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Are there really 3.6 million refugees in Turkey
or could there be considerably fewer?

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Franck Düvell, Head of Migration Department

GERMAN ABSTRACT

Die Türkei beherbergt nach eigenen Angaben über 3,6 Millionen syrische Flüchtlinge. Diese Zahl wird unter anderem auch vom UNHCR und anderen Institutionen genutzt und verbreitet. Es gibt jedoch erhebliche Zweifel an der Richtigkeit dieser Zahl. Einerseits ist Situation in den beiden Ländern unbeständig und Bewegungen von so vielen Menschen immer schwer zu kontrollieren und zu registrieren. Andererseits hat die Art und Weise, wie die Flüchtlingszahlen bisher erhoben wurden, große Schwächen.

Während, ausgelöst durch den Bürgerkrieg in Syrien, immer mehr Menschen über die Grenze in die Türkei flüchteten, war die Türkei gerade erst im Begriff ihr Migrationsmanagement-System zu modernisieren. Syrische Flüchtlinge wurden zwar registriert und mit Ausweisen ausgestattet, die ihnen Zugang zur öffentlichen Verwaltung verschafften. Allerdings wurde kein durchgängiges System an Überprüfungsverfahren geschaffen. Das bedeutet, dass diejenigen, die nach der Zurückdrängung des IS wieder nach Syrien zurückkehrten oder nach Europa weiterreisten, nicht systematisch aus dem System herausgenommen wurden. Aktuelle Forschung deutet außerdem darauf hin, dass zwischen 8-12 Prozent der Syrer*innen, die Stadt, in der sie sich erstmals registriert haben, wieder verlassen um irregulär in eine andere Stadt zu ziehen und sich dort wahrscheinlich unter einem anderen Namen zu registrieren.

Ein neues Überprüfungsverfahren der Migrationsbehörde und des UNHCR sowie wissenschaftliche Schätzungen kommen unabhängig voneinander zu dem Ergebnis, dass 2.7 bis weniger als 3 Millionen syrischer Flüchtlinge als Zahl realistisch ist.

SUMMARY

- Since the beginning of the Syria crisis, at least 984,500 Syrians have left Turkey to return to Syria, or for the EU or other countries.
- So far, the Syrian refugee verification process has identified only 2.7 million individuals. Hence, it has not (yet) been possible to verify almost one million.
- It is estimated that there are between 2.7 million and no more than 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. This figure is considerably lower than the currently assumed 3.65 million.

Introduction

As is well-known, Turkey claims it is hosting more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees, for the most part admitted under the country’s temporary protection legislation (DGMM 2019). So far, this number is also being replicated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2019) and many other stakeholders. This implies that the country is hosting the largest refugee population in the world, and the government claims it is the champion of refugee protection in the region and globally. However, there are reasons to doubt this number and question the claims made. Notably, whilst the situation is hugely volatile and such fluid movements are difficult to monitor, there are also significant flaws in the way these figures are generated.

The influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey

From 2011, following the beginning of the ‘Arab Spring’ and, specifically, the revolution in Syria and the subsequent backlash by the Assad regime, an influx of refugees from Syria has been recorded in Turkey. Whilst in 2012, 14,237 Syrians were registered in Turkey, this figure rose to 1.5 million in 2014 and 3.66 million in 2019. This number also includes 415,000 Syrian babies born in Turkey (Mr Ayaz, head of DGMM, in Hurriyet Daily News 20/6/2019), meaning that only 3.2 million migrated from Syria.

Syrians are not evenly dispersed across the country, but rather concentrated in a few provinces; irregular movements within the country, in particular to Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara, further reinforce this pattern.

The politics and governance of Syria refugee protection in Turkey

The issues of Syrian refugees and refugee statistics are sensitive and politicised. From the very beginning of the crisis the Turkish government maintained an open border policy and welcomed Syrians as ‘guests’. On the one hand, Turkey presented itself to the world, and specifically to the Arab world, as the true protector of the ‘umma’, the Muslim community (e.g. Daily Sabah 20/4/2017), to the international community as the champion of refugee protection and to the EU as the country that contains what could become yet another large-scale influx of refugees (see President Erdogan’s latest statement, Spiegel Online, 5/9/2019). The numbers are also an important argument in negotiating some international (including financial) support from the EU and its member states. On the other hand, more recently, refugees have become an increasingly contentious issue in Turkey based on the public attitude that there are ‘too many’ Syrians (see Centre for Turkish Studies, 4/7/2019), and the AK Party as well as the CHP aim to enhance control over the issue and also bring the

numbers down locally and nationally. This would be achieved by removing Syrians and others from Istanbul (Istanbul Governor, 22/7/2019), deporting some back to Syria and contemplating voluntary return policies.

Only from 2006 onwards did Turkey begin modernising its migration regime. First, it set up two agencies: the Bureau for Integrated Border Management and the Bureau for Migration Management. The latter then prepared modern legislation which came into force only in 2014, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. Simultaneously, the law regulated a new authority, the Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM). Initially, this consisted of an improvised office in Ankara with around 400 staff, many of them young university recruits. It took several years to also prepare secondary legislation, roll out the DGMM and set up branches across the country (see IOM 2018 for this paragraph). The DGMM by its mandate holds a kind of monopoly over all migration matters, including migration data, and protects them stringently.

This outline shows that Turkey was confronted with the largest refugee influx in its history whilst a modern migration management regime was still in the making. Notably, the influx coincided with setting up a registration system. During the first years, whilst there were still no DGMM branches, which are called Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMMs), a UNHCR-sponsored project sent mobile DGMM stations, converted lorries, to the relevant provinces to register Syrian refugees, who were provided with ID cards which facilitated access to public services. Registration also implied, however, that Syrians, like other refugees, were confined to the province where they were residing and not permitted to move to other parts of the country. A certain proportion of refugees do disobey these restrictions and relocate to other cities irregularly.

This initial process did not envisage a continuous system of controls or de-registration procedures (see Düvell, Corabatur and Soyusen 2015). This means that those who first registered in Turkey but subsequently returned to Syria after, for instance, Daesh was beaten, or who moved on to the EU were not systematically removed from the system. Therefore, the emerging statistics de facto represent for the most part the cumulative number of registrations and not the actual number of individuals in the country. Also, some recent research (Düvell and Sagioglu 2019) suggests that around 8-12 per cent of the Syrians who left their city of first registration to irregularly move to other cities re-registered there, most possibly under another name. Therefore, it is all but certain how many Syrians there actually are in Turkey and where they reside. Unfortunately, no Turkish, UN (IOM, UNHCR) or EU actor has as yet signalled any issues with these statistics.

Table 1: Registered Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey

2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
14,237	224,665	1,519,286	2,503,549	2,834,441	3,426,786	3,623,192	3,658,250*

Source: DGMM 2019

*As per 5/9/2019

So what is the real number of Syrian refugees in Turkey?

From October 2016, the DGMM, jointly with the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency of Turkey (AFAD) and again with UNHCR support, rolled out a verification or re-registration scheme ([TR World 14/11/2017](#), [UNHCR no date](#)) with which Syrians are issued a new ID card, facilitating access to public services. The scheme is funded by the EU as part of the financial support under the March 2016 EU-Turkey statement. This time, biometric data is also collected. Still, the website of the DGMM shows that by 1 August 2019 there were 3,643,870 Syrians in Turkey ([DGMM 2019](#)). On 28 August the figure stood at 3,657,694; hence, numbers are currently slowly increasing by 13,824 a month or around 3,500 persons per week.

However, from 2014 to 2019, 1,236,678 people moved on irregularly to Greece; of these, around 616,000 were Syrians. Since the verification began in October 2016, 111,678 persons have arrived in Greece coming from Turkey, including around 25,000 Syrians. A certain (though unknown) proportion of these Syrians will have been registered in Turkey; a non-representative study found that in 2015 54 per cent of all Syrians who arrived in Greece had spent more than one month in Turkey, 44 per cent more than 4 months; many of them had registered with the authorities ([MedMig 2019](#)).

Further to this, the Minister of the Interior claims that 339,000 refugees have already returned to Syria ([TRT World, 26/5/2019](#)). However, there are huge uncertainties over the scope of return migration; for instance, the [UNHCR \(2019\)](#) monitored only 62,439 returns to date, implying there are also unmonitored returns. Finally, a small number of refugees have been resettled to third countries, 21,580 from 2013 to 2017 ([UNHCR 2018](#)) and another 8,100 in 2018 ([UNHCR 2019](#)). Since these left through official channels, they seem to be the only ones who have been deregistered accordingly. There are no figures on Syrian refugees deceased in Turkey. On the other hand, there are uncertainties about the scope of recent irregular arrivals, notably since the Syrian government commenced its attack on Idlib province with supporting Russian forces, where an estimated 3 million people are ‘caught in crossfire’ ([The Guardian, 24/8/2019](#)). Recently, irregular arrivals have increased: the authorities apprehend on average 500 persons per day, and it can be assumed that at least another 500 escape detection and make it to Turkey. Thus, up to 15,000 Syrians enter Turkey irregularly every month, 60,000 since the attack on Idlib commenced in May ([TRT, 18/5/2019](#)). This could result in an increase of irregular Syrian refugees who are not (yet) registered in Turkey.

Meanwhile, the UNHCR ([UNHCR 2019a](#)) reported that by the end of 2018 only 1.75 million Syrians under temporary protection could be verified. By 15 February 2019, this had increased to ‘over 2.7 million’ ([UNHCR 2019b](#)). Meanwhile, under the EU-funded Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) schemes, 1,545,674 ESSN and 487,089 CCTE or a total of just over 2 million beneficiaries were recorded as of February 2019 ([Asylum Information Database, 19/4/2019](#)). The [UNHCR, \(2019\)](#) states ‘96 per cent of the verification target across Turkey’ had been achieved. In the meantime, however, Syrians have continued to leave the country, distorting these new figures as well.

A possible formula for an estimation could be: Registered Syrian Refugees in Turkey (RSRT) – ½ of Transit Migrants to EU (TMUE) – Returned Syrian Refugees (RSR) – Multiple Registered Syrian Refugees (MRSR) + Recently Arrived Unregistered Syrian Refugees (RAUSR). Hence, RSTR 3.658.250 – ½ TMUE 308,000 – 339,000 – 365,000 + RAUSR 60,000 = 2,706,250. In any case, the [2018 UNHCR](#) document suggests that the latest figure of 2.7 million released in February by the UNHCR could be near the real number of

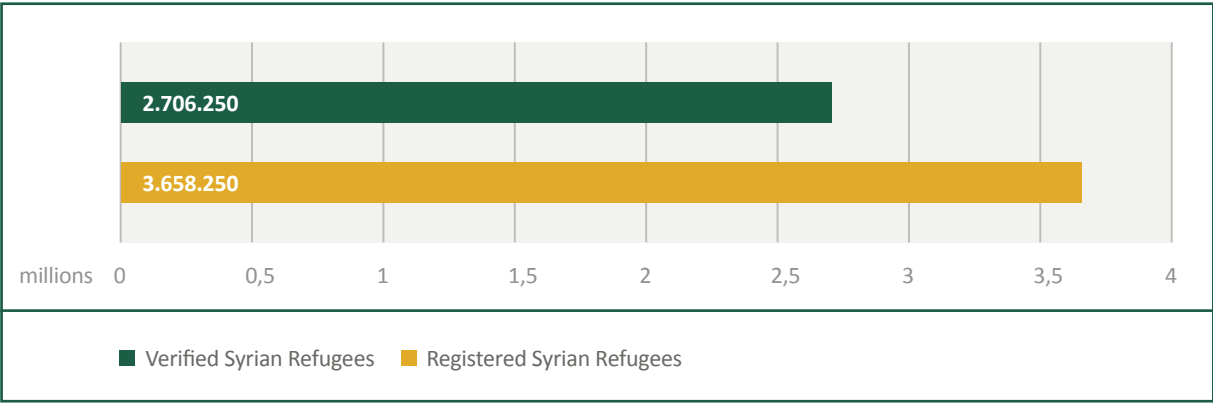
Syrians in Turkey. In other words, the presence of a quarter of the Syrians registered under the temporary protection scheme could not be verified. To this one would need to add an unknown number of un-registered and thus irregular Syrians in Turkey, notably in the southern provinces.

Table 2: Verification of Syria refugees in Turkey

2012	2013	2014	2015
n.a.	529,000	1,750,000	2,700,000

Source: UNHCR 2017, 2019a, 2019b

Figure 1: Registered versus verified Syrian refugees in Turkey



Policy implications

On the one hand, this could be an embarrassment for the authorities – though it must be acknowledged that such a mobile population is hard to administer: even Germany got the numbers of arrivals in 2015 wrong due to double counting arrivals in different records. On the other hand, if true, this downward correction of the number of Syrian refugees in the country would also have rather positive implications. For instance, based on the number of registered Syrian children it was always concluded that only around 65 per cent are in education, whereas the proportion of children not in education could be as much as 35 per cent. Were the total number to be considerably less, the proportion of children not in education would also be considerably lower (there are 1.15 million children between 5-18 registered; if this number is 25 per cent lower, the total would be 868,000. Given that 650,000 are enrolled at school (number provided to author by the Ministry for Education), this is at least a 75 per cent enrolment rate). The same would apply to the proportion of Syrians receiving emergency cash payments, of whom not just 41 per cent but 55 per cent would be benefiting from these.

Conclusion

To conclude, it appears that by the end of 2018 the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey, including the children born to Syrian refugees in Turkey, was considerably lower than the commonly claimed 3.65 million, namely around 2.7 to 2.8 million. In fact, given that 415,000 Syrian children were born in Turkey, the number of Syria-born Syrians could even be around just 2.3 million. Since January, notably, a fresh influx has been noted since the unfolding of yet another crisis in Idlib due to the offensive of the Regime and Russian forces. Observers in the field suggest that many do not or have not yet registered with the authorities. Therefore, numbers have been increasing again and could now be in the region of 3 million.

In this light all numbers disseminated by Turkish sources or international organisations so far seem flawed or even grossly misleading. Apart from the administrative challenges in monitoring highly mobile populations, Turkey has its own national and international interests for claiming supposedly higher numbers. However, one would expect impartial monitoring and reporting from international organisations mandated to advocate refugee matters; there is no good reason why international actors have failed to provide a kind of “health warning” but rather replicated these figures without further critical examination.

In any case, Turkey would still be the top refugee hosting country in the world, followed by Pakistan with 1.4 million refugees ([UNHCR 2019](#)). But the perceived ‘migration pressure’ from Syrians in Turkey would be considerably less, whilst the challenge of Syrian refugee integration in Turkey and the associated costs would be considerably smaller and thus more manageable. Any such estimates must still be treated with some caution, as they are based on various assumptions and uncertainties. The hope is that this paper triggers a debate and fresh calculations in order to establish an accurate scope of this social problem so that policies can be adjusted to reality. In any case, EU and international organisations would be well advised to seek clarifications on this matter.

Reference

This analysis builds on a previous technical assistance project funded by the EU from 2014-2015, ‘Comprehensive Assessment Study on Mapping of Sources and Key Trends of International Migration in Turkey’, which assessed the availability and quality of population and migration data and the capacity of migration governance in Turkey, see FWC BENEFICIARIES 2013 - LOT 7 “Governance and Home Affairs” - Europe-Aid/132633/C/SER/multi, Technical Assistance for Comprehensive Assessment Study on Mapping Sources and Key Trends of International Migration in Turkey, Contract N° ALTUN/TAAIM/TR2010/0740.01-2/FWC/006, Final Report, 14 September 2015, Franck Düvell, Servet Soyuşen and Metin Çorabatır.

This analysis is also an outcome of a recent project ‘Migrationsaspirationen von syrischen Flüchtlingen in der Türkei vor dem Hintergrund ihrer familiären Situation’ conducted at the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM-Institute) from 10/2018 – 10/2019 by Franck Duvell, Zafer Sagiroglu and Martin Petersen-Lemberg.

THE AUTHOR

Franck Duvell, PhD, is head of the migration department at the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) in Berlin. Until 2018, he was senior researcher and associate professor at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, where he still is a research associate. He is also convener of the Turkey Migration Studies Network (TurkMiS). For over 20 years he has been studying irregular, transit and refugee migration in the neighbourhood of the EU and specifically in Turkey.

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Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und
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German Center for Integration and Migration
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Mauerstraße 76
10117 Berlin
☎ +49 (0)30 804 928 93
✉ info@dezim-institut.de
🌐 www.dezim-institut.de

Directors
Prof. Dr. Naika Foroutan, Prof. Dr. Frank Kalter

Author
Franck Düvell, Head of Migration Department

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