

The Syrian refugee crisis reconsidered: The role of the EU-Turkey Agreement

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Abstract

The aim of the article is to analyse the roots of the current refugee crisis in Syria. The author argues that the most effective way to solve the crisis can only be to re-establish order and stability in Syria and Iraq. However, even with the most recent international attempts to bring the different Syrian actors to engage in proximity talks, re-establishing order in Syria will not be possible in the short term for the international community. Therefore more attention is needed to address the refugee crisis in the neighbouring countries. Due to its geographical location Turkey is the most important host and transit country for Syrian and other migrants. Turkey lacks the appropriate legal system and infrastructure to handle the situation. The author argues that the international community must make a greater effort to provide the refugees with basic necessities. The EU-Turkey agreement is an important step forward, but it lacks a truly comprehensive approach to solve the crisis. Turkey's foreign policy toward Syria further complicates the challenge arising from the Syrian crisis.

Keywords: Syria, refugees, postcolonial state, Syrian conflict, IDPs, Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, state failure

Introduction

An unprecedented refugee crisis hit the European Union in the course of the year 2015, having its origins in the Middle East and North Africa. According to the statistics of UNHCR, over one-million refugees arrived in Europe mainly via sea routes through the Mediterranean. About half of these refugees (48%) have a Syrian background. Afghans account for 21%, Iraqis for 9%, and the rest come from a number of countries most of which are failed or collapsing states (UNHCR 2016a).

With a view to the source countries, these official numbers contradict the rhetoric of many European politicians that most of the refugees are economic migrants. The

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simple truth is that the consequences of the Arab Spring have left many countries in the region in a chronically unstable condition.

The aim of this article is to analyse the roots of the current refugee crisis with a focus on its origins in the Middle East. The author argues that the ultimate solution of the crisis can only be to re-establish order in the collapsed states of the region.

The failure of the postcolonial state

The Middle Eastern state system is the result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. The so-called Sykes-Picot Treaty, a secret pact between Great Britain, France and Russia divided the sphere of influence among the three great powers in the Middle East. Later on, the San Remo agreement and the mandate system demarcated the current borders of the Middle Eastern states, and they subsequently remained under the sovereignty of the mandatory powers.

Border wars and disputes are not uncommon in the region, but generally speaking the state system remained relatively stable in the 20th century. The idea of nationalism, imported to the region in the 19th century from Europe, became the mantra of the newly appointed rulers of these countries after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The new Middle Eastern entities were not nation-states in the European sense of the word but artificial ones based only on the interest of the European powers (Ayubi, 2001: 91-99). The merger of Baghdad, Mosul and Basra resulted in the contemporary state of Iraq in 1922. Its population did not share any kind of Iraqi identity or „Iraqiness.“ It was the British political interest that dictated the creation of the new Iraqi state, to serve its objectives in the Middle East. Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and many other states in the African Maghreb, where states were created earlier than in the Levant, similarly served external powers’ purposes primarily.

For a century at least, the Sykes-Picot-based state order in the Middle East has remained stable despite frequent border disputes among the countries of the region. The Arab-Israeli question is an exception to this; with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, a new state was created based on religion and ethnicity.

The history of the Arab states shows that in spite of their artificiality they displayed strong viability during the last century. The Middle Eastern states entered into a period of modernization right after independence. Strong leaders such as Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya or Saddam Hussein in Iraq helped to create a sense of “Libyanness” and “Iraqiness” in their respective countries. Many scholars discuss the “multiple identities”

of the Middle Eastern population resulting from this; one of the most important being “national” identity and that of belonging to a given “national” community, eventually (Lewis, 1998).

According to popular beliefs the Arab Spring has not only weakened the existing political regimes in certain republics, but also resulted in disintegrating states in four cases. Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya show the typical signs of what the literature refers to as “failed states.” In all of the four states the so-called Arab Spring started with regular protests against the ruling elite calling for political and economic reforms. These protests have, under significant external influence, given way to civil wars preparing the ground for radical organizations which quickly filled the emerging political and military vacuum.

Borrowing Hamid Dabashi’s idea, we might speak of the failure of the postcolonial state in these cases (Dabashi, 2012). The four long-ruling dictators (Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, the al-Assad family, father Hafez and his son Bashar, in Syria, and Muammar al-Gaddafi in Libya) have maintained a “fragile equilibrium” in their ethnically and religiously diverse multicultural states. The lowest common denominator of the diverse politically determined groups was a consensus in maintaining the same elite groups in power for a long time. With the Arab Spring this consensus has completely collapsed and the attempt to challenge the *status quo* by transforming the political regime into either a new type of authoritarian or a democratic arrangement has failed. There is a lack of new charismatic leaders who would have enough power to reach a new balance among the different stakeholders of their societies. The only way to truly solve the challenge of the current wave of emigration from the region towards Europe may be to re-establish order in the four states in question.

This article deals only with the case of Syria due to space limitations, and with a view to the salient importance of this case for understanding the refugee question.

The situation in Syria

It is beyond our possibilities to deal with all of the aspects of the Syrian crisis, therefore the article will focus on those peculiarities of the Syrian case that hold relevance in the context of the present refugee crisis.

In Syria, protests began as they did elsewhere in the region. The first of them erupted in a town close to the Jordanian border, in the city of Deraa, in March 2011, at a time when the town and its area were already experiencing difficulties with agricultural production and water scarcity. This had an impact on other parts of Syria as well, and the

protests spread. However, at this time, the Syrian state was not yet a failed state, and the country was not in a state of war. There were political and military groups aiming to challenge the *status quo*, but the weakened Assad regime maintained its power and the existence of the Syrian state was not called into question. A major bomb attack in Damascus against the inner circles of the Assad regime in July 2012 marked the beginning of a new phase of the Syrian crisis. What we have seen from then on is a civil war and a proxy war at the same time.

Syria's geopolitical location in the Middle East makes the country a flash point where regional and global powers can measure their strength relative to one another. The main regional powers – Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, a small country with enlarged capabilities – all have an interest in influencing the outcome of the Syrian war, turning it into a proxy conflict. Whereas Iran is allied with the Assad regime, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have an interest in destabilising it by providing arms to the different rebel groups within the country. The influence of the regional powers and the conflict of global interests (American and Russian interests) has thus further aggravated the situation.

The rise of the Islamic State in 2014 came only in a later phase of the Syrian conflict. Upon its territorial expansion, the existence of the Islamic State consolidated Syria's fragmentation, turning the current map of the country into a mosaic. These and related changes in the military situation in Syria since 2014 are the most important to assess in order to understand the contemporary refugee situation burdening the neighbouring countries, among them Turkey in particular (Herman, 2015).

From September 2014 a coalition of countries, with the leadership of the United States, has launched air strikes on the Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra*. In the meantime, the provision of arms and training to certain rebel groups helped the factions concerned to advance against regime forces. In the end, however, the US program to train 5,000 rebels to fight both the Assad regime *and* the above-named extremist organizations came to a halt acknowledging the strategic failure of the initiative, and the air campaign has so far failed to cripple the Islamic State.

Most of the air strikes concentrated on the Iraqi side of the territory of the Islamic State, where military intervention was approved and even requested by the Abadi administration based in Baghdad. With limited foreign military pressure on the Islamic State in Syrian territory, there it was able to gain significant ground in the northern and eastern parts of the country. The city of Raqqa has become the administrative capital of

the Islamic State, and its advances have reached Palmyra in central Syria as well as the city of Deir al-Zor in the east where the Assad regime is waging war against both the Free Syrian Army and the Islamic State.

The Assad regime controls around 20 to 40 percent of the territory of Syria at the present. Yet it still maintains public services in the areas it is able to hold onto, and these are the most densely populated parts of the country.

The intervention of Russia from September 2015, aimed at strengthening the Assad regime's hold on these areas, further complicated the situation. Russia, together with Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah, has the intention to reunify Syria under the banner of the Assad regime. With their help, by the time of writing this article, the government forces have recaptured key strategic cities in the north and the south of the country from the rebels.

In the meantime, a new series of peace talks was announced by the international community to address the situation in Syria. The so-called Vienna process was launched in November 2015 by the International Syria Support Group consisting of 20 member countries, including the United States, Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia, and other important international actors. The latest efforts to bring peace are based on the joint opposition to the Islamic State and *Jabhat al-Nusra* by all the participating actors. However, this consensus is not enough to get all the relevant political actors to come to the table. According to a recent study, the number of rebel groups in Syria may be as high as 1,000. This multitude of factions represents a wide range of political and military interests (Lister, 2014). The recent Vienna talks in November 2015 have nominated Jordan and Saudi Arabia to decide which rebel groups are terrorist and which are not. The rebel groups regarded as terrorist organizations are thus excluded from any further negotiations on the political transition (Tabler and Decottignies, 2015).

The direct consequence of the Vienna initiative is the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 2254 in December 2015. Based on the first and the second Geneva initiatives, the Resolution calls for a ceasefire and a genuine political transition within 18 months. It also emphasises the commitment of the major actors to fight against the Islamic State and *Jabhat al Nusra*, and to stop the war in Syria.

The actors supporting the Assad regime, among them Russia and Iran, criticise the role of Saudi Arabia and that the monarchy was given the right to decide over the legitimacy of the different rebel groups. The breaking of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran in January 2016 is a clear sign of diverging interests not only in

Syria, but related to the balance of power in the region. The Saudis were in fact not in favour of the inclusion of Iran in the Vienna talks to begin with. Without a minimal cooperation between these two regional powers the chances for peace are extremely low.

Saudi Arabia eventually proceeded to invite the representatives of various rebel groups to Riyadh in the wake of the Vienna initiative in December 2015. Not surprisingly, mainly the Saudi-backed rebel groups attended. These groups established the Higher Negotiations Committee in order to unify the like-minded factions under the auspices of Saudi Arabia (Final Statement, 2015). The Riyadh meeting excluded many influential and non-jihadist rebel groups, diminishing the likelihood of success. The absence of *Ahrar al-Sham*, an Islamist but non-jihadist rebel group, is a notable sign of how Saudi Arabia tried to manage the Syrian crisis on its own.

The military involvement of Russia, aimed against all the military and political groups that oppose the Assad regime in Syria further complicated the situation. Russia shares the standpoint of the Assad regime on the rebel groups, and labels all of them terrorist entities. Russia helps the military advancement of the Assad regime mainly, but not only, in the densely populated western parts of the country. Partly with this assistance, strategically important military bases and cities were captured by the Kurdish People's Protection Unit in late 2015. Russia's military involvement thus runs against the interests of the Turkish state, which has tried to keep the Kurdish minority out of any political transition. The November 2015 incident, in which a Turkish F-16 fighter aircraft shot down a Russian Su-24M bomber, brought bilateral relations into a negative spiral. Russia has launched a trade and economic embargo against the Turkish state.

In the meantime, with Russia's help, the Assad regime could initiate a new military campaign around Aleppo in order to re-occupy key positions from the rebel factions in these areas. According to some American observers, the aim of Russia may be to let the regime win the military conflict against all of its opponents before any serious political compromise on the transition. Whatever the motive, the intensified military operations by the regime and the resistance put up by the rebel groups further aggravated the humanitarian situation inside Syria, with obvious implications for the refugee crisis..

The recent attempt to engage the Syrian regime and the so-called rebel groups in proximity talks thus seems to be a failure. The planned Geneva round was suspended at the beginning of February due to a lack of confidence among the different Syrian groups. The Higher Negotiations Committee called for an immediate cease-fire which was not in the interest of Russia, involved at the time in helping the Assad regime's military

advancement. In Munich, in February 2016, behind the scenes of the yearly security conference, a limited agreement has eventually been reached by the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Iran. This agreement called for a cessation of hostilities (not a cease-fire) within a week, and for the opening up of the main areas of Syria to let in humanitarian aid. At the time of writing, a fragile cease-fire has entered into force, on 27 February 2016, respected by the relevant actors, including Russia.

Whether this will bring lasting results remains to be seen. What is certain is that re-establishing order is a minimal requirement to solve the refugee crisis and the humanitarian situation. In the short run it can be safely expected that there will be a rise in the number of IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) within Syria as well as in the number of refugees, due to the recent clashes among the different combatant parties. Furthermore, the cessation of hostilities does not include the territories held by the Islamic State or *Jabhat al Nusra*. Intensifying the military campaign against these groups can also have implications for the residents of these areas.

In the meantime, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are calling for a ground military intervention in Syria. Ground intervention is necessary according to many military observers to win the war against the Islamic State, but it can have a negative impact on stability as well as on the peace negotiations, due to the complexity of the local interests of the key regional powers.

The lack of a minimal consensus on the future of Syria among regional and global actors questions if there is any chance for immediate peace. Re-establishing order along with the state's reach in terms of both legitimacy and capacity in Syria might take several years at least. This means that the refugee crisis will continue to put pressure on European countries as well.

The current refugee situation

Given that solving the Syrian conflict is an enormous task, the international community should pay more attention to ameliorating the humanitarian situation of the Syrian refugees in the neighbouring countries as a short-term goal.

Among the three neighbouring countries (aside from Iraq) Turkey has the most importance. According to a recent UN estimate, the number of Syrians seeking refuge outside their home country has reached 4.7 million. More than half of them reside in Turkey (2.6 million), one-million in Lebanon, and 600,000 in Jordan (UNHCR, 2016b). Due to the intensifying military conflict among the different rebel groups and the

government forces, the number of IDPs within Syria is approximately 8 million, and this number is growing. According to the estimation of the Syrian Centre for Policy Research at least 470,000 persons have died due to the civil war in Syria by February 2016 (SCPR, 2016). From among the 4.7 million refugees, over 900,000 asylum seekers have reached the territory of the European Union between March 2011 and December 2015 (UNHCR, 2016c).

Syrian refugees find themselves in varying legal, political and economic circumstances in the neighbouring countries. What is common in the case of the three most affected countries is that the refugee crisis overlaps with certain internal tensions in their cases. The neighbouring countries thus pay a considerable price for accepting refugees in their territory. Among them, Lebanon and Jordan have the highest number of refugees in terms of percentage of the population.

Throughout its history, Jordan has witnessed numerous waves of refugees as one of the most stable countries in the region. The Palestinian refugee crisis hit Jordan first, in 1948, and it still has a huge impact on the ethnic mosaic of the country. The third Gulf War in 2003, which ousted Saddam Hussein from power, resulted in an influx of Iraqi refugees reaching the number of one-million. Even against this backdrop, the Syrian refugee crisis is unprecedented in many ways. At the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, the refugees arriving in Jordan took shelter in refugee camps. Since then, Syrian refugees have contributed to an 8% growth of the Jordanian population (by the year 2015). In 2016, the population of Jordan has reached 9.5 million – among them 30%, or a total of 2.9 million people, are non-Jordanians. At least 600,000 Iraqi refugees still live in Jordan, complicating the situation even further. Given these numbers, refugee camps were filled rapidly, and at the moment 80% of the refugees stay in urban areas due to the shortage of places and the bad living conditions inside the camps.

Most of the refugees are around the capital Amman, and other cities in the north. Their situation is considerably worse than the that of the post-2003 Iraqi refugees. Generally speaking, Syrian refugees do not have the same accumulated wealth and standard of living that the Iraqi refugees had when they came to Jordan. It also means that the Syrian refugees living in Jordan rely mainly on state infrastructure and assistance rather than their own savings and income. The perception of Syrian refugees in Jordan is consequently rather negative, just as elsewhere in the region. The deeper reason behind the negative perceptions is the high unemployment rate in Jordanian urban areas, even as most of the Syrian refugees find work only in the informal sector, relying on seasonal

employment (Carrion, 2015). The presence of Syrian refugees in Jordan has thus worsened the fragile political situation in the country where King Abdullah initiated reforms in the context of the Arab Spring and the ensuing years with the regime's survival at stake. Jordan is, in the meantime, also a participant in the US-led coalition against the Islamic State.

The question of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is a similarly complex issue due to the direct involvement of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement in the Syrian crisis. Moreover, just like Jordan, Lebanon also has a controversial history with the Palestinian refugee crisis in the wake of the establishment of the State of Israel. Around 400,000 Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon without any political or civil rights in the country. The newly arrived Syrian refugees account for 26% of the total population. Most of them stay in urban areas as there is a lack of refugee camp housing, partly due to the high number of Palestinian refugees in the country (Mudallali 2013).

The influx of Syrian refugees has thereby further exacerbated the negative impact of the Arab Spring on Lebanon. It has worrying implications for social cohesion, given that Lebanon's confessional political system is in a state of constant crisis. Hezbollah, a Shia political and military group in Lebanon, openly intervened in Syria on the side of the Assad regime, helping it to reoccupy the city of Qusair in 2013. The Syrian crisis has thus effectively spilled over into the Lebanese political system, further aggravating instability in the Levantine country.

Overall, Lebanon shares the same humanitarian challenges related to the Syrian refugees that Jordan is facing. The lack of resources for easing the situation is the most fundamental problem. The lack of shelter, the lack of sufficient clean water, as well as the shortage of doctors and basic medications, are challenges on a daily basis.

The pivotal role of Turkey

In absolute terms, Turkey has the highest number of Syrian refugees, with (as of the beginning of 2016) over 2.6 million refugees. Turkey is not only a host country but it has also become the most important transit country for refugees from Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. During the summer of 2015, Turkey received an unprecedented wave of Syrian refugees, and at the same time it has continued to serve as a transit route for other refugees moving toward Europe.

To appreciate the larger context of this, it is important to understand the complex situation in which Turkish foreign policy found itself upon the eruption of the crisis in

Syria. Turkey's position towards the Syrian crisis has been in obvious conflict with its foreign policy principle of "zero problems with neighbours." The country adopted an open-door policy towards Syrian refugees from March 2011 providing "temporary protection" to them in the framework of the Turkish asylum system. At the same time, Turkey was the first country in the neighbourhood to break diplomatic ties with the Assad regime. From the very beginning of the uprising Turkey supported the rebel groups fighting against the Syrian government forces.

As to handling the arrival of refugees, the most significant issue with which Turkey was faced in 2011 was the underdeveloped status of Turkish asylum law. Turkey is a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees but with an important reservation: a geographical limitation was included, per consequence of which only refugees entering from European countries have rights and obligations according to the 1951 Law. The other asylum-seekers arriving from non-European countries are thus under "temporary protection" only. Temporary protection means that these refugees are supposed to resettle in a third country as soon as possible (Corabatir, 2015: 468-469). Despite these shortcomings of the legal system, Turkey declared an open door policy toward the Syrian refugees, and also expressed a commitment to the basic principle of the *non-refoulement* of refugees.

New legislation came into force in April 2014 with the help of the international community, and especially with the support of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Under the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, the General Directorate on Migration Management was established in order to coordinate the tremendous challenges arising from the tasks of dealing with the Syrian refugees. The new legal framework concerning refugees does not, however, annul the geographical limitation (Elman, 2015: 3). Moreover, even as the Turkish legal system related to refugees and international protection developed significantly over time, it still fails to incorporate some of the general norms of dealing with asylum-seekers.

Outside the legal system, the Turkish state faces further difficulties in dealing with the refugee situation. In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, the refugees found shelter in refugee camps, as was the case in Jordan. But with the growing numbers of refugees these camps soon ran out of capacity. Many are consequently finding or seeking shelter in urban areas. Turkey has started to build new refugee camps, especially along the border with Syria, but this fails to answer to the basic needs of the new asylum-seekers. A total of 25 refugee centres have been built meeting all international standards. The problem with

these refugee centres is that they provide facilities for only 15% of the refugee population hosted by Turkey (Elman, 2015: 4). Only 260,000 Syrian refugees have access, while the others lack this kind of opportunity.

The presence of the refugees places a huge burden on the Turkish economy. According to Turkish estimates, the cost of the Syrian refugee crisis may have amounted to around 9 billion Euros by the end of 2015. Despite the huge amount of resources invested, outside the camps the conditions have only deteriorated since 2013.

The lack of prospects, the absence of adequate accommodation, basic income, and enough schools and doctors forced many thousands of Syrian refugees in Turkey to leave the country toward Europe. The lack of any chance of peace in Syria in the short term also had an impact on the decision of many to start the journey towards Germany. By 2015, much of the urban infrastructure in many of Syria's major cities has been destroyed. Rebuilding the basic infrastructure to resettle Syrian refugees in their home country might take at least three to five years once (and if) a resolution of the conflict is achieved. The consequences of these losses of the civil war have pushed further IDPs to leave the territory of the country, and, at the same time, their arrival across the border created an impulse pushing those who were already outside Syria to depart for the European Union. With what were, as mentioned above, deteriorating humanitarian conditions both inside and outside the refugee camps at the same time, Syrian refugees had only one rational option: risking their lives to attempt the journey to Europe.

In spite of the extraordinary scale of the challenge, the European Union provided Turkey with only a small portion of the money that Turkey itself contributed to solve the refugee crisis. The members of the EU offered a 3-billion-Euro economic aid package to Turkey to deal with the situation, but Turkey received only 44.6 million Euros of this assistance so far. Overall international support for Syrian refugees in Turkey provided only for about 7% of the total costs of the crisis (Elman, 2015: 1).²

Expectations related to the EU-Turkish agreement

The European Union, and Germany in particular, realised the fact that without cooperation with Turkey the slowing down of the waves of asylum-seekers coming to Europe would not be possible.

² Turkey has also received financial contributions from the UN through the 3RP, i.e. the Regional Refugees and Resilience Plan (3RP, 2016), but according Turkish authorities only a part of the agreed sum arrived to Turkey thus far.

The European Union and Turkey have signed an agreement on 29 November 2015 in order to cooperate in the field of refugees. The European Union agreed to provide Turkey with 3 billion Euros in the year 2016 to deal with the crisis. The EU asked Turkey primarily to help the refugees to stay in its territory and to not allow them to seek asylum in the European Union. The EU promised that new chapters in the accession talks would be opened with Turkey in return. The Union will also speed up the process to liberalise the visa procedure for Turkish citizens in the Schengen area in case of Turkey's willingness to implement the readmission agreement concerning the sending back of refugees from European countries.

Due to the high number of refugees who have entered into the European Union in 2015, the EU tries to keep new refugees out of its area – clearly this is now the priority for the EU. Even Angela Merkel's earlier stance on allowing refugees into Germany without any conditions has changed significantly. The agreement therefore recognises the central role of Turkey in providing the refugees with basic humanitarian services which, according to EU countries' expectations, should convince them to stay in Turkey for a longer time. The Turkish leadership, for its part, called the agreement one of the most important events in EU-Turkish relations (Günther, 2016).

However, Turkey's relationship with the European Union is an ambivalent partnership. On the one hand, Turkey agrees to cooperate with the European Union on this issue, and even offers to monitor the sea routes to stop illegal migration. On the other hand, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan threatens the European Union by saying: „we can put refugees on buses” (these were the words used by Erdoğan just after the beginning of the siege of Aleppo by the forces of the Assad regime).

The refugee situation is a double-edged sword for Turkey. The pressure from Syria due to the intensification of the military conflict there has been growing since last year. Turkey expects to receive at least 600,000 more Syrian refugees in the spring of 2016. The number of asylum-seekers may grow to up to 3 million with the delaying of the proximity talks and the implementation of the cease-fire. The EU plan to relocate a lower number of Syrian refugees staying in Turkey to the European Union does not help Turkey in this respect. Turkey's aims are thus two-fold. It would prefer to establish safe humanitarian zones for civilians in northern Syria. These safe zones may help to keep internally displaced persons inside Syria. With the establishment of the safe zones Turkey may also launch a ground military intervention across the border, and at the same time secure its interests against the Kurdish People's Protection Units demanding autonomy

in northern Syria. Turkey regularly attacks the Kurdish *peshmerga* forces along the Turkish-Syrian border to prevent any *fait accompli* of a Kurdish autonomy. Turkey also has a major interest in convincing the European Union to consider new asylum-seekers from Syria for relocation in European territory. Using a compulsory quota system, the EU for its part intends to consider for resettlement only those Syrian refugees who are already staying in the territory of Turkey.

One of the short-term benefits of the EU-Turkish agreement is the consideration of opening the job market for Syrian refugees registered in Turkey. It would help to convince the refugees that long-term stay in Turkey can be an option that is financially sustainable. However, by giving job permits to Syrian refugees Turkey risks increasing political tensions within Turkish society. The unemployment rate is quite high in the country, especially in southeastern parts of Turkey where most of the refugees are concentrated. The same problematic implications apply if Turkey considers integrating Syrian refugees going beyond the measures taken thus far. For example, Turkey may offer citizenship to registered Syrian refugees. However, this decision would clearly jeopardise the weak social harmony there is within Turkish society.

Turkey's approach toward the Syrian refugee crisis also clashes with its political interests in Syria. With its open-door policy, Turkey had an interest in supporting the Syrian refugees. But Turkey's influence in Syria and its role in supporting the moderate rebel groups, with the ambivalent relations the latter have with the jihadist and salafist elements inside Syria, does not help to bring peace and stability to the country.

For the European Union it is a fundamental interest to provide Syrian refugees in Turkey with a basic standard of living in order to stop new waves of illegal migrants departing for Europe. Turkey is thus due to receive the promised financial support from the EU in the first part of 2016. Yet, although the help of the European Union will be significant, it does not offer a long-term solution to the refugee crisis.

The European Union's agreement with Turkey serves only a short-term interest of the European countries inasmuch as it may help to prevent a major new refugee wave in the summer of 2016. However, the expectations on the part of the EU may be too high with respect to Turkey's ability to stop illegal migration, and may at the same time overestimate its interest in doing so even if it had the ability.

It may be noteworthy in this respect that, at the time of writing this, even upon the declaration of a cease-fire in Syria thousands are fleeing from the country to set up a better future elsewhere.

Conclusion

The unprecedented wave of migration that reached Europe in 2015 will most likely remain at a similar level in 2016 despite the recent attempts by the international community to force the Syrian stakeholders to initiate proximity talks. The 18-month transition period launched by the Vienna initiative in November 2015 fails to offer any short-term benefits for the civilians who have become refugees. The only positive benefit for IDPs in Syria is the agreed humanitarian access to besieged urban or rural areas.

Re-establishing an effective and legitimate state in Syria may take several years at least. The current attempt to strengthen the Assad regime by Russia, Iran, and Shia militias cannot directly lead to it. Therefore the migration crisis can only be handled in the neighbouring countries at the moment. Its geopolitical location makes Turkey the most important host country in this respect, as the main transit route for the refugees.

The Turkish state has not enough capacity to integrate Syrian migrants. The EU-Turkey agreement is an important step forward but it reflects only the short-term interests of European countries: namely, that they wish to keep refugees out of the territory of the EU. A more comprehensive international approach is needed to address all the issues connected to the Syrian refugee crisis.

In the meantime, Turkey's foreign policy goals in Syria are in contradiction with the requirements of effectively handling the refugee issue. Turkey is at a major historical crossroads at the moment, with the presence of terrorist networks in its territory rendering the choices it makes in this respect even more extraordinary.

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