



Turkey's refugee politics

by Roderick Parkes

Turkey's government recently overhauled its immigration laws in a process of exemplary transparency. It has also won plaudits for its high standard of care for Syrian refugees. And yet, Turkey is struggling to adopt a predictable and long-term approach to the refugee crisis. The problem is not just the sheer volume of the flows: it is the way these impact on three specific mobility regimes – with Turkey's southern neighbours, with Turkey's own minority groups, and with the European Union.

The legacy of southern migration relations

Turkey has been praised for keeping its border open to Syrian refugees. But the government's border policy is as much the result of high-minded humanitarianism as of old regional ambitions: Ankara has spent years building a visa-free travel regime with southern neighbours, including Syria and Iran. With the region now on fire, this leaves a difficult legacy.

Turkey's readiness to control its borders may be influenced, first, by its ambivalent relationship with radical Sunni forces in Syria. In 2009, Ankara signed the first of its web of visa-free deals with Damascus. Thus Turkey, unlike the United Arab Emirates (which purposefully draws its immigrant labour primarily from South Asia), disregarded the risk of importing regional conflicts and sectarianism. Today, many Syrians fleeing the Assad regime view the open border as a sign of

religious kinship, and Ankara struggles to secure the border for fear that this will be interpreted as an act of hostility.

Second, Turkey's border policy is also seen as being vulnerable to the 'weaponisation' of migration flows by other states. Governments of the region have long used the threat of refugee flows to dampen enthusiasm for regime change or to draw concessions from neighbours; some are even suspected of peppering refugee flows with their intelligence services. Currently there is speculation that Moscow will exploit the threat of a new wave of (as many as three million) refugees from Syria in order to press the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government to rekindle relations with Damascus and Teheran and help restore order.

Third, Ankara treats some of Syria's Kurdish militias as allies only on condition that they stay out of the border zone west of the Euphrates. In the run-up to the general election scheduled for 1 November, the government has been highlighting its responsible approach to the Kurdish issue (not least in a bid to reduce the significance of Turkey's opposition HDP party).

But AKP support for Kurdish forces remains predicated on the creation of a 'safe zone' in Syria and the possible construction of border fences – an echo of Ankara's policy during the first Gulf War, which received US backing.



The tension with minorities

Turkey has also been lauded for its generous offer of temporary protection to Syrian refugees. As the conflict rumbles on, however, Ankara must begin sorting those refugees who want only short-term protection from those in need of longer-term integration or resettlement to other countries. This shift will be difficult in a society which already suffers from many problems related to low social and physical mobility.

A small number of refugees are seeking only short-term protection. But keeping them in a permanent state of readiness to return home is costly. Turkey's migration directorate, the GMMM, has successfully focused resources on its 25 refugee camps. But the 260,000 inmates find themselves increasingly dependent on the state and cut off from family support networks. As for the 2 million refugees outside the camps, they can forge networks and retain their mobility, but they are becoming trapped by a combination of low wages and high rents. Poorer Turks also resent any perceived special treatment meted out to refugees.

The question how to integrate refugees in need of longer-term protection raises questions of fairness, too. Although most refugees will remain in Turkey for years, they must maintain the language and social skills necessary to return home to Syria. That ambiguity is hard to legislate for. If Ankara gives the refugees special cultural rights in areas like schooling, Turkey's ethnic minorities may demand similar exemptions. But, if the government integrates refugees into the social mainstream, it will face opposition too: critics claim that the AKP views Syrian refugees as a loyal clientele who will soon gain citizenship and voting rights.

When it comes to creating transit and processing areas for international resettlement, meanwhile, the government will encounter problems of territorial cohesion. Some of Turkey's ethnic communities already accuse the government of practising 'transmigration': a process whereby the state uses migration in order to alter a country's ethnic balance and boundaries. Turkey's Alawite minority complains about the large influx of predominantly Sunni refugees who are opposed to the (Alawite) regime in Damascus, and worries that its own influence is being purposefully diluted.

Turkey's European relations

Turkey's attempts to regulate the onward flow of refugees to Europe have also met with broad

approval: Turkish authorities cooperate with Frontex, the EU border agency, and the Turkish Coast Guard has intercepted around 60,000 refugees seeking to cross the Aegean and arrested at least 70 smugglers. But the discussion with the EU has been politicised by broader questions of access.

Ankara wants to secure visa-free travel for all Turkish citizens to the EU. But its bid to win this headline commitment from the Union now risks obscuring the difficult administrative reforms which must pave the way to it. One prerequisite for visa liberalisation is greater trust between European and Turkish intelligence agencies – a field which remains difficult despite the shared problems associated with the refugee crisis. Moreover, Western visa regimes are anyway evolving away from mass liberalisation and towards greater individualisation ('trusted traveller' programmes).

The question of EU membership also impinges on current talks. The EU has been discussing whether to classify Western Balkan states as 'safe countries of origin' (SCOs). This would entail a presumption that Balkan countries do not produce refugees, allowing the EU to handle the large number of unfounded asylum claims made by Balkan citizens via expedited procedures. But SCO status would also mark a recognition that Balkan states meet the human rights standards necessary to join the EU, and this may explain why talks with Turkey also focus on its SCO status rather than the more relevant status of 'safe third country' – that is, a country of transit to which it is safe to return Syrian refugees.

Issues of visas and EU accession have particular significance for Turkey's European diaspora. Overseas voters played a significant role in the June 2015 general election: according to calculations, they delivered about six seats to the AKP, but also helped push the (pro-Kurdish) opposition HDP over the 10% parliamentary threshold, resulting in 80 seats for the party, a hung parliament and the November elections.

Turkey's parties are again reaching out to overseas voters with the promise of reduced airfares and easier access to Turkish passports. The AKP government may also be wary of Kurdish asylum-seekers increasing their influence in Europe – another reason to pursue SCO status.

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