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Conflating Spaces: Syrian Rebels and Refugees in South Turkey

There are worrying signs that refugee camps in Turkey are being used by Syria's armed opposition. Not only does this violate basic humanitarian principles but it alters the dynamics of Syria's conflict, argue Mark Naftalin and Kristian Berg Harpviken.

By Kristian Berg Harpviken and Mark Naftalin for ISN

Violence in Syria continues unabated. A resolution to the conflict appears as distant now as at any time since the uprising began in March 2011. The latest data confirms that there are over a quarter of a million Syrian refugees registered or awaiting registration in Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan with the unofficial figure likely to be significantly higher. Vast numbers are women and children with the majority intent on seeking safe sanctuary whilst they await the end of hostilities.

What do we know?

Yet, today, the humanitarian, peaceful and civilian character of asylum amongst those fleeing Syria is threatened. In Turkey – Syria's northern neighbor and, with 80,000 registered individuals, host to one of the largest official Syrian refugee populations – refugee camps are not the exclusive preserve of civilians but are also utilized by those committed to overthrowing the regime in Damascus.

Whilst neither systematic nor endemic, the conflation of two supposedly divergent entities – combatants and non-combatants, and the distinct spaces they should respectively occupy – is prevalent, organized and typically overlooked by both analysts and humanitarian practitioners. Some camps provide not just rest and recuperation facilities for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) but are used as organizational, logistical and coordination hubs by the rebels and their supporters. Elsewhere the FSA are undertaking direct and voluntary recruitment of refugees who go on to moonlight as anti-government fighters. Others have joined the FSA out of their own volition with minimal initial synergy with the group.

The blurring of distinctions between refugees and rebels is not new. Since the 1990s when rebels from Rwanda, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Sudan and elsewhere entered refugee camps at will, the UN has become increasingly mindful of what is broadly categorized as 'refugee militarization'. Over the last decade, the UN has implemented a variety of preventive measures and operational guidelines that have, to varying extents, alleviated the proliferation of armed rebels in and around refugee camps.

Nevertheless, as the camps along the Turkish-Syrian border illustrate, the immersion of rebel groups

into refugee populations continues to present a legal, humanitarian and logistical quagmire for UNHCR, the UN agency whose primary purpose is to safeguard refugees and their rights in accordance with international law and humanitarian principles.

Even describing individuals in Turkey as refugees is itself somewhat of a misnomer. The country has established a two-tiered asylum policy whereby those originating from non-European countries are accorded 'temporary protection status' as opposed to full refugee status. Such temporary status affords significantly less legal and practical protection than that enshrined in the 1951 Refugee Convention. The multitude of preventive measures and operational guidelines developed by UNHCR to guarantee the civilian, peaceful and humanitarian character of refugee camps, which are always open to interpretation, have been largely dismissed by the host state.

What should we expect?

Determining how this issue will evolve is dependent on the course of the current crisis, the nature of displacement and the relationship between Damascus and Ankara. Presently, lucidity dictates that the enabling environment is unlikely to markedly change and the nexus between refugee and rebel space will continue and, perhaps, expand.

First, the 822 kilometer border remains porous with Turkey's proposals to establish a humanitarian safe zone in northern Syria having failed. The result is that without a 'buffer' along Turkey's southern border, rebels are free to circulate between the refugee camps in Turkey and areas of combat in northern Syria.

Second, and related, eight of the twelve present refugee camps lie within a few kilometers of the volatile border and are mostly contiguous with rebel strongholds in Syria. At least two of the remaining four camps are located within fifty kilometers of the border - the minimum recommended distance where camps should be positioned in large part to mitigate circumstances such as these. This is unlikely to change significantly. Just one of the four new camps currently under construction will be located at a distance greater than fifty kilometers from the border.

Third, the camps lie in close proximity to FSA safehouses, bases and fighters within southern Turkey along with external supporters, Turkish military outposts and defecting Syrian government soldiers. As a result, an assortment of interested actors party to the conflict are able to access the camps and establish crude networks of resources and personnel.

Fourth, there is limited oversight within the camps and insufficient screening and monitoring. UNHCR and international nongovernmental organizations have been largely frozen out of the area and have minimal access to the camps. Rather, the embryonic Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı (AFAD) - Turkey's disaster and emergency management department established under the Prime Ministry in 2009 to respond principally to earthquakes - is responsible for administering the humanitarian border response. It provides third parties with little leverage to affect the current status quo.

Fifth, refugees harbor strong grievances against President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Many have concluded that, with no sign of hostilities ending and massacres and indiscriminate bombing by Syria's armed forces continuing, it is time to join the FSA. The refugee population in Turkey has more than tripled since late May/early June and the tented camps are filled to bursting point which has further amplified resentment amongst the refugees.

Sixth, the FSA is a disparate and decentralized rubric of former army soldiers, local militias, Salafists, armed volunteers and, on occasion, criminal groups. Hence, attempting to influence the behavior of

the rebels and maintain an overarching command and control over Syria's armed opposition is problematic.

Lastly, there is compelling evidence to suggest that Turkish authorities - ultimately responsible for preserving the peaceful character of refuge - are at the very least condoning the FSA and refugee conflation within its territory and, at times, actively promoting it. Indeed, formerly supportive of al-Assad, Turkey is now an ardent critic of Syria's President and wants regime change in Damascus. The FSA's nominal leadership has long been located in Turkey and is reportedly receiving support from Milli İstihbarat Teşkilatı (MIT), Turkey's national intelligence organization. That support is likely to grow as Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the MIT increasingly accuse al-Assad of supporting Turkey's restive Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

Why is it problematic?

Within the context of the unfolding events in Syria, it is tempting to disregard the activities along the Syrian-Turkish border. Why should it matter if rebel and refugee spaces collide when the general consensus - notwithstanding a divided UN Security Council - is one of support to the FSA and a desire to remove President Bashar al-Assad? Or, put differently, why is this an issue that should not be ignored?

The convergence of refugees and rebels is in direct contravention of established international laws, principles and norms. Refugee camps should be sanctuaries from violence not conveyors of it. Separating agents of conflict from those escaping it should be sacrosanct - as emphasized by António Guterres, the head of UNHCR, at the most recent UN Security Council meeting on Syria. Refugees in Turkey do not get the humanitarian protection they rightfully deserve, and, by extension, the foundational rights of refugees and the very taxonomy of asylum are compromised.

The militarization of refugees and the space they occupy alters the trajectory of violence, the configuration and contours of the conflict and prospects for its resolution. It creates opportunities for additional mobilization, resource acquisition or sanctuary and changes the FSA operational calculus. Furthermore, fighters in the borderlands separating Syria and Turkey exacerbate the contagion of violence and insecurity in an already complex regional milieu. In short, it contributes to the protractness of the conflict.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[A Test for Turkey's Foreign Policy: The Syria Crisis](#)

[Turkey's Syrian Dilemma](#)

[Apocalyptic Musings about Syria](#)

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Editor's note:

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