

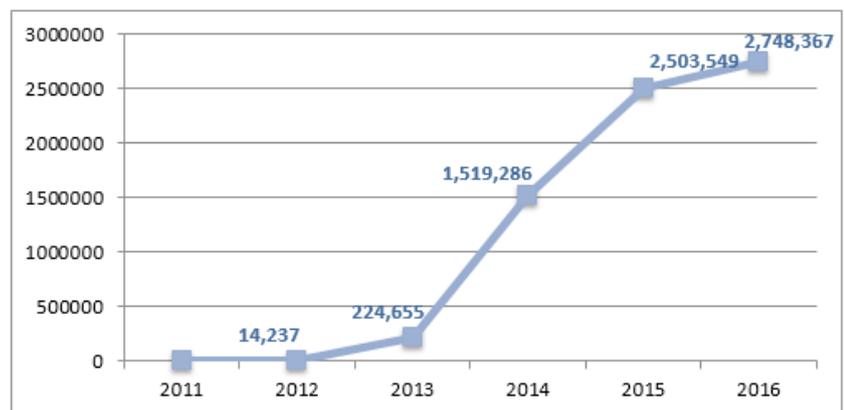
Preventing a ‘Lost Generation’: Educating Syrian Children in Turkey

Muberra Nur Emin

Abstract: The Syrian Civil War began in March 2011, and has turned into a humanitarian crisis, with more devastation in every subsequent year. The hopelessness engendered by these clashes and the failure to find a solution has led to migration flows on a scale not seen since the Second World War to countries in Syria’s neighborhood and to Europe. While the heavy responsibility brought about by the needs of these Syrians has been met with a barbed-wire fenced “closed door” attitude by Western countries, Turkey has met this crisis with an “open door” policy despite hard times, and has come to host nearly 3 million Syrians, half of whom are known to be children or young people. In addition to primary needs such as security, shelter, and nutrition, Syrian refugees are also in need of education. In order to prevent Syrian children and youth from becoming a “lost generation,” it is vital to assess and address the Syrians’ need for access to quality education in Turkey.

SYRIAN REFUGEES, WHO HAVE NOW BEEN IN TURKEY for around five years due to the continuation of the war in Syria and the almost total destruction of anywhere livable in the country, will not return home for a long time yet. According to May 5, 2016 data from the Directorate General of Migration Management (GİGM), the Syrian population in Turkey has risen from 14,000 in 2012 to almost 3 million—2,749,000—in 2016 (Figure 1). Of these, 264,000 are in 26 shelter centers established in 10 provinces by the Turkish Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD), while the remaining 2,484,000 live outside the camps. Consequently, this population are heavily concentrated in city centers outside the camps (Figure 2) [1].

Figure 1. Number of Syrians in Turkey by Year

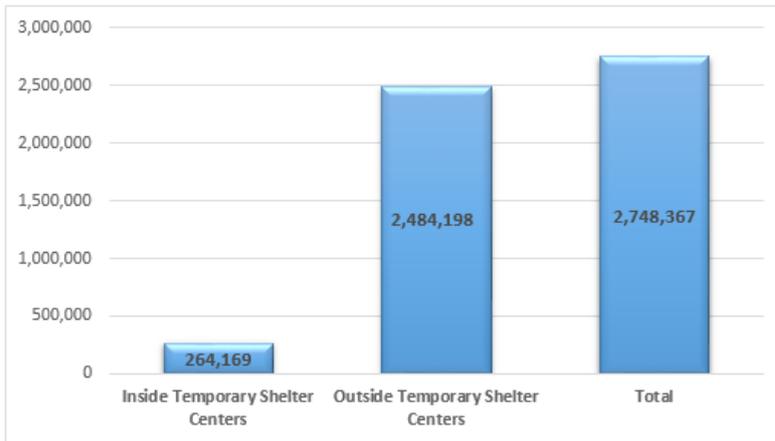


Source: GİGM, 2016.

From An Aid-Centered Approach To A Rights-Centered Approach

This mass migration from the Syrian crisis, which caught Turkey unprepared, has brought the question of refugees’ legal status higher up the agenda. International protection for refugees and asylum seekers is regulated by the 1951 “Geneva Convention on the Legal Status of Refugees” and the supplementary 1967 Protocol. Turkey

Figure 2. Syrians Inside and Outside Temporary Shelter Centers



signed the Geneva Convention, but interpreted this agreement as having a “geographical limitation” [2].

Hence, Turkey only accepts asylum seekers from Council of Europe member countries as “refugees”, while Turkish law places those coming from outside Europe into the “asylum seeker” category. However, the big wave of migration that came with the 2011 Syrian crisis made a new legal arrangement necessary. Finally, in April 2014 the Foreigners and International Protection Law No. 6458 (YUKK) came out, which recognized those coming from outside Europe as “conditional refugees”, giving them permission to remain in the country until resettled in another country. This law also established the Directorate General of Migration Management. [3]

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The legal framework that provided Syrians with this legal status and other benefits came into force with the Temporary Protection Directive as part of the YUKK in 2014. Thanks

to this directive, health, education and social services for Syrians both inside and outside the camps are brought together on a “rights” basis rather than an “aid” basis.

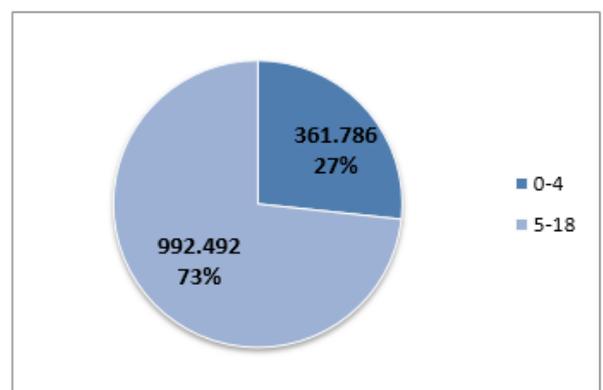
The right to access education granted by the temporary protection directive is regulated by the Education and Teaching Services for Foreigners Circular No. 2014/21. This circular provides that Syrian children be able to access education at

schools run by the National Education Ministry (MEB) or at Temporary Education Centers (GEMs) formed for Syrians.

Syrian Children In Turkey

Looking at the population of Syrian children in Turkey, the data provided by GiGM shows that over half of Syrians in Turkey (51%) are aged between 0-18. This indicates that there are around 1.5 million Syrian children in Turkey. Their distribution by age group indicates that, if we include pre-school aged children, 73% of Syrian children are aged 5-18—the ages when they should be receiving their basic education (Figure 3). Hence, we see that there is a large population of Syrian children who have had their education interrupted and who require education services. If we add the 27% of Syrian children aged between 0-4, we see that there are a large number born in Turkey and approaching the age where they should be in education. Therefore, every step taken today with regards the education of Syrian children should necessarily take into account planning for the long term. [5]

Figure 3. Age Distribution of Syrian Children in Turkey



Source: Compiled from data from GiGM, 2016.



An “Open Door” Policy Also In Education For Syrian Children

The policies adopted on the education of Syrian children, like policies in other areas, were first developed predicated on the assumption that the Syrians would return, and these short-term policies were only created for Syrian children in the camps. However, as the conflict in Syria has turned from an emergency situation into a long-term crisis, the search has begun for a long-term policy that would allow all children to access education and replace these short-term plans. To this end, Turkey, just as it has adopted an open door policy on the border, has proposed two important educational models to allow Syrian children whose education has been left unfinished to continue where they left off. The first of these is the Temporary Education Center (GEM), designed as part of the emergency intervention plan. These centers, which operate both inside and outside the camps, provide education in Arabic based on the Syrian curriculum from elementary school to the final year of high school. These centers are based in National Education Ministry schools, which are allocated to Syrian students in the afternoons. At these centers, Turkish language lessons are also given. In addition Turkish language teachers appointed by the National Education Ministry (MEB) and volunteer Syrian teachers give children an education. According to MEB figures, there are currently 10,361 teachers teaching Syrian children at GEMs: 852 teachers with Turkish citizenship and 9,509 Syrian teachers. Together with the MEB, every GEM has a national or international stakeholder such as an NGO, aid organization or UNICEF, which meets the cost of students' stationery supplies and pays the wages of the service personnel and volunteer Syrian teachers. [6] Therefore, the sustainability of the GEMs is linked to the continued support of stakeholder institutions.

Moreover, the Temporary Education Centers in Turkey are an exemplary model for the rest of the world. When we look at large-scale mi-

gration flows in the past, it is very rare to see an example of education being provided to asylum seekers in their own language and according to their own curriculum. In particular, this can be seen as a powerful model to be put in place so as that short-term child migrants are not left outside the education system. But it must be underlined that this model is effective and efficient for short-term migration movements. As the Syrian crisis continues and it is foreseen that Syrians will not be able to return to their country for many years due to the destruction of social and economic life, more permanent solutions were required in the educational field, just as in every other area. The MEB have therefore presented a second model with the aim of allowing for this permanent situation and integrating Syrians into Turkish society and the Turkish education system. In this model, Syrian children will be presented with the opportunity to be educated in the Turkish language according to the Turkish curriculum in state schools alongside their Turkish citizen peers. Thus, the doors of state schools have been opened for Syrian students.

Health, education and social services for Syrians both inside and outside the camps are brought together on a “rights” basis rather than an “aid.”

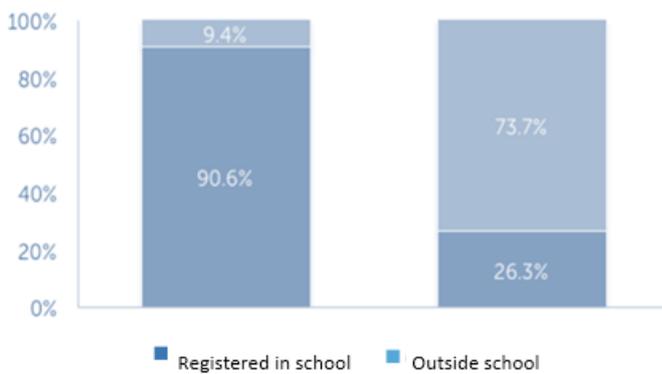
The education of Syrian children in state schools is important in order to make it easier for them to integrate into Turkish social, cultural and economic life in the long term. But it must not be forgotten that there are around 18 million school-age students in Turkey. At present, there are serious problems relating to physical infrastructure, capacity and hence quality in state schools. Hence, it appears impossible to send all these Syrian children to these schools in the short term without sufficient improvements.



The Situation Of Access To Education

Looking at the situation of access by Syrian children to either state schools or Temporary Education Centers in Turkey, according to MEB data, a total of 325,000 Syrian children are being educated in Turkey at present: 75,000 alongside their Turkish citizen peers in state schools, while 250,000 children in Temporary Education Centers. While 90% of children in the camps have access to education, only 26% of children outside camps are able to access education (Figure 4) [7]. In other words, 665,000 school-age Syrian children outside the camps are unable to access education. Therefore, it appears to be extremely important that education policies are designed in such a way as to allow children outside the camps to access education.

Figure 4. Numbers of children inside and outside the camps registered and not registered in school



Source: UNICEF, 2015

Syrian Youths In Higher Education

Another important issue relating to the education of Syrians is Syrian youths who have partially completed higher education. A series of decisions taken by the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) from 2013 onwards have attempted to make it easier for Syrian asylum seekers who have partially completed their university education in Syria to continue it in Turkey. These include easing measures such as the MEB establishing a high school equivalence exam; while YÖK have established undergraduate transfers, private study, and Arabic language departments and programs; the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) making a contribution

for students studying on their own means, and projects and efforts such as the Turkey Scholarships-Syria Project, the Turkey Scholarships-DAFI Scholarships, and the Turkey Scholarships-EU Supported Scholarships managed by Turkey Scholarships. Thanks to this work, today there are around 10,000 Syrian nationals—6,500 men and 3,500 women—in higher education in Turkey [8].

However, it must not be forgotten that there is a large young population that has not yet been able to access higher education, due to problems such as socio-economic troubles, language problems, the different and complex rules for university registration, a lack of documentation and a lack of awareness about the opportunities available. Even if higher education is not considered to be a primary need for Syrian refugees, a quality higher education is important in terms of helping individuals to reestablish their lives, for Turkey's development and, especially, for the rebuilding of their country once the conflict has ended.

The Temporary Education Centers in Turkey are an exemplary model for the rest of the world. When we look at large-scale migration flows in the past, it is very rare to see an example of education being provided to asylum seekers in their own language and according to their own curriculum.

In addition to Syrian young people, another important issue is those academics who have sought asylum in Turkey. It is difficult for them to find work in Turkey or internationally, especially those who have no documents relating to their identity, passport, or profession. Even if refugee academics from Syria are better organized in Turkey than elsewhere, it is worth emphasizing the point that support for them, especially from the international community, is insufficient.



The Indifference Of The International Community

According to AFAD data, while Turkey had spent a total of \$8 billion as of February 2015, the total contribution of international donors was just \$455 million [9]. Turkey's spending represents the greatest contribution "made in the world to Syrian refugees up to the present day". [10] It must be underlined how Turkey alone has taken the responsibility for the financial burden of the Syrian refugee crisis while the international community has not provided a sufficient level of support.

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When we look at educational spending, which is one of the most important components of this financial responsibility, Turkey's contribution is very important. The spending on the education of Syrian students in the 2014-2015 school year not only added a 700 million Turkish Lira additional burden on the National Education Ministry, but an additional fund was also created solely for the education of Syrian refugees. [11]. The international community mention at every opportunity that the responsibility taken on by Turkey in the Syrian crisis is generous and admirable [12]. However, the support it has given to Turkey on to lighten the burden on this matter has been extremely limited. Another issue on which the international community deserves criticism is for how it has focused solely on financial support and limited its actions to material aid. Of course, Syrian refugee children and young people do not solely face financial obstacles to an education. In addi-

tion, there are other big problems including the teachers, physical infrastructure, curricula and educational materials. Consequently, for a sustainable and quality education system, it is important that the international community is more encouraging and takes more responsibility.

Obstacles To Access To Education

Syrian children have problems accessing and participating in education. There are currently education centers in more or less every camp, but there are not education centers in every province outside the camp. In provinces with temporary education centers, there are no transport services, and families not being able to put aside the resources for transportation can be a reason for their children to remain outside of education.

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The biggest obstacle to access to education is the insufficient and extremely low socioeconomic situation of families. Boys generally work low-paid unskilled jobs in order to help their families keep afloat, while girls either look after those at home who need looking after, or else get married in order to reduce the financial burden on their families. [13]

However, children working out of financial necessity brings with it all the problems of child labor, child abuse and begging. Moreover, it must be remembered that every child left outside school is at risk of joining or being exploited by every type of criminal organization or radical group, and facing important rights abuses [14]. This leads to serious security problems, both on a personal and on a societal level.



Another important area of difficulty is language problems. Both within and without camps there is Turkish language education, but not of the desirable quality. Turkish teachers find language teaching difficult as they are rarely experienced in teaching the language to foreigners. In particular, it is often language problems that cause Syrian parents not to send their children to state schools. This postpones the integration of Syrian children into social life, society and the education system. For this reason, language education, both for adults and for children, is of the utmost importance.

When we consider education quality, the first thing that comes to mind is unquestionably the question of teachers. There is a need for expert educators in the field of Syrian children's education. This is why there is a corresponding need for work on identifying Syrian teachers and allowing them to get accredited. In the same way, a series of deficiencies need to be remedied in order to help teachers in Turkey establish healthy communication with Syrian students and to provide them with quality education.

Another area of difficulty is on the issue of curricula. The Syrian curriculum, which is taught in temporary education centers, has been cleansed of content relating to Assad and the Baathist regime by the Syrian Transitional Government, but there are still problems with the content. In particular, negative judgments about Ottoman and Turkish society have been discovered in relation to Turkey, which is the society in which these Syrians will be trying to live [15]. At the same time, as Syrian children begin to study in state schools, the Turkish curriculum must be reviewed, and it will be necessary to make it more pluralistic in order to preserve the Syrian children's own languages and cultures. The process of integration is thus not a one-way process. The prejudices and fears of both sides need to be assuaged, and social order, peace and security to be assured.

In addition, there are deficiencies in the coordination between public institutions and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, the hard rules and slow working pace of the bureaucracy may come in for criticism for delaying the solutions to various problems.

What Should Be Done?

- The Turkish government, international stakeholders and civil initiatives need to prepare an action plan for at least 10 years to strengthen existing capacity and activities in order to ensure that not even one Syrian child is unable to have an education.
- The identification of children unable to access education must be carried out effectively.
- Quality Turkish language education must be given to Syrians: this must be carried out in collaboration with experts and institutions, and training must be provided to teachers.
- The physical infrastructure of education and teaching centers inside and outside camps must be improved.
- MEB must take precautions in order to monitor and follow the continuing education of school-age children.
- NGOs that provide Syrian children and young people with educational support need umbrella organizations for accreditation and coordination.
- MEB must have NGOs, academics and experts review their educational programs, curricula and schoolbooks for Syrian children. In the same way, the Turkish curriculum must be revised in a way conscious of pluralism.
- Remedial mechanisms must be created for children who have spent a long time outside the education system.
- In particular, various policies and programs must be developed to ensure that children outside the camps have access to education. To this end, national and international NGOs must increase their humanitarian and financial assistance.
- It is important that psychological guidance and advice services for Syrian students are made more available for Syrian students and their families.



- All educational institutions and societies, beginning with schools hosting Syrian students, must give awareness lessons, preventing prejudice, intolerance and clashes, which will speed up the adaptation of Turkish society to these new developments.
- Scholarship options must be developed for Syrian students at all levels. These types of small-scale support can prevent children becoming child laborers, beggars or being married off young.
- Arabic language programs must be opened at universities for Syrian students at higher education level.
- Employment must be provided for Syrian academics and educations at universities and other places of need in Turkey in accordance with their specialties.
- More academic research on Syrians in Turkey should be encouraged.

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