

# The Humanitarian Dimension of the Refugee Crisis in Turkey: Challenges and Prospects

Bianca Benvenuti\*

STIFTUNG  
MERCATOR

 **IAI**  
Istituto Affari Internazionali

**IPC** | **ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER**  
SABANCI UNIVERSITY  
STIFTUNG MERCATOR INITIATIVE

## Report from the field trip and seminar held in Istanbul on 21-22 July 2016

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), in collaboration with the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC) and Stiftung Mercator, launched the Global Turkey in Europe Programme in 2012 in order to establish a platform to discuss and analyse the rapid transformation of Turkey in a European and global context. In its fourth edition, the project focuses on the refugee crisis and its impact on European member states and EU-Turkey relations. The protracted armed conflict in Syria has created 4.8 million registered refugees outside Syria. Turkey hosts the highest Syrian refugee population, with more than 2.7 million registered by the government of Turkey.<sup>1</sup> The massive influx of refugees and irregular migrants has become a common challenge requiring cooperation between the European Union and Turkey. The EU-Turkey Agreement of 18 March introduced a series of “action points” to foster cooperation and stem the irregular flux of refugees crossing and dying in the Aegean sea. The deal has sparked heated discussions concerning its implications for the humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis: in particular, human rights organisations, scholars and observers criticised the EU for recognising Turkey as a safe third country – i.e., a country that is safe for asylum seekers of other nationalities.

The public discourse on the issue is polarised and is often confused. Global Turkey in Europe aims at providing a ground for people with different professional

backgrounds, experiences and opinions, to meet and discuss various facets of the refugee crisis. Under the programme, the first of a series of workshops took place in Istanbul to discuss the humanitarian dimension of the refugee crisis in Turkey, including the issue of whether Turkey qualifies as a safe third country, one of the key implicit assumptions of the EU-Turkey deal. The programme in Istanbul included a preliminary field trip for non-Turkish participants and an open workshop with all the participants. The two activities took place on 21 and 22 July.

### 21 July: Field trip

We envisioned the field trip as an occasion for participants coming from outside of Turkey to get a feel for Syrian refugees’ issues in Istanbul through a first-hand experience and direct observation. The group included journalists, researchers and think-tankers. As part of the programme, we visited a community centre and a Syrian school, both located in the historical peninsula of Istanbul (Fatih). Around 85-90 per cent of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey lives outside the 25 refugee camps; however, the vast majority of government funds go towards assisting refugees living in official camps. There are around 500,000 Syrians in Istanbul, unevenly distributed among the city’s municipalities; Fatih hosts a large proportion of them. For this reason, the field trip was organised inside the city and regarded in particular urban refugees. The participants received a brief introduction about the specific situation

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, *Syrian Refugees Regional Response*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>.

\* Bianca Benvenuti is a Visiting Researcher at the Istanbul Policy Center (IPC).



**The school's children made this painting after the bombing at Ataturk Airport on 28 June 2016**

of the neighbourhood, along with ground rules for the field trip. An Arabic-Turkish translator joined the group to help improve communication. The field trip was very informal, in order to ease dialogue and interaction between participants and the organisations which we visited.

In the first part of the field trip, participants had a chance to speak with the founder and one of the volunteers of a community centre in the neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup> Although opened only a few months ago, the centre attracts many of the Syrian children living nearby: the vast majority of these children do not have access to formal education, as public schools have no capacity to absorb all of them,<sup>3</sup> and private schools are too expensive. In addition, many of them work or beg on the streets at very early ages to help sustain their families. Besides, they are often overexposed to images of violence and suffering in their houses as the parents very closely follow the evolution of the situation in Syria. The community centre is a safe place for them to learn and play; it welcomes around 50 children per day, although it consists of only two very small rooms. In total, around 250 families are registered at the centre, receive assistance on legal and social issues, and benefit from weekly food and clothing distribution. After a brief introduction about the history of the centre and its main activities, participants had a chance to ask questions and learn more about the lives and difficulties of Syrian refugees living in the city.

We then moved to a school in the neighbourhood opened by a Syrian who escaped the war and settled in Turkey. When he arrived in Istanbul almost five years ago, he was struck by the number of Syrian children in the streets and

decided to give private lessons to some of them. With time passing and the number of children attending his classes rising, he decided to invest all his savings in opening a school. Now he has more than 400 students in attendance. Although not all of them can pay tuition fees, he does not reject anyone. Lately things are getting better as the Turkish government has started paying the teachers, who had been working for free up until then. While we were sitting in the school's garden, participants again had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss in an informal environment, which facilitated the dialogue. At the end of the field trip, all participants were enthusiastic about the experience and the amount of information received. They were also pleased to have another occasion the following day to report their impressions and share them with all the participants of the workshop. The field trip revealed a certain degree of mismatch between the situation and priorities on the ground and the discourse at the political and academic level, highlighting the value of a practical experience before the seminar began. Participants have found the combination of academic, political and on the ground insights and perspectives invaluable in providing the information needed for rich and constructive conversation.

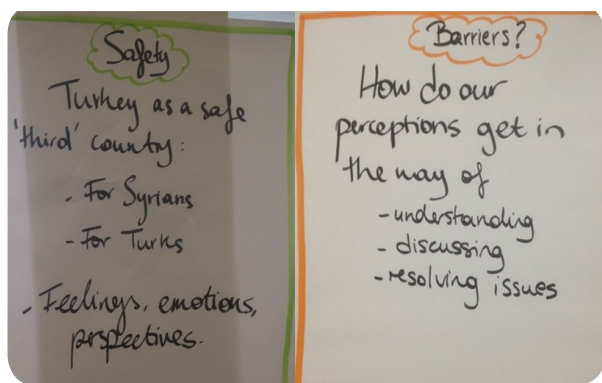
## 22 July: Workshop

Around 35 experts, including economists, political scientists, activists, NGO representatives, think-tankers and researchers from seven different countries, participated in the workshop. Mia Forbes Pire mediated the interactive seminar, with no panels and no PowerPoint presentations. The immediate aim was to spark unconventional discussion and straightforward dialogue: instead of a traditional conference set-up, the floor was organised in five small groups of six or seven participants. This allowed people from different professional backgrounds to feel at ease in sharing their ideas, offering the unique chance for these professionals to interact first and foremost as individuals.



<sup>2</sup> Names and exact location of the organisations visited will not be reported for security issues. For further information, please contact the author of this report.

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Turkey: 400,000 Syrian Children Not in School*, 8 November 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/node/283137>.



In the introduction, Professor Ahmet İcduygu presented his paper *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Insecure Lives in an Environment of Pseudo-Integration*, prepared for the conference. He provided information about Turkish legislation on asylum and migration, together with data about the distribution of migrants in Turkey. He highlighted some key characteristics of Turkey's migration and asylum law. Professor İcduygu stressed the differences in regulation for migrants of Turkish origin/descent and others. The 1934 Settlement Law (revised in 2006) and the 1994 Asylum Regulation define what type of migrants Turkey prefers, namely those of Turkish origin/descent. Turkey is also the only country which retains the geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva Convention. Hence, Turkey grants refugee status only to Europeans, which is why Syrians cannot legally be considered as refugees. Moving to EU-Turkey cooperation on migration, Professor İcduygu explained that, although a readmission agreement was signed in 2013, as the Syrian War unfolded a new agreement became necessary since no one had expected such a large influx of migrants.

Like the field trip, this introduction aimed at providing participants from heterogeneous backgrounds, and having different levels and types of expertise, with basic facts about the situation in Turkey. Before getting into the core of the seminar, participants were encouraged to share their own perspectives and perceptions about the refugee question in Turkey, addressing it at three levels: personal, cultural and professional. In particular, participants were asked to discuss their basic assumptions and how these get in the way of understanding, discussing and resolving issues. Language, communication and ideas were the starting point of the discussion, which aimed at encouraging participants to adopt an open and inquisitive approach to the question of whether Turkey can or cannot be considered as a safe third country.

Across the room there were mixed feelings regarding whether or not this was a relevant topic to discuss. Given recent events in Turkey, i.e., the attempted military coup in the country that had taken place the week before, many considered the answer obvious: Turkey is not a safe country for Turks as well as others. However, after a constructive exchange participants decided to go ahead and discuss this topic in small groups. There was near

consensus among the participants that Turkey is not a safe country for Syrians nor for its own citizens. There is a possibility that it may create its own refugees. This debate was already a central topic in the EU-Turkey migration deal, but it will most likely intensify after the coup attempt.

By the end of the discussion, participants agreed on some steps to a potential solution to the issues discussed. There should be no selective humanitarianism: what applies to Syrians should apply to all vulnerable groups in the country. There should be more responsibility sharing and participation of all actors in decision making, and institutional and systemic approaches should be central. Last but not least, peace in Syria would root out the problem.

