




## Commentary


# The Turkish model


How Turkey has coped with 3.6 million Syrian refugees

VOCAL  
EUROPE

\*This Commentary was written by **Robert Ellis**.

 Rue de la Science 14, 1040 Brussels

 [office@vocaleurope.eu](mailto:office@vocaleurope.eu)

 + 32 02 588 00 14

# THE TURKISH MODEL

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### VOCAL EUROPE

RUE DE LA SCIENCE 14B, 1040 BRUSSELS

TEL: +32 02 588 00 14

VOCALEUROPE.EU



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There is one issue that has preoccupied Europe since the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011: immigration. More than six million Syrians are internally displaced and five million have fled to neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey but also Lebanon and Jordan. As of November, there are now 3.6 million registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, to which can be added some 300,000 -400,000 who are unregistered and more than 400,000 non-Syrian refugees, mainly from Iraq, Afghanistan and Iran. In fact, Turkey is hosting the world's largest refugee population.

As conditions in Syria deteriorated, there was a sharp rise in the number of refugees fleeing to Turkey, so that there were two and half million by 2015, and with Russia's intervention the number increased to over three and a half million. Correspondingly, there was a marked increase in the number of asylum seekers in Europe, which spiked in 2015 with a record 1.3 million. Half of these came from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq with Germany as the primary destination.

#### **Wir schaffen das**

German chancellor Angela Merkel's response was an optimistic "Wir schaffen das" - we can do it, but which provoked an immediate backlash. Shaken by the response, Merkel hastened to Istanbul to meet with Turkey's President Erdogan a fortnight before the Turkish elections in November in an attempt to plug the hole. To sweeten the deal, she conflated two separate issues: that of humanitarian aid and Turkey's accession to the EU.

A month later the EU and Turkey confirmed at a top-level meeting in Brussels to "re-energize" Turkey's accession process by opening another negotiating chapter and preparing to open more. There would be regular summits and high-level dialogues and the visa liberalisation process would be completed. In addition, a Facility for Refugees in Turkey would be established to coordinate an initial 3 billion euro in aid. Furthermore, a Joint Action Plan would be implemented to stop the influx of irregular migrants.

Afterwards, President Erdogan's advisor Burhan Kuzu tweeted: "The EU finally got Turkey's message and opened its purse strings. What did we say? "We'll open our borders and unleash all the Syrian refugees on you."

By this time, Turkey had already spent \$7.6 billion hosting 2.2 million Syrian refugees but the EU was also the largest donor in response to the Syrian crisis, having mobilised €4.2 billion in aid for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq as well as for Syrians displaced in Syria.

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### The EU-Turkey statement in March 2016

The following March Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu was dispatched to Brussels to press further concessions from the EU. After a nocturnal meeting with Chancellor Merkel, a new deal was brokered with the EU, which included an additional €3 billion in humanitarian aid, an acceleration of visa liberalisation and a readmission agreement to cover the return of irregular migrants from the Greek islands.<sup>1</sup>

By now, it is clear that the political element concerning Turkey's accession process and visa liberalisation has foundered, but in 2017 there was a dramatic drop in the number of migrants arriving by the Eastern Mediterranean route. However, in the last two years, an increasing number have crossed from Turkey into Greece via the land border, many of these being Turks fleeing President Erdogan's crackdown since the attempted coup in July 2016.

Nevertheless, the EU has honoured its commitment to provide humanitarian aid to Turkey's Syrian refugees, which apart from trade provides a viable channel for cooperation. Following the establishment of the Facility for Refugees, it was agreed that one third of the initial contribution of €3 billion would come from the EU's budget and two thirds would come from the 28 member states.

The Facility's Steering Committee provides strategic guidance and consists of two representatives from the Commission, a representative from each member state and is chaired by the Commission. Turkey is a member in an advisory capacity.

### The first tranche

Consequently, in June 2016 a comprehensive needs assessment report<sup>2</sup> was prepared, which not only took into account basic needs but also the fact that the Turkish government had recognized that millions of Syrian refugees were likely to remain in Turkey for at least the medium term and had taken concrete steps to facilitate their social and economic cohesion.

The outcome was that by early 2017 the entire amount of the first tranche (€3 billion) had been allocated and by the end of December the last contract had been signed. As the head of the EU delegation to Turkey, Ambassador Christian Berger, commented, in his 20 years' experience with the EU he had never seen a programme of such dimensions being implemented at such speed.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/03/18/eu-turkey-statement/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.avrupa.info.tr/fileadmin/Content/2016\\_April/160804\\_NA\\_report\\_FINAL\\_VERSION.pdf](https://www.avrupa.info.tr/fileadmin/Content/2016_April/160804_NA_report_FINAL_VERSION.pdf)

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### A massive programme

There is no doubt that this is a massive programme,<sup>3</sup> consisting of two components: one humanitarian, providing basic needs such as food, shelter and health care, and another longer-term programme concerning education, health and socio-economic support to enable Syrian refugees to stand on their own feet. 21 organisations were enlisted for the first component, both UN agencies such as UNICEF, UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency), WHO, IOM (International Organization for Migration) and UNFPA (UN Population Fund) and international NGOs such as Médecins du Monde, Danish Refugee Council and Save the Children.

The second component involved 16 agencies such the World Bank, UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), WHO, UN Women and the German KfW development bank as well as the Turkish Ministry of Education, Ministry of Health and TOBB (Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey).

### Humanitarian aid

€1.4 billion was allocated to humanitarian aid and €1.6 billion was allocated to development. Geographically, the various organisations are responsible for their projects in 38 towns in Turkey, mainly concentrated in the three metropolitan areas, Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, and provinces in southeastern Turkey. In fact, there can be several organisations working in the same town, and in some cases the same organisation may be running two projects.

As far as humanitarian aid is concerned, the flagship project is the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), which has been allocated €990 million out of the €1.4 billion for this component. Registered Syrian refugees can with a cash card draw 120 Turkish lira (about €20) a month at ATMs or to pay in shops to cover their needs. The amount was originally set at 180 TL but after discussions with Turkish authorities was dropped to 100 TL in the interests of social cohesion. This project has now reached 1.3 million refugees and a similar project, Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE), gives refugee families a cash incentive to get their children to attend school regularly. This has benefited 330,000 pupils

### Development aid

Similarly, with half the development aid the emphasis is on education. For example, there is a direct allocation of €300 million to the Ministry of Education to provide access to education for almost half a million children and KfW has been allocated €405

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<sup>3</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility\\_table.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/facility_table.pdf)

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million to build and equip new schools in provinces with a high concentration of refugees.

As far as health care is concerned, the flagship project is an allocation of €300 million to the Ministry of Health to provide primary health care for two million people and rehabilitative mental health services for one million. In addition, the Council of Europe Development Bank has contracted to build a 300-bed hospital in Kilis and AFD (Agence Française de Développement) is building a 250-bed hospital in Hatay.

#### **The press trip**

Which is where I came into the picture. As a commentator on Turkish affairs who has often taken a critical stance, I was surprised but also pleased to receive an invitation from the EU Delegation in Turkey to join a three-day press trip to Turkey in November to visit EU-funded projects in Istanbul and Gaziantep inside health and socio-economic support. As I mentioned to the Ambassador, this gave me another string to my bow.

Together with colleagues from Ireland, France, Luxembourg, Italy, Greece, Cyprus, Croatia, the Czech Republic and Poland, on Monday morning we visited a Migrant Health Centre at Esenyurt in Istanbul. There are 560,000 Syrian refugees in Istanbul, 47,000 of them in Esenyurt alone. The Centre is staffed with Syrian doctors and nurses and is well equipped with a full range of facilities, including an emergency room, x-ray room and a natal clinic. It can also handle emergency surgery. Since it began in June, it now treats 180 to 250 patients a day. The aim is to establish 178 health centres like this, which can employ 3,000 Syrian health workers who can practice their profession under the Turkish health service. This in turn will relieve pressure on state hospitals.

We later visited a Refugee Health Training Centre in Gaziantep, which provided in-service training to Syrian doctors and nurses and made it possible for Syrian health care personnel to participate in the job market. The fact that they spoke the same language as their patients (Arabic) made communication easier.

In the afternoon we were carpet bombed with various presentations on the socio-economic dimension but there was a useful contribution from the manager of Gaziantep's Vocational Training Centre, which we were to visit the next day. Gaziantep, which is only 100 km. from Aleppo on the other side of the Syrian border, is not only known for its history but is also an industrial and commercial centre, where 1,250 Syrian companies are registered with the Chamber of Commerce.



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#### Gaziantep

Since the civil war in Syria began, Gaziantep's population of two million increased by 25 percent, putting an increased strain on the infrastructure and provision of services such as water, electricity and sanitation. Nevertheless, the atmosphere is

supportive. The Vocational Training Centre, which was established by UNDP (UN Development Programme), trains employees for Gaziantep's industry and provides a wide variety of courses including computer repair, basic accounting, metal work, plastering and painting, textile production, packaging and foreign trade. At present, there are 226 trainees: 190 Syrians and 36 Turks. 83 of them are women: 63 Syrians and 20 Turks.

This was supplemented by a visit to two Syrian owned factories: one which produced carpets and another which produced packaging machines for crisps and snacks. Both were exporters but complained that the lack of skilled labour was a barrier to expansion. Indeed, Syrians make a significant contribution to Turkey's economy, as nearly 7,000 businesses have been established by Syrians since 2011, employing nearly 100,000 people. However, this is at one end of the scale. Some 20 – 30 percent of Syrian refugees are illiterate and an estimated 750,000 – 950,000 work in the informal sector, mostly as low-paid seasonal labourers in the agricultural sector, or in construction or the textile industry.



A carpet factory in Gaziantep, Turkey.

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The high point of the trip was undoubtedly the visit to the SADA (which in Arabic means ‘voice’) Women’s Empowerment and Solidarity Centre in Gaziantep under the aegis of UN Women. 400 women, mostly Syrian but also Turkish as well as Iranian, Afghan and Iraqi, come here for language training as well as vocational training which will help them to be self-supporting. 75-80 women also benefit from daily psycho-social support. Many of them are alone with their children, so the Centre also provides a playroom for 60 children. Many of them spoke of the way they had been

given the self-confidence and skills to build up their lives again. One told us she had been illiterate but now she could read and write and speak Turkish.

#### **A Potemkin village?**

At the end of the first day, my Polish colleague asked me the leading question: “Is this a Potemkin village?” Perhaps I am now better able to come with a qualified answer. The EU Delegation is naturally interested in presenting successful projects, which is what I believe the ones we have seen are. When the European Court of Auditors (ECA) presented its report<sup>4</sup> on the Facility for Refugees in Turkey in November, this consisted of a team of eight who had only visited 10 out of 45 projects providing humanitarian aid.

It would have been interesting to visit some of these NGOs, but Ambassador Berger told us these were needed for niche aid. This is confirmed by the fact that they only account for €103 million of the €1.4 billion budget for this segment. Yet the ECA’s report mentions “the challenging operating environment” faced by the international NGOs and the problems they face with the Turkish authorities in their cooperation with local NGOs.

For example, the US-based Mercy Corps was in March 2017 forced to close down its operations in Turkey and the Danish Refugee Council was fined for employing Syrians without a work permit.

#### **Work permits**

During our trip it also became clear that the question of work permits for Syrian refugees, which became possible from 2016, constitutes a stumbling block for their employment and integration into Turkish society. A recent report estimates there are 1.9 million Syrians of working age but from 2016 – 2017 only 34,260 work permits were issued by the Ministry of Labour and Social Security. The Gaziantep Vocational Training Centre reports that out of 42 applications only half were approved.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR18\\_27/SR\\_TRF\\_EN.pdf](https://www.eca.europa.eu/Lists/ECADocuments/SR18_27/SR_TRF_EN.pdf)



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The application process is bureaucratic and although the application fee has been dropped from 650 TL to 228 TL (about €38), the work permit is only valid for a year. At the same time, the employer becomes liable for social security contributions amounting to 22.5 pct. of the employee's salary and the employee's liability is 15 pct, which makes the informal labour market more attractive.

#### Education

Seen from a European perspective, the integration of 3.6 million Syrian refugees into Turkish society should constitute no problem because, after all, they have a common culture. This, however, is not the case, as although most Syrian refugees like most Turks are Sunni Muslims, they speak Arabic, which is why the emphasis in every field is on learning Turkish. One important area is education, which is why half of the non-humanitarian aid is allocated to this sector.

There are 1,050,000 school-age refugee children in Turkey,<sup>5</sup> and more than 600,000 have been enrolled for the current school year, either in Turkish public schools or in temporary educational centres, where the curriculum is in Arabic, but they also learn Turkish. In the EU's aid programme provision is also made for higher and further education for Syrian refugees. A Syrian instructor at the Gaziantep Vocational Training Centre told me that one of his sons had just graduated in bio-technology at Istanbul University and a woman at the SADA Centre, whose husband had died, told us she had been able to stand behind her children, so they had been able to finish school and go on to university.

#### Culture clash

Syrian refugees who come to Europe are met with quite different conditions than in Turkey and receive various social benefits. We now have at least two generations of immigrants and the common complaint is that they don't learn the language, have too large families and live in ghettos. Also that they are underrepresented on the labour market and overrepresented in crime statistics. The International Crisis Group has in a report<sup>6</sup> examined the background for the rising hostility in Turkey towards its Syrian guests and the accompanying "compassion fatigue".

Another report by the Istanbul Political Research Institute<sup>7</sup> on Syrian "ghost" kids in Istanbul has interviewed 25 Turkish citizens who either live on or use a particular bus route in Istanbul. What is remarkable is that the views expressed don't differ that much

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<sup>5</sup> [www.hurriyetdailynews.com/over-600-000-syrian-children-schooled-in-turkey-ministry-data-137249](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/over-600-000-syrian-children-schooled-in-turkey-ministry-data-137249)

<sup>6</sup> <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/248-turkey-s-syrian-refugees.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c80586\\_b6ead24efc964e70864ea7737f7d2e1d.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/c80586_b6ead24efc964e70864ea7737f7d2e1d.pdf)

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from similar views among the indigenous populations of Copenhagen, Berlin, London or Paris. For example,

- they should learn Turkish.
- they are a burden on the economy and ‘freeload’.
- those interviewed feel like foreigners in their own country.
- they will become dangerous and criminals when they grow up.
- the older ones sexually abuse women.
- they are unfair competition on the labour market.
- they are culturally different – smell bad, speak loudly and are noisy.
- they should go back home with their families.

If they were Europeans, they would be accused of Islamophobia. So what is this?

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