arabic so that they can maintain their ethnic and cultural identities, and training teachers specifically to meet the requirements of a multicultural context (MoNE, 2016).

HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE TRANSFORMATION OF EDUCATION POLICIES TOWARDS SYRIANS?

The transformation of Turkey's education policies towards Syrian refugees, from a laissez-faire approach towards community-based and NGO-run temporary education to a commitment to the full integration of Syrian refugees into the national education system, took place in a matter of just a few years. To be clear, it is not argued here that Turkey has managed to integrate all Syrians into its education system. In fact, the access to education of Syrians and the quality of education they receive both need serious improvement (Bircan and Sunata, 2015; Emin, 2016). However, the change in the macro-level strategy has been tremendous. In explaining why such a radical transformation has taken place in the education policies towards Syrians, three factors appear to be the most significant.

First and arguably most significantly, education policies towards Syrians are both a manifestation of and an instrument for the transformation of the perception of Turkey's Syrians. In other words, on the one hand, as this perception and the vision concerning the future of Syrians in Turkey changed, education policies have been re-shaped to reflect these changes. Thus, when the existence of Syrians was seen to be temporary, developing any sort of an education policy was seen as unnecessary. As this perception changed and the presumption of temporariness started to fade away, more comprehensive education policies came into existence (Erdogan, 2014, 2017; Unutulmaz, 2017). On the other hand, through more comprehensive and inclusive education policies, the Turkish state is now contributing to this transformation of the perception of Syrians as longer-term residents of the country. In other words, education policies are both manifestations of the transformation of the political vision and instruments to drive and control this transformation.

This is why there were no coordinated efforts to open up education centres or to make it possible for Syrian refugees to register at Turkish schools in the initial years following the arrival of the first Syrian refugees in 2011. As time passed, the number of Syrians increased and the conflict in Syria proved to be much too complicated to come to a swift solution; accordingly, this perception started to lose its traction, on all sides. By 2014, the fact that around 1.5 million Syrians had yet to acquire a legal status started to be seen as unsustainable (Ustek-Spilda, 2017; Erdogan, 2017; Kirisci,

2014). While the legal status given to them was still conceived of as provisional, hence the name "temporary protection", it was a clear acknowledgement that many public policy domains needed to adopt a more comprehensive and longer-term approach vis-à-vis the Syrians in the country. Education was certainly one of the most central of these public policy domains. Therefore, starting from 2014 and growing into an even longer-term strategy of full integration, education policies towards Syrians started to be closely monitored, carefully controlled, and strategically coordinated:

> A significant number of them [Syrians] will remain in Turkey permanently. Many of them will return to Syria when the war is over and a large number will end up in different countries in Europe, America, and elsewhere. So, our guiding belief is this: no matter what happens, whether they stay, return or move on, giving them a quality education is in our [Turkey's] best interest. In other words, we don't consider it to be a kindness to the Syrians, it is an essential strategic investment for our future.
>
> Interview, representative from MoNE Immigration and Emergencies Education Unit, Ankara

Secondly, in a closely related manner, education policies evolved the way they did because of their immediately recognized close relationship with the prospects of integrating Syrians socially, culturally and economically into Turkish society. Education is considered to be one of the most crucial aspects of such a general integration policy. The literature on integration confirms this close relationship and suggests that education is intricately related to integration on many different levels and concerning many different issues, including language acquisition, creating social interaction between immigrant-origin individuals and their host society, intercultural exchange, the acquisition of market-relevant skills and the development of human resources (Heckmann, 2004; SIRIUS, 2014; Unutulmaz, 2017).

It needs to be noted, however, that just as education was not initially a priority for Syrians or the Turkish state, integration – or, to use the state's preferred terminology, "harmonization" – was not a pressing concern in the heated political context of the initial years of the Syrian refugee crisis (Erdogan, 2014). It was only after the aforementioned change of perception about the future of Syrians in Turkey that the issue of Syrian integration emerged as one of the most important items on the political agenda. As was mentioned at the beginning of this article, this study is itself a result of the growing concern to develop a strategy and action plan for Turkey's integration policies. A specific unit, Harmonization and Communication Unit, has been established under the DGMM to oversee Turkey's efforts for harmonization and social integration. The growing attention to the issue of educating Syrians and the strong desire to fully integrate all Syrian students into the national education system need to be seen as partly a result of the growing importance of integration debates.

Thirdly, the last major factor that explains the transformation of education policies towards Syrians is related to security concerns at national as well as local levels. This is evident in the account provided above about how the initial flexible system, where there was no significant state control, soon came to be viewed as creating security vulnerabilities. Particularly considering the extreme geographical proximity of various Turkish border cities to the war in Syria and the fact that complete control of such long land borders has been nearly impossible, letting anyone open up an education centre for Syrian children soon began to be seen as unacceptable. These centres were basically closed-off spaces for the Turkish state, where neither the personnel nor the content of the education material could be screened. The fact that the instruction was given in Arabic was an extra barrier. One major concern was, as quoted above from interviews in Hatay, that these centres could easily be infiltrated by and turned into recruitment centres for radical organizations. This was a particularly potent concern, since the children at these centres tend to be traumatized and disoriented by the effects of war and forced mobility. It was feared that these vulnerable children could be easy prey for such organizations which would try to radicalize and recruit them.

FUTURE PROSPECTS: CHALLENGES FOR FULL INTEGRATION INTO FORMAL NATIONAL EDUCATION

Completely integrating all Syrian refugees into the formal national education system in Turkey is not an easy goal to achieve. Some of the most immediate and practical obstacles involve the difficulty of securing the necessary additional human resources, physical infrastructure and finances, as briefly discussed above. There are, however, other challenges that lie at a much deeper level and that are likely to be even more difficult to overcome. These include the structure and existing problems of Turkey's national education system; the dominant republican tradition's emphasis on cultural homogeneity in building a national identity and its mistrust of ethnic and cultural diversity; the lack of a comprehensive immigration and integration policy, of which education policies towards immigrant-origin communities need to be an extension; the increasing securitization and politicization of the issue of Syrian refugees; and lastly, resistance on the part of Syrian refugees arising from fears of assimilation and the importance they attach to the Arabic language. In what follows, these potential challenges are briefly discussed.

First of all, the issue of education arguably poses a particularly complex challenge for Turkey due to several reasons related to the structure of its national education system. On the one hand, the national education system is extremely centralized in Turkey. Admission procedures to schools, teacher employment practices, pedagogical strategies, curricula and teaching materials are mostly regulated by the MoNE from the capital, Ankara. With a population of approximately 80 million, this already creates a very complicated education system. It needs to be added that the education system has always been at the forefront of political struggles in the country, with each government trying to make their mark with comprehensive reforms guided mostly by political objectives of a higher ideological order (Altinay, 2004). The past decade or so, in particular, has seen several radical reforms in the national education system related to the types of schools, length and composition of compulsory education, and central selection procedures for secondary and higher education, to name just a few (Inal and Akkaymak, 2012).

Secondly, ethnic and cultural diversity have always been at the centre of political debates in Turkey. Moreover, in terms of its historical experiences and legal, institutional and social structure, Turkey is arguably not well prepared to manage the sudden emergence of a new form of diversity brought on by the wave of new immigrants. It has been a destination for migrants for a long time, yet the unprecedented volume of migration from Syria has come as a surprise. The same applies, as illustrated by the above discussion, to the extent, significance and duration of the stay of the Syrians. Crucially, ethnic and cultural diversity have never been welcomed in the country, which was established on the very strong republican ideal of a unified nation embodied in the notion of a modern Turkish citizen (Kirisci, 2000). Education, in this context, has always been one of the most significant and effective instruments at the disposal of the republican elite (Altinay, 2004). This is, to a great extent, why the national education system is so centralized and seen as so closely tied to national security. Therefore, what is being taught, who is teaching and who gets to be in the classroom as a student have always been politically contentious issues. In such a context, the integration into the system of such a large number of Syrian students, who receive free public education in the same schools and classrooms as Turkish students, has the potential to create great political repercussions.

Thirdly, how the public will perceive the integration of all Syrians into the national education system depends significantly on the degree to which this issue is securitized and politicized in Turkey. So far, it can be argued that, unlike in many countries in the Western world where issues related to refugees have become extremely contentious security matters (Bourbeau, 2011), the Turkish government has succeeded in preventing the issue from becoming a full-fledged security issue that is very high on the political agenda with polarising implications. Elsewhere, I (Unutulmaz

(2017, 228-230)) claim that due to the humanitarian nature of the movement of Syrians escaping war in their country, the perception and expectation of temporariness of their stay, but most importantly the heavy political engagement of a strong government party were the reasons preventing the issue from further securitization.

However, there are significant pressures from political circles as well as "from below" that are pushing the issue closer to a securitized status. These include an increasing degree of political commentary by the opposition parties ("While the Turkish soldiers are fighting in Syria, Syrian young men are staring at our girls on beaches", Hurriyet, 2017); negative public reactions to the increasing visibility of Syrians and Arabic as a language in public space; speculations about granting Syrians the right to vote in political elections (Haber7, 2017; Cnnturk, 2017); a surge in the use of racist and xenophobic language towards Syrians; and the exploitation of the issue through provocation and misinformation by various groups, including those on social media (Unutulmaz, 2017, 230).

Fourthly, there are factors that could potentially create new challenges, or complicate the challenges discussed above. These relate to the profile and dynamics of Syrian refugee communities. The fact that the Syrian community in Turkey is very young both reinforces the importance of education and complicates the financial and organizational challenges discussed above. Almost half (47%) of all Syrians registered in Turkey are aged 18 or younger, with around 479 thousand being between the ages of 0 and 4, which indicates that either they were born in Turkey or they moved there as infants. In addition, the young age group of those under 35 constitutes a staggering 79.3 per cent of the whole Syrian population, further accentuating the need for their effective integration into the economic and social systems of the country (see Table 1). In their recent comprehensive analysis, Yucesahin and Sirkeci (2017, 208) further suggest that the Syrian communities in Turkey would be expected to display similar demographic trends to those of the Syrian society, which resemble Turkey of 1980s and are characterized by high fertility rates. While this means that Turkey would benefit from a continued supply of young human resource, despite its ongoing "demographic transition" leading to a stagnating and ageing population, it also means that the ratio of Syrians in the Turkish population could be expected to increase with new younger generations joining the society increasing the demand for education (Yucesahin and Sirkeci, 2017).

Last but not the least, Syrian refugees' attitudes towards integration into the formal Turkish education system and their willingness to be a part of that integration are also of crucial importance. The fieldwork conducted in the framework of this study confirms that Syrians have significant reservations about their children receiving formal education in the Turkish language. They voice concerns about a perceived attempt at assimilation, and quite a few respondents, both Syrians and individuals from NGOs working on the education of Syrians in the field, mentioned the importance of the Arabic language as an identity marker for these communities. In other words, it appears that the language issue does not only feature as an obstacle to access to education, it also needs to be addressed in the framework of the protection of cultural identity. While the MoNE seems to be aware of this issue and promises that the Syrians will be able to have courses on their mother tongues as an integral part of their education (MoNE, 2016), it is very likely that the issue will be a difficult one to handle, given the above-mentioned republican tradition of the national education system.

CONCLUSIONS

The education of Syrian refugees is a very important policy challenge for those countries that have received significant inflows of these refugees in the last few years. This is particularly true for the neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and so on, since they are not traditionally

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF SYRIAN REFUGEES BY AGE AND GENDER (DGMM, 2017)

Age	Male	Female	Total	
0-4	248,187	231,507	479,694	1,563,116 (0–18)
5-9	235,684	221,777	457,461	
10-14	178,947	163,904	342,851	
15-18	155,719	127,391	283,110	
19-24	284,046	209,568	493,614	1,695,428 (19–64)
25-29	179,953	136,707	316,660	
30-34	147,917	114,323	262,240	
35-39	103,650	84,832	188,482	
40-44	74,412	67,421	139,833	
45-49	55,524	51,051	106,575	
50-54	44,399	42,681	87,080	
55-59	29,711	29,610	59,321	
60-64	20,587	21,036	41,623	
65-69	13,608	14,002	27,610	62,270 (65+)
70-74	7,235	8,071	15,306	
75-79	4,471	5,346	9,817	
80-84	2,354	3,004	5,358	
85-89	1,263	1,572	2,835	
90+	593	751	1,344	
TOTAL	**1,786,260**	**1,534,554**	**3,320,814**	

refugee-hosting countries and the challenges of incorporating large numbers of refugees into their already struggling national education systems have been unprecedented. This is the case, it should be noted, despite the fact that Turkey has a long history of immigration (Erdogan and Kaya, 2015). However, such a large number of immigrants had never arrived in Turkey in such a short period of time, which made many of the implications truly unprecedented.

This article has attempted to survey and analyse the transformation of education policies towards Syrian refugees in Turkey. The close link and resemblance between the general political vision concerning Syrians and the actual education policies in Turkey is a testament to the much-cited need for developing effective education policies as part of larger integration strategies. In other words, Turkey, and any other refugee-hosting country for that matter, will only be able to develop effective education policies if and when it is able to develop a comprehensive long-term vision for the future of the society as a whole that includes the refugees. Only then will it become possible to plan and coordinate the complicated and dynamic education policies required by the complexity of the challenges discussed above.

This article has also discussed several complexities that arise from Turkey's own peculiar historical and political context. This is in line with the argument that there is no single "best education policy" towards refugees that will work everywhere. In contrast, every country must work within the confines of its own specific context. For Turkey, this will mean that the state needs to carefully manage not only the logistical or administrative issues specifically related to the education of refugees, but also much larger political issues including, for instance, how cultural diversity is framed and approached, the structure of the national education system, and the structure of the labour markets.

Lastly, this article has tried to draw attention to the two main sides of the education policies. While a great part of the discussion about refugee education appears to concern the supply side, especially the state and main non-state actors drafting education policies and providing the actual education, the other side of the coin – the refugees themselves – seems either to be taken as a

passive recipient in need or to be left out of the discussion altogether. However, the motivations, attitudes and perspectives of refugee communities are also crucial factors in adopting and implementing effective education policies, and deserve closer examination. This article tried to give the refugee side of the issue the attention it deserves.

Despite all the challenges and potential difficulties discussed above, Turkey's move from a temporary accommodation towards a full integration strategy in its education policy is certainly positive. No matter what the future holds concerning the Syrian civil war and its aftermath, all countries need to take significant steps addressing the question of the social integration of Syrian refugees. The Turkish case could provide several lessons in the risks of neglecting the longer-term implications of refugee communities for public policy and the importance of forming a comprehensive vision for their social integration, giving the issue of education the central position that it deserves.

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