

Immigration Politics: Refugees in Turkey and the 2023 Elections

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SNAPSHOT

SUMMARY

- Hosting more than six million refugees and migrants has had a significant social, economic, and political impact on Turkey. The government's inability to manage this impact has led to perceptions of a refugee crisis, fostering an atmosphere of insecurity for both citizens and refugees.
- As Turkey prepares for highly contentious presidential and parliamentary elections expected in June 2023, this “refugee crisis” has become a top issue for voters—indeed, it is often cited as the country's second-biggest problem after the devastating economic situation.
- In order for Turkey to overcome its refugee crisis, the country's political elites, whether in government or opposition, need to accept the country's new reality, change their rhetoric, and devise integration policies that foster social harmony and protect Turkey's new residents from violence, disinformation, and exploitation.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, an influx of refugees and migrants from war-torn neighboring countries

has transformed Turkey.² Today, Turkey hosts upwards of six million refugees and migrants, more than any other country.³ These new residents have turned Turkey from a relatively

1. The author thanks POMED's Clare Ulmer for her assistance with this Snapshot and the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Washington, D.C., for its support of this publication and the associated roundtable discussion.

2. Although a large majority of migrants in Turkey have left their countries due to unsustainable humanitarian conditions such as war and violence, and as such generally would be considered “refugees,” Turkish laws consider only Syrians as “refugees” and thereby eligible for a status of temporary protection in Turkey. The Turkish government officially considers Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and other non-Europeans who have fled to Turkey and are seeking international protection “migrants.”

3. Kelly Petillo, “Turkey's open door closes: How Europe can better support Syrian refugees,” European Council on Foreign Relations, May 9, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/turkeys-open-door-closes-how-europe-can-better-support-syrian-refugees>

homogenous nation composed largely of ethnic Turks and a large (albeit repressed) Kurdish minority into a more diverse country with millions of Arab and Afghan people. This demographic change has had a major impact on Turkey, a country long defined by ethnic nationalism and one with little experience accommodating non-Turkish speakers.

Indeed, the growing refugee population has become a top political issue in Turkey, with both voters and politicians citing it as one of the country's biggest and most urgent problems. Turkey's ongoing economic meltdown, marked by unprecedented inflation and unemployment rates, has only intensified the debate around the refugee crisis in the country, contributing to increased disinformation and violence against refugees.⁴ As Turkey heads toward highly contentious elections expected in June 2023, the issue of refugees is likely to dominate the news cycle and play an important role as a campaign issue.

THE GROWING REFUGEE POPULATION HAS BECOME A TOP POLITICAL ISSUE IN TURKEY, WITH BOTH VOTERS AND POLITICIANS CITING IT AS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST AND MOST URGENT PROBLEMS.

To understand how and why refugees have become such a political flash point in Turkey, and drawing on a recent POMED roundtable discussion held in partnership with the Heinrich Boell Foundation, Washington, D.C., this Snapshot presents an overview of the socio-economic impact of refugees on the country, Turkish public attitudes toward refugees, and how Turkey's political elites are responding to the issue.

REFUGEES' SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

In 2002, Turkey hosted an estimated five thousand refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from neighboring Iran and Iraq.⁵ Twenty years later, that number has risen, according to the Turkish government, to six million people, of whom four million are from Syria and two million from Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and other countries.⁶ Unofficial estimates, which include unregistered and undocumented refugees, are even higher. Based on the official figures, refugees now correspond to around 7 percent of Turkey's population, with Arabs becoming the country's second-largest ethnic minority after the Kurds, who constitute 15–20 percent of the population.

This new reality is hard for Turkish society to ignore, as an overwhelming majority of refugees are concentrated in big cities, where they live side-by-side with Turkish citizens.⁷ To limit the number of refugees in each province—and dampen social tensions between refugees and citizens—the government has promoted a province-based protection system, requiring refugees to register with the local authorities in the city where the government settles them. Under this system, refugees can only access services and rights within their cities of registration and must acquire permits for intercity

4. Melin Durmaz, "Price increases are coming one after another and anger is being directed towards refugees," *Bianet*, June 23, 2022, <https://bianet.org/english/society/263691-price-increases-are-coming-one-after-another-and-anger-is-being-directed-towards-refugees>

5. "UNHCR Global Report 2002," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/publications/fundraising/3edf4ffa0/unhcr-global-report-2002-turkey.html>

6. Petillo, "Turkey's open door closes."

7. M. Murat Erdoğan, "'Securitization from Society' and 'Social Acceptance': Political Party-Based Approaches in Turkey to Syrian Refugees," *International Relations* 17, no. 68 (2021): 1-20, <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.883022>; "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Haziran 2022" [Number of Syrians in Turkey June 2022], *Mülteciler Derneği*, June 23, 2022, <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi>



Undocumented Afghan refugees in Istanbul speak with VOA about their difficulty accessing Covid-19 treatments and vaccines in an interview on January 10, 2022. Photo credit: VOA screenshot

travel. Many refugees, however, find it difficult to live and work in these locations and flock instead to bigger cities like Istanbul and Izmir, where they can find jobs and establish businesses, most frequently in the informal economy.⁸ Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, with a population of 15 million, officially counts more than half a million Syrian refugees; with unregistered refugees, the number is even higher.⁹

For Turkey, the economic burden of hosting so many refugees is considerable. Some experts estimate that over the past decade, Ankara has spent \$100 billion on housing, medical care,

and schooling for Syrian refugees.¹⁰ According to one expert, the education of refugee children alone costs Turkey more than 1.5 billion Turkish lira (\$83 million) per year.¹¹ The European Union, Turkey's biggest source of refugee-related aid, gave the country six billion euros (\$6.1 billion) between 2016 and 2019 and has promised another three billion euros (\$3 billion) for 2021–2024. Yet these amounts are only a fraction of Turkey's needs.¹²

The Turkish government is also responsible for the security and welfare of some 2.5 million Syrians who live in Turkish-occupied territories

8. Besire Korkmaz, "Suriyelilerin Türkiye'de 5 binin üzerinde şirket kurduğu ve vergi ödemediği iddiası" [The allegation that Syrians have established more than 5 thousand companies in Turkey and do not pay taxes], Teyit, March 31, 2021, <https://teyit.org/analiz-suriyelilerin-turkiyede-5-binin-uzerinde-sirket-kurdugu-ve-vergi-odemediği-iddiasi>

9. "Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Haziran 2022" [Number of Syrians in Turkey June 2022], Mülteciler Derneği, June 23, 2022, <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi>

10. Selcan Hacaoğlu, "Turkey Plans Return of a Million Syrians as Refugee Critics Grow," Bloomberg, May 3, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-03/turkey-plans-return-of-a-million-syrians-as-refugee-critics-grow>

11. Author's interview with migration experts, Turkey, June 2022.

12. Lorne Cook and Suzan Fraser, "EU greenlights major funding plan for refugees in Turkey," Associated Press, June 25, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-middle-east-turkey-europe-migration-e9395d4a3376e8d53cd8a51508fc4a61>; "10 Years On, Turkey Continues Its Support for an Ever-Growing Number of Syrian Refugees," World Bank, June 22, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/06/22/10-years-on-turkey-continues-its-support-for-an-ever-growing-number-of-syrian-refugees>

in northern Syria, half of whom are internally displaced. Turkey's aid agency has built tens of thousands of houses, hospitals, schools, bakeries, and mosques in these regions. And if Turkey is to ever convince its Syrian refugees to return to Syria, it needs to keep on spending: The Turkish government has promised to complete the construction of one hundred thousand housing units in these territories by the end of 2022.¹³

Although many refugees in Turkey do work, their contribution to the Turkish economy is complicated.¹⁴ While there are no official numbers about refugee employment, survey data indicates that only half of the two million adult Syrian refugees in Turkey actually work—and nearly all of them do so informally.¹⁵ Although the Turkish government began issuing work permits to Syrians in 2016, only some 35,000 had obtained permits by 2019, according to the latest government figures.¹⁶ In 2020, the International Labor Organization estimated that 97 percent of the refugees in Turkey work informally.¹⁷ This trend—due in part to inhibiting cultural differences such as language, and in part to a Turkish government quota that limits the proportion of refugees employed in a given workplace to 10 percent of the total staff—has significantly expanded Turkey's informal economy, which today represents one-third of the overall economy.¹⁸ In addition to creating

insecure and often unsafe conditions for workers, the expansion of the informal economy serves as a drag on Turkey's economic growth.

The education of refugees is another challenge. In January 2022, the Turkish government reported that there were 1.1 million school-aged Syrian children in Turkey, of whom some 730,000 were enrolled in schools. That leaves nearly four hundred thousand, or 35 percent, outside of the education system.¹⁹

THESE LABOR AND EDUCATION CHALLENGES STEM FROM A LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND COHERENT GOVERNMENT POLICY ON HOW TO DEAL WITH REFUGEES.

These labor and education challenges stem from a lack of infrastructure and coherent government policy on how to deal with refugees.

13. “Bakan Soylu açıkladı: 1 milyon Suriyeliye ev yapılacak” [Minister Soylu Stated: Houses to be constructed for 1 million Syrians], T24, May 3, 2022, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/bakan-soylu-acikladi-1-milyon-suriyeliye-ev-yapilacak,1031948>

14. Beşire Korkmaz, “Suriyeli emeği: İşgücü piyasasını nasıl etkiliyorlar?” [Syrian Work: How do they impact the job market?], TeYit, September 21, 2021, <https://teyit.org/dosya-suriyeli-emeği-ısgucu-piyasasını-nasıl-etkiliyorlar>

15. Şenay Akyıldız, Murat Kenanoğlu, Sibel Güven, Taylan Kurt, Cansu Doğanay, and Omar Kadkoy, “İşgücü Piyasasında Suriyeliler” [Syrians in the Job Market], Tepav, February 2021, https://www.tepav.org.tr/upload/mce/2021/haberler/ısgucu_piyasasında_suriyeliler_arz_ve_talep_yanlı_analizler.pdf

16. Bakanlar Kurulu Kararı [Cabinet Decision], “Geçici Koruma Sağlanan Yabancıların Çalışma İzinlerine Dair Yönetmelik” [Regulation Regarding the Work Permits for Foreigners Under Temporary Protection], T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Mevzuat Bilgi Sistemi, November 1, 2016, <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/3.5.20168375.pdf>; “Suriye Vatandaşlarına Çalışma İzni” [Work Permits for Syrian Citizens], Göçmen Büro, December 7, 2021, <https://gocmenbuuro.com/suriye-vatandaslarina-calisma-izni/>

17. Luis Pinedo Caro, “Türk İşgücü Piyasasında Suriyeli Mülteciler” [Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Job Market], International Labor Organization Turkey Office, February 9, 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-ankara/documents/publication/wcms_739463.pdf

18. Dennis Dlugosch et al., “Unleashing the full potential of the Turkish business sector,” Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), no. 1665 (2021): 5-50, <https://doi.org/10.1787/18151973>

19. Alican Uludağ, “MEB raporu: Suriyeli çocukların yüzde 35'i okula gidemiyor” [NME report: 35 percent of Syrian children cannot go to school], *Deutsche Welle*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/tr/meb-raporu-suriyeli-%C3%A7ocuklar%C4%B1n-y%C3%BCzde-35-i-okula-gidemiyor/a-61307411>



Syrian refugee street children collect trash in the streets of Istanbul in this undated photo. Photo credit: Emrah/Adobe Stock

Some migration experts lament the arbitrariness of Ankara’s policies, which they say are unclear, ever-changing, and inconsistently applied, including with regard to the granting of work permits and paths to citizenship. Rather than devising a sustainable policy aimed at social integration, the government often formulates short-term—and short-sighted—responses aimed at putting out immediate fires. Some experts attribute this approach not to governmental incompetence but rather to an intentional policy to exploit refugees as a cheap labor force and to instrumentalize them as political tools, using them as scapegoats for domestic troubles or as bargaining chips against Turkey’s neighbors.

The refugees themselves live under precarious conditions. Of all refugees in Turkey, Syrians

are the only group to receive an official government status of temporary protection, which affords individuals certain rights such as access to health and education.²⁰ But because most Syrian refugees are not legally employed and thus work informally, they remain extremely vulnerable to exploitation: They have no job security, often earn well below minimum wage, and work under very harsh conditions. Although Turkey does offer a path to citizenship for Syrians, the requirements and application process are unclear and arbitrary. Only about two hundred thousand Syrian refugees have obtained Turkish citizenship in recent years, about half of whom are eligible to vote in Turkey.²¹ Because refugee children born in Turkey do not automatically qualify for Turkish citizenship, there are an estimated 750,000 Syrian children born

20. “Temporary protection in Türkiye,” UNHCR, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://help.unhcr.org/turkey/information-for-syrians/temporary-protection-in-turkey/>

21. “Türkiye’deki Suriyeli Sayısı Haziran 2022” [Number of Syrians in Turkey June 2022], Mülteciler Derneği, June 23, 2022, <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi>

in Turkey who are effectively stateless.²² Non-Syrian refugees, such as Iraqis and Afghans, are in an even worse position. With no official refugee status granted by the Turkish government, they have only international protection—which comes with a more limited set of rights and guarantees—as they wait to be resettled into third countries, a process that can take many years. Undocumented people are completely unprotected and have no legal rights in Turkey.

GROWING DISCONTENT: TURKISH PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD REFUGEES

In the early years of the Syrian civil war that began in 2011, the Turkish public appeared to show a high degree of social acceptance toward refugees. But that picture has since changed dramatically. In an August 2021 Metropoll survey, 67 percent of respondents said that Turkey should close its borders to refugees entirely. A March 2022 survey by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) found that 48 percent of Turkish citizens want the government to send Syrian refugees back to Syria—a fourfold increase from three years earlier.²³ Other public opinion research indicates that although those citizens of Turkey who support the Turkish opposition—especially those citizens with more nationalist leanings—appear most worried, citizens of all political colorations are concerned about the number of refugees in Turkey and support repatriating them or confining them to refugee camps.²⁴

This decline in public support for refugees is due in large part to Turkey’s economic crisis, which since 2017 has seen unprecedented hyperinflation and unemployment, leading to

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rising income inequality, poverty, and hunger. Other factors influencing public opinion are the influx of Afghan refugees who came to Turkey in the aftermath of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 and a growing belief that refugees are unlikely to ever leave Turkey.

The most important wedge between refugees and Turkish citizens appears to be cultural differences, especially regarding language and religiosity. The Turkish language is a staple of Turkish nationalism. Indeed, a sticking point in Turkey’s decades-long “Kurdish Question” has been the failure of successive Turkish governments to grant the Kurds the right to education in their mother tongue. The Kurdish language

22. Ceday Avcı, “Türkiye’de 750 bin ‘vatansız’ yenidoğan var” [There are 750 thousand ‘stateless’ newborns in Turkey], *Bianet*, July 4, 2022, <https://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/264080-turkiye-de-750-bin-vatansiz-yenidogan-var>; “Suriyeli Sığınmacıların Türkiye’de Doğan Çocuklarının Otomatik Olarak Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Vatandaşı Olduğu İddiası” [The Allegation that the Children of Syrian Refugees Born in Turkey Automatically Become Citizens of the Republic of Turkey], *Malumatfuruş*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.malumatfurus.org/turkiyede-dogan-suriyeli-siginmacilarin-cocuklarinin-vatandasligi/>

23. M. Murat Erdoğan, “Turkey: Syrians Barometer 2020 - A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey,” UNHCR, September 2021, <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/91511>

24. Erdoğan, “Secularization from Society;” Altan Sançar, “AKP’liler de sığınmacılardan şikayetçiymiş: Seçmeni ikna edemiyoruz” [Pro-AKPists also repine about refugees: We cannot convince the voter], *Diken*, April 14, 2022, <https://www.diken.com.tr/akpliler-de-siginmacilardan-sikayetciymis-secmeni-ikna-edemiyoruz/>



Esenyurt municipality, which has one of the highest Syrian populations in Istanbul, started taking down Arabic shop signs on June 29, 2018, citing a new regulation stipulating that shop signs must include at least 75 percent Turkish words. Photo credit: Hürriyet Daily News

is all but outlawed in public spaces in Turkey: Kurdish movies and songs are frequently banned and Kurds are even arrested or beaten for speaking Kurdish on the streets. It is not surprising, then, that Turkish citizens frequently cite the proliferation of Arabic shop signs, songs, and other expressions of Arabic language in cities like Istanbul and Izmir as a major problem for social cohesion.²⁵ Many secular Turkish citizens also cite the overt piety of many Syrian and Afghan refugees as “threatening” to their way of life, or even as a security threat.²⁶

Disinformation on social media has both drawn from and fueled negative public sentiment about refugees. Against the backdrop of

rising unemployment and inflation, many of the most viral false claims online about Syrian refugees have focused on their supposed criminality and economic advantages. Social media posts allege, for instance, that Syrians attack Turkish citizens, “take” their jobs and housing, buy houses that they refuse to rent out to Turkish speakers, don’t pay their bills or taxes, and receive various handouts and unfair benefits from the government.²⁷ Media outlets often add fuel to the fire with inflammatory headlines. Last year, for example, the prominent Turkish newspaper *Sözcü* published the headline “Every Ten Syrians Have Put Six Turks Out of a Job,” a claim that misrepresented data published by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development regarding

25. Edgar Şar and Nezih Onur Kuru, “İstanbul’da Suriyeli Sığınmacılara Yönelik Tutumlar” [Attitudes Towards Syrian Refugees in Istanbul], İstanPol Institute, updated June 24, 2020, <https://www.istanpol.org/post/i%25CC%2587stanbul-da-suriyeli-s-%25C4%25B1%25C4%259F%25C4%25B1nmac%25C4%25B1lara-y%25C3%25B6nelik-tutumlar>

26. Edgar Şar and Nezih Onur Kuru, “İstanbul’da Suriyeli Sığınmacılara Yönelik Tutumlar” [Attitudes Towards Syrian Refugees in Istanbul].

27. Mehmet Atakan Foça, “13 false information about Syrians living in Turkey on social media,” Teyit, September 21, 2017, <https://en.teyit.org/13-false-information-about-syrians-living-in-turkey-on-social-media>; Besire Korkmaz, “Suriyelilerin Türkiye’de 5 binin üzerinde şirket kurduğu ve vergi ödemediği iddiası” [The allegation that Syrians have established more than 5 thousand companies in Turkey and do not pay taxes], Teyit, March 31, 2021, <https://teyit.org/analiz-suriyelilerin-turkiyede-5-binin-uzerinde-sirket-kurdugu-ve-vergi-odemedigi-iddiasi>

the impact of Syrian refugees on Turkey's informal economy.²⁸

Such disinformation does not only come from online campaigns or the media; opposition politicians also capitalize on the widespread false belief that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan grants citizenship to refugees before elections in order to increase his votes, and they use anti-refugee rhetoric to raise such fears. During the 2019 election cycle, politicians claimed that Syrian voters were poised to help Erdoğan and his party win in certain districts and might pose a threat to election security.²⁹ These claims were circulated widely in the mainstream media and online despite the fact that less than half a percent of Syrian refugees in Turkey were eligible to vote at the time.³⁰

The rising anti-refugee sentiment has increasingly translated into violence. In 2017, a group of three hundred people reportedly attacked refugees in an Izmir neighborhood, forcing five hundred refugees to flee the area.³¹ In July 2019, waves of violence erupted in an Istanbul district following unverified reports that Syrian refugees had committed sexual violence against minors, with people throwing stones

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at refugee businesses and homes.³² In August 2021, a group of masked individuals attacked and vandalized refugee-owned businesses in an Ankara neighborhood, with perpetrators telling reporters that “[these people] never pay their taxes.”³³ In January 2022, in one of the worst instances of such violence, masked individuals armed with guns, sticks, and knives entered a home and stabbed a Syrian refugee, Nail Alnaif, to death.³⁴ In June 2022, security forces opened fire on a group of 35 refugees who were reportedly fleeing from a temporary migrant shelter in Osmaniye in southern Turkey.³⁵ Although the refugees escaped the bullets, they were chased down by a mob of armed civilians who attempted to lynch them.

28. Ahmet Kaya, “Her 10 Suriyeli mülteci 6 Türk’ü işsiz bıraktı” [Every ten Syrian refugee has put six Turks out of a job], *Sözcü*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/ekonomi/her-10-suriyeli-multeci-6-turku-issiz-birakti-6575518/>

29. For example, see Lütfü Savaş’s tweet on January 17, 2019: <https://twitter.com/docdrutfusavas/status/1085827211482071040>; “Binali Yıldırım: “Güvenlik problemi oluşturan Suriyeliler varsa gözünün yaşına bakmadan göndeririz. Yabancılar sorunu İstanbulluları rahatsız ediyorsa beni de rahatsız eder” [Binali Yıldırım: If there are Syrians who create a security problem we will send them back regardless of the tears in their eyes. If the foreigner problem makes Istanbulites uncomfortable, then it makes me uncomfortable as well], *Habertürk*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.haberturk.com/video/haber/izle/binali-yildirim-guvenlik-problemi-olusturan-suriyeliler-varsa-gozunun-yasina-bakmadan-gondeririz-yabancilar-sorunu-istanbullulari-rahatsiz-ediyorsa/644176>

30. Erhan Kuğu, “Syrian Refugees: #2 Could they influence Turkey’s local elections outcome?” Teyit, April 10, 2019, <https://en.teyit.org/syrian-refugees-2-could-they-influence-turkeys-local-elections-outcome>

31. “İzmir’de Suriyelilere saldırı: 500 mülteci mahalleyi terk etmek zorunda kaldı” [Attack on Syrians in Izmir: 500 refugees were forced to leave the neighborhood], *Diken*, April 8, 2017, <https://www.diken.com.tr/izmirde-suriyelilere-saldiri-500-multeci-mahalleyi-terk-etmek-zorunda-kaldi/>

32. Ercüment Akdeniz and Neslihan Karyemez, “Küçükçekmece’de mültecilere saldırı: Yakmasınlr diye ışıkları söndürdük” [Attack on refugees in Küçükçekmece: We turned the lights off so that they don’t burn], *Evrensel*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/382392/kucukcekmece-multecilere-saldiri-yakmasinlar-diye-islklari-sondurduk>

33. “Suriyelilere ait iş yerlerine saldırı: Altındağ’da neler yaşandı?” [Attack against Syrian workplaces: What happened in Altındağ?], *Euronews*, August 12, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVkSPXxT_H0

34. “İstanbul’da Suriyeli mültecilerin evine saldırı: Bir mülteci öldürüldü” [Attack against Syrian refugees’ house in Istanbul: One refugee killed], *Gazete Karınca*, January 11, 2022, <https://gazetekarınca.com/istanbulda-suriyeli-multecilerin-evine-saldiri-bir-multeci-oludurdu/>

35. “Lincin gerekçesi ‘huzursuzluk’” [The reason for the lynching is ‘unrest’], *Birgün*, July 3, 2022, <https://www.birgun.net/haber/lincin-gerekcesi-huzursuzluk-394194>

REFUGEES AND THE 2023 ELECTIONS

The growing negative public attitudes toward refugees have turned into a genuine political crisis for the country.³⁶ According to recent polls, many voters consider the presence of refugees to be Turkey’s second-most important issue after the economy.³⁷ Indeed, opposition parties report that they receive the biggest applause during their campaign speeches when they raise the refugee issue.³⁸ Many political analysts attribute the sweeping victories of the main opposition party, the People’s Republican Party (CHP), in the 2019 municipal elections to its campaign promises to repatriate refugees.

This apparent trend in anti-refugee voter sentiment has prompted most political parties to harden their positions on migration and has even spawned explicitly anti-refugee parties.³⁹ In August 2021, far-right Turkish politician and member of parliament Ümit Özdağ founded the Victory Party (ZP), which is focused almost exclusively on opposing immigration. A member of the ultranationalist Nationalist Action Party (MHP) until 2016, and later of the more moderately nationalist Good Party (IP) until 2019, Özdağ made headlines after giving a fiery speech in April 2022 lambasting government spending on “foreigners” and arguing that the presence of refugees has exacerbated Turkey’s record-high inflation.⁴⁰ Within weeks, Özdağ’s popularity on Twitter exceeded that of Erdoğan, typically Turkey’s most popular tweeter. Özdağ’s viral tweet—criticizing Turkey’s interior minister, Süleyman Soylu, on migration—garnered him



Ümit Özdağ, founder of the Victory Party, makes a hand sign associated with the Grey Wolves, a far right ethno-supremacist movement in Turkey, during a party press event on September 1, 2021. Photo credit: Ümit Özdağ Facebook page

four times more “likes” than did Erdoğan’s tweet on the subject, Bloomberg reported.⁴¹

Although Özdağ and his party remain on the fringe of Turkish politics, his popularity on Twitter illustrates the power of

36. Gülçin Karabağ, “Türkiye’de mülteciler: Sorun ne, siyasiler durumu nasıl ele alıyor” [Refugees in Turkey: What is the problem, how are politicians handling it], *Medyascope*, April 22, 2022, <https://medyascope.tv/2022/04/22/acik-oturum-344-turkiyede-multeciler-sorun-ne-siyasiler-durumu-nasil-ele-aliyor/>

37. Begüm Dönmez Ersöz, “‘Türkiye’de Halkın Gündemi Ekonomi ve Mülteci Sorunu” [The Public’s Agenda in Turkey is the Economy and Refugee Problem], *Amerika’nın Sesi*, January 27, 2022, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/6415369.html>

38. Gonca Tokyol, “Facing public pressure, Turkish political parties outline their refugee policies,” *Turkey Recap*, June 21, 2022, <https://turkeyrecap.substack.com/p/facing-public-pressure-turkish-political>

39. Idil Karsit, “Turkey’s Far Right Has Already Won,” *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/12/turkeys-far-right-has-already-won/>

40. Seclan Hacaoglu, “Erdoğan Faces New Challenge From Anti-Immigration Firebrand,” *Bloomberg*, April 28, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-28/erdogan-faces-new-challenge-from-anti-immigration-firebrand>

41. Patrick Sykes, “Turkey’s Anti-Immigration Challenger Tops Erdoğan on Twitter,” *Bloomberg*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-05-20/turkey-s-anti-immigration-challenger-tops-erdogan-on-twitter>

anti-refugee rhetoric in Turkish politics. Since May, Erdoğan's outbursts have forced both Erdoğan and mainstream opposition figures to explain their official policies on the issue.⁴² Despite some differences in tone, nearly all major parties in Turkey today are promising their voters that if elected, they will repatriate refugees.

The Ruling Bloc

Erdoğan has approached the refugee question largely from a religious and emotional perspective, arguing that Turkey has a moral duty to help those in need. At the same time, Erdoğan's ultimate goal has been to ensure refugees' "honorable and voluntary" return to their home countries.⁴³ He has launched several military operations in Syria since 2016 with the aim of creating "safe zones" where Syrian refugees in Turkey can be resettled. Since 2019, his government has constructed tens of thousands of housing units in Turkish-occupied towns in northern Syria such as Jarabulus and Azaz, and officials say that around half a million refugees have relocated from Turkey to these areas.⁴⁴ Under more pressure from the newest wave of public backlash against refugees, Erdoğan and his government are now seeking to launch another military operation into northern Syria, which they say will enable the resettlement of one million more refugees there.⁴⁵

Interestingly, Erdoğan's political ally Devlet Bahçeli of the MHP has, despite being an ultranationalist deeply sensitive to the dominance of the Turkish language in Turkey, been less vocal than other politicians on the topic

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of refugees. While Bahçeli has called irregular migration to Turkey an "invasion," he has also said that Turkey must welcome all those who are suffering and accept anyone who can contribute to the country's economic and "social" growth.⁴⁶

The Opposition

Turkey's two largest opposition parties, the CHP and the İP, have taken a harder stance on refugees. They heavily criticize Erdoğan for pursuing policies that have changed Turkey's demographics, and they promote rebuilding relations with Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in order to send all the remaining Syrian refugees back. The CHP promises that if it wins in 2023, it will lay out conditions to ensure the refugees' voluntary return to Syria within two years of coming into power, including through dialogue with the al-Assad

42. Okan Yücel, "Siyasetin gündemi mülteciler: Suriyeliler hakkında hangi siyasetçi ne demişti?" [The agenda of politics is refugees: What had which politician said about Syrians], Medyascope, April 19, 2022, <https://medyascope.tv/2022/04/19/siyasetin-gundemi-multeciler-suriyeliler-hakinda-hangi-siyasetci-ne-demisti/>

43. "Erdoğan'dan sonra Bahçeli'nin de gündemi mülteciler: Köklü şekilde çözülmeli" [After Erdoğan, Bahçeli's agenda also becomes refugees: It must be solved ineradicably], Gazete Duvar, April 19, 2022, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/erdogandan-sonra-bahcelinin-de-gundemi-multeciler-koklu-sekilde-cozulumeli-haber-1561295>

44. "502 Bin Kişi Gönüllü Olarak Geri Döndü" [502 Thousand People Have Returned Voluntarily], Amerika'nın Sesi, May 20, 2022, <https://www.amerikaninsesi.com/a/suleyman-soylu-502bin-kisi-gonullu-olarak-geri-dondu/6582003.html>

45. "Erdoğan, 1 milyon Suriyelinin gönüllü geri dönüşü için hazırlık yaptıklarını söyledi" [Erdoğan says they are preparing for the voluntary return of 1 million Syrians], BBC, May 3, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-61307585>

46. Gazete Duvar, "Erdoğan'dan sonra Bahçeli'nin de gündemi mülteciler: Köklü şekilde çözülmeli" [After Erdoğan, Bahçeli's agenda also becomes refugees: It must be solved ineradicably].



Ahmet Davutoğlu (left), head of the Democracy and Progress Party (DEVA), met with Ali Babacan, head of the Future Party (GP), on May 26, 2022, ahead of a summit at the GP headquarters. Photo credit: Ahmet Davutoğlu Facebook page

regime, enhanced cooperation and coordination with the international community, and infrastructure investments in Syria. For her part, IP leader Meral Akşener called on Erdoğan in May to appoint her as a special envoy on refugees, adding that she would be happy to “travel to Syria, shake hands with Assad, and send the refugees back home.”⁴⁷

The CHP and IP’s key partners, the Democracy and Progress (DEVA) Party and the Future Party (GP), agree. The two parties are headed, respectively, by Ali Babacan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, former cabinet members from Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP), who many people in Turkey see as guilty by association for the refugee crisis. The men now argue that Turkey’s original open-door policy has become unsustainable,

and they unequivocally support sending Syrian refugees elsewhere. The DEVA party promotes sending refugees to third countries, including European ones.⁴⁸ As an interim solution, meanwhile, the GP advocates for a more stringent policy of limiting refugee mobility within Turkey, arguing that refugees must live in camps or designated living areas rather than “mingling in city life without supervision.”⁴⁹

Turkey’s second-largest opposition party in parliament, the Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP), which is Kurdish-dominated and strongly leftist, has a more humanistic approach to the refugee question than any other major party, and it heavily criticizes both the AKP-MHP government as well as the other opposition parties for weaponizing the issue

47. “İYİ Parti lideri Akşener, Suriyelilerin geri gönderilmesi için devletten görev istedi” [Iyi Party leader Akşener asked the state for a mandate for the return of Syrians], Euronews, May 11, 2022, <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/05/11/iyi-parti-lideri-aksener-suriyelilerin-geri-gonderilmesi-icin-devletten-gorev-istedi>

48. Tokyol, “Turkish political parties outline their refugee policies.”

49. Tokyol, “Turkish political parties outline their refugee policies.”

of refugees for political gain.⁵⁰ While the HDP has not conveyed a formal plan for either the integration or the return of refugees, it is the only party in parliament that consistently references “migrant and refugee rights” in its discourse and condemns instances of violence against refugees in Turkey.⁵¹

CONCLUSION

With Turkey’s June 2023 elections shaping up as an increasingly tight race between Erdoğan and the opposition, the question of refugees will only become more salient.⁵² Having seen the emotional and political weight that voters give to the issue, candidates are likely to make it central to their campaigns, whether by making thinly veiled physical threats against refugees or by pinning the crisis on a lack of international support.⁵³ Such rhetoric will only exacerbate anti-refugee sentiment and violent attacks on refugees.

But the refugee question will not disappear after the elections, regardless of who wins. About eight hundred refugees are returning to Syria from Turkey on a weekly basis now, a rate that is well below the kind of exodus needed to meet many parties’ resettlement goals. The sheer number of Syrian refugees in Turkey dwarfs even the government’s most ambitious construction plans for northern Syria. Besides, despite the increasing animosity they can

sense against them, most refugees in Turkey want to remain: According to a 2020 UNHCR survey, 78 percent of refugees say that they do not want to leave, compared to just 17 percent in 2017.⁵⁴

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Refugees in Turkey are there to stay, at least in some capacity. Rather than pretending that a short-term plan for mass resettlement is realistic, Turkey’s political leaders must recognize this reality and devise integration policies that foster social harmony between citizens and migrants and protect Turkey’s new residents from violence, disinformation, and exploitation.

50. “Sancar’dan ‘mülteci’ tepkisi: Önce ‘göndereceğiz’ dediler, sonra ağız değiştirdiler” [‘Refugee’ response from Sancar: First they said ‘we will send them back,’ then they changed tuned], *Gazete Duvar*, May 10, 2022, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/sancardan-multeci-tepkisi-once-gonderecegiz-dediler-sonra-agiz-degistirdiler-haber-1564143>

51. Gülsüm Ağaoglu, “Göçmen ve mülteci hakları için herkesi duyarlılığa çağırıyoruz” [We invite everyone to sensitivity regarding migrant and refugee rights], HDP, December 18, 2019, <https://hdp.org.tr/gocmen-ve-multeci-haklari-icin-herkesi-duyarlilik-agiriyoruz/13819/>; “Mülteci çocuğun ölümüyle ilgili sorumlular yargı önüne çıkarılmalı” [Those responsible for the refugee child’s death must be brought to justice], *Bianet*, July 8, 2022, <https://bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/264320-multeci-cocugun-olumuyla-ilgili-sorumlular-yargi-onune-cikarilmali>

52. “Erdoğan would lack majority support in presidential election - poll,” *Ahval*, July 8, 2022, <https://ahvalnews.com/turkey-elections/erdogan-would-lack-majority-support-presidential-election-poll>

53. Menekşe Tokyay, “Populist Turkish politicians stoke tensions over Syrian refugees as elections loom,” *Arab News*, June 29, 2022, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2113401/middle-east>; “President Erdoğan slams West over refugee policy,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, June 20, 2022, <https://www.hurriyettailynews.com/president-erdogan-slams-west-over-refugee-policy-174721>

54. “Türkiye’deki Suriyeliler ülkesine dönmek istiyor mu; kalmak isteyenlerin sebepleri ne?” [Do Syrians in Turkey want to return to their country, what are the reasons of those who want to stay?], *Euronews*, April 25, 2022, <https://tr.euronews.com/2022/04/25/turkiye-deki-suriyeliler-ulkesine-donmek-istiyor-mu-kalmak-isteyenlerin-sebepleri-ne>



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