

## Syrians in Turkey under Temporary Protection: From Guest Status to Citizenship

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### Abstract

Beginning in the wake of the Arab Spring that occurred in 2010, 3,070,000 Syrians have taken refuge in Turkey following the war and conflicts experienced in the region that is Syria. The country of Turkey, which as of today has four million people in different statuses like immigrant, asylum seeker, refugee, and temporary protection/guest who have become homeowners, hosts the most “asylum seekers” in the world at the same time. Temporary protection status, as an exceptional procedure under international law, has been provided to Syrian citizens taking refuge in Turkey. In other words, every need of theirs is accepted in the position of “guest” in the sense of being met by the state, because the temporary protection status assumes the victims of the Syrian war will return to their homes with the war’s end. However, the war in Syria has not yet come to an end, nor does its finish seem possible in the short term with current conditions. This situation reveals the temporary protection status to be non-sustainable. While on one side debates lead on related to the problems arising from temporary protection status in this process, on the other, debates related to granting citizenship to Syrians residing in Turkey who add value to the country have gained speed. However, the most neglected point in this process is perhaps “What do we think about the issue of giving Syrian individuals citizenship?” In this context our study is focused on the debates of citizenship from the eye of Syrians. How Syrians in Turkey evaluate the debates on citizenship and their convictions related to citizenship have been discussed from an analytical perspective with motion from qualitative research data conducted over 125 Syrians with different socio-economic levels from January to May 2017.

### Keywords

Turkey • Immigration • Syrians • Citizenship • Temporary protection

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Following the war and conflicts experienced in Syria in 2011, 3,070,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey (İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2017). Temporary protection status was given to Syrians seeking refuge in Turkey as an exceptional procedure in international law. On one hand, while driving discussions related to problems sourcing from the temporary protection status in this process, discussions related to providing citizenship to Syrians residing in Turkey who offer added value to the country have gained speed on the other hand. However, perhaps the most neglected issue in this process has been “What are Syrians’ thoughts on the issue of being granted citizenship?” In this context, our study focuses on how Syrians in Turkey evaluate discussions on citizenship and their convictions related to citizenship.

Although the origins of the concept of citizenship have also been taken as far as ancient Greece, the Enlightenment, French Revolution, and organization of nation states in a modern sense have been effective in the emergence of the concept of citizenship. This development prepared the groundwork for the concept of citizenship to emerge in the modern sense as a result of symbolic equality conceptualized in the claim of the alleged end of privileges following the French Revolution (Kaya, 2003, p. 49). An understanding was gained following the 20th century that defined and organized the relations of the state with the individual together with structuring the nation states that had emerged as political organizations.

Turkey has also opened its doors to outside migrants coming from the Balkans and Caucasus at different times. In addition to being Muslim, the most important characteristic of immigrants coming to Turkey is the in the form of being Turkish or of Turkish descent. Turkish modernity prefers the republican version of citizen-based nationalism for building a new identity on the new nation-based state (Baban, 2009, pp. 61–62). According to Vardar (2009, p. 97), Turkish citizenship is also historically a combination of “ethnic citizenship,” which carries exclusionary features in the tradition of German nationalism, and “contractual political citizenship,” which is a politically inclusive model of French nationalism (republicanism). The given forms that this construction process has produced also have decisive importance, especially in discussions about Syrians.

The migration flow directed from Syria after 2011 has been a breaking point in terms of immigrants turning to Turkey. The Turkish government has given Syrians (due to the geographical restriction imposed by the 1951 Geneva Convention) temporary protection status as an exceptional procedure in international law with the thought that this process would soon be over (Turkish Grand National Assembly’s Human Rights Investigation Commission, 2012, p. 4). However, the temporary protection status has also been seen as unsustainable in the time that has followed. Indeed, following the speech given by Turkey’s President Erdoğan in Kilis on July 2,

2016, the possibility of citizenship being given to Syrians also was placed first on the agenda. Negative responses came to this proposal following its explanation. Research performed in relation to this subject also revealed the local people to be against offering citizenship to Syrians (Hakan, 2016; Erdoğan, 2014, p. 41). Alongside this, direct contact with this topic, as well as Syrians' attitudes and opinions related to citizenship, have been ignored. In this context, the problem of the study is to form determinations of the views of Syrians in Turkey on the topic of citizenship, the fields legislating the problem, and resolution proposals related to these.

The qualitative research was performed between January and May 2017 over 125 Syrians residing in Konya from different socio-economic levels with temporary protection status. The semi-structured interview technique has been used in the interviews. Sixty-eight Syrians were reached using the snowball sampling technique, and 57 Syrians using the quota sampling technique. Different criteria have been considered in selecting the sample, such as gender, age, education, income level, occupation, and residency in Syria. The data obtained in the research has been interpreted using the discourse analysis method in order to provide the opportunity of expressing the participants' perceptions and thoughts related to the topic and how they make sense of this.

Before entering the discussion on citizenship, the research also posed the question "Would you like to return to Syria again in the case of war in Syria coming to an end?" was asked to the participants. More than half the participants expressed wanting to go back to their homeland in the case of peace prevailing and security being provided in their country. The possibility of returning has been qualified as a rather remote possibility due to the environment of war and conflict already in Syria and which is expected to last for a long time. This situation reflects the demands of citizenship. Almost all participants were seen to have a positive view of Turkish citizenship being given to Syrians.

The qualities that draw forth in the demand of citizenship can be sorted as the children's future, being officially employed (social security), officially being able to open a business, non-disruption of the established order, and better living conditions.

When looking at the topic from the angle of citizenship criteria, all participants who want Syrians to be given citizenship emphasized the common criteria of excluding beggars and criminals. When excluding this common emphasis, participants were seen to prioritize their own positions in the criteria of citizenship. According to this, the great majority declared ideas in the direction of "everyone must receive it and it cannot discriminate." (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Başbakanlık, Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, 2013, p. 31; 2014, p. 63). In this regard, the majority of Syrians in Turkey belonging to the lower income group economically and their having a low level of education is quite a significant factor.

Syrians can be renounced from neither citizenship nor being in Turkey. Participants expressed the alternative of dual citizenship as a solution in this case. Together with the different justifications put forth, the majority of participants think dual citizenship is more appropriate for themselves. In the case of dual citizenship, more than half of the participants say they would want to return to Syria for elections, while others think otherwise. The main justification from these segments is the insecurity of the political institution.

The majority of participants respect the decision related to the negative view from more than 80% of the local population on granting citizenship to Syrians; in fact, they find the public in the right according to themselves yet seem to be waiting for empathy to be established on this issue. The main reason for this opposition has been emphasized as the negativities caused by risk groups. Additionally, the number of those giving voice to the fact that granting citizenship to Syrians is a win for Turkey is also quite large. Evaluations of the topic in terms of human rights and Islamic siblinghood are also present.

As a result, the refugees becoming permanent in Turkey is clearly visible when considering the current conditions and war environment in Syria. As such, clearly identifying the legal status of Syrians is extremely handy.

In this context, two proposals have come forth in the discussions related to Syrians' legal status. Granting refugee status to Syrians is one of these proposals. For the validity of this status, Turkey must remove the geographical conditions placed by the 1951 Geneva Convention, and Syrians must bring to life the necessary official procedures in order to benefit from this status. However, international contracts of which Turkey is a party and the Western institutions these contracts address will intervene with sanctions and audits; in other words, intervention is predestined in Turkey's internal affairs. When considering the attitude exhibited by the West and the segments that have given support in Turkey's struggle with terror and terror organizations, especially after the July 15 coup attempt, the contribution of such an arrangement should be examined through all dimensions that contribute to what will provide a solution to the problem.

The second is granting citizenship to Syrians, one of the areas where discussions on this topic were most intense. However, the local public was not seen to be warm to this proposal. No clear answers were found on the points of justifications presented related to the reasons for this opposition and the consistency of these justifications. The discussions were seen to form around rhetorical criticisms mostly directed at the assumed mental patterns of the process of nation-state building, vote-based political debate, and asylum seekers being a burden. This point (together with the criteria debate) stands out from the secular perspective: Whether wanting a proposition or religious siblinghood, granting citizenship to Syrians is among the available options in terms of both economic gains and real politics.

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