

Turkey's Syrian Youth and Higher Education*

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Refugee children and youth, are of the main subjects of migration which is one of the world's most significant humanitarian issues. Education is a fundamental human right and liability that has to be provided by the governments to children and youth who constitute more than the half of the refugee population. Generations who are deprived of this unique right which is also a hope for the school-aged population for the future, would likely face difficulties to contribute constructing a humane and productive future both for themselves and for the society they will be living among. Today, although refugees have certain rights in accordance with the international law, they live in the 'purgatory' between their past and future. This situation increases the need for public policies locating refugees at the center. At this point, education is an indispensable key to change that purgatorial situation for children and youth who have the strong will and aspiration to build a new life.

Today, Republic of Turkey hosts almost a three-million-population of Syrians. This hosting made the fact clearer that these newcomers have some certain rights beyond being 'temporary guests'. As also pointed out by the academic studies regarding this issue, it should not be neglected that the due to the prolonged nature of the crisis, Syrian refugees are in the state of expecting permanence. The probability of permanence for Syrian population who are juristically under 'temporary protection status' in our country needs to be taken into consideration while constructing the country's future public policies for the mutual needs, demands and expectations of these individuals and of the country. Now, it has become an essential need to place education on the basis of public policies of our country which are intended to provide a new life to the people coming from Syria.

Being a signatory to various international conventions, Turkey recognizes the right to education for children who came to our country hoping to start a new life. According to the Convention on the Right of the Child (Article 2-1): *"States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status."* Accordingly, article 22-1 concerning the rights of refugee children indicates: *"States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that a child who is seeking refugee status or who is considered a refugee in accordance with applicable international or domestic law and procedures shall, whether unaccompanied or accompanied by his or her parents or by any other person, receive appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance in the enjoyment of applicable rights set forth in the present Convention and in other international human rights or humanitarian instruments to which the said States are Parties."*

In Articles 22-1 and 22-2 of Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees dated 1951, it states and underlines the significance of right to education as *"The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education"* and *"The*

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Contracting States shall accord to refugees treatment as favorable as possible, and, in any event, not less favorable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances, with respect to education other than elementary education and, in particular, as regards access to studies, the recognition of foreign school certificates, diplomas and degrees, the remission of fees and charges and the award of scholarships”.

International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that we are a signatory of, also states in Article 13-1 that *“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to education. They agree that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”.* They further agree that *“education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups, and further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace”.*

In the European Convention on Human Rights, Protocol-1 to the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Article 2, it is also emphasized as; *“No person shall be denied the right to education. In the exercise of any functions which it assumes in relation to education and to teaching, the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions”*

The right to education as indicated by all of these international conventions, was attempted to be implemented within all significant decisions in order to support Syrian children’s access to education by Turkey during the time that migration from Syria to Turkey accelerated. After a thorough review of literature, it is observed that the regulations focusing on short term solutions have evolved into more permanent and productive solutions after the year 2013. The Law on Foreigners and International Protection, entered into force in 2014 and the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) established following the Law, reinforced the implementations of many rights for Syrians including provisions for access to education.

During that process, Circular on Educational Activities Targeting Foreigners, dated 23 September 2014, numbered 2014/21, published by MEB (Ministry of National Education), has been the primary step to support and regulate the access to education. Following all these positive steps, in the 2016/17 education year, around 496.426 of the 833.039 school-aged Syrian children who have been enrolled in Temporary Education Centers (TEC’s) and state schools, have been successfully incorporated into Turkish education system.

These regulations on basic education should preferably be supported by higher education policies. Although the number of Syrian citizens under temporary protection between the ages 19-24 is reported (DGMM, 2016) to be 391.781 by August 2016, the number of Syrian citizens registered to a higher education program is 9.684 (Turkish Higher Education Council, 2016). Taken into consideration that the number of Syrian teenagers between 15-18 is 241.711 (DGMM, 2016), and the population whose higher education is interrupted by the five-year civil war, it is clearly seen that the higher education policies have a direct impact on a big number of people.

The issue of Syrian youth’s access to higher education should be considered in three separate aspects. The first one is to provide support in order to facilitate their transition to higher education after basic (elementary and secondary) education. The main problem in this transition is the equivalency issue, since the majority of the Syrian teenagers -approximately 66%- are being educated at the TEC’s; they are not Turkish state/private school graduates; or that they had fulfilled their education in Syria. According to the *“Circular on Educational Activities Targeting Foreigners”*

(2014/21), published by MEB (Ministry of National Education), the basic education for Syrian students in Turkey is provided through two path-ways; at the state schools or at TEC's that follow a revised Syrian curriculum in Arabic. For these TEC graduates following a different curriculum than the Turkish one, "Temporary Education Centers High School Proficiency and Equivalency Exam" is held by MEB for the last two years is also a very important step. Besides this Equivalency Exam, MEB encourages and supports the students to register at the Turkish state schools that are free of charge. It is a major part of the road map targeting the integration and adaptation of Syrian students to Turkish state schools and thus the Turkish education system declared by MEB in September 2016 particularly in order to prevent possible problems (such as language barrier, equivalency and integration problems etc...) that the first generation of immigrants experienced in the elementary education level.

The second topic on access to higher education is the support of Turkish Higher Education Council on the issue. The decisions taken since 2013 to include and support Syrian students in the higher education system follows one another. The main problems in this period of time could be stated as; Turkish language barrier/deficiency of students, lack of documents, information and guidance, and financial difficulties despite the will to keep on higher education studies. The opportunities offered to include students lacking necessary documents with special student status and facilitate their access to education is also a notable measure. Another example for the support of Turkish Higher Education Council is the meeting held to examine the acceptance of Syrian students to eight higher education institutions (Çukurova, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaraş Sütçü İmam, Kilis 7 Aralık, Harran, Mersin, Mustafa Kemal and Osmaniye Korkut Ata Universities) and start programs in Turkish language or other foreign languages in the framework of overseas students' acceptance. This meeting and the other similar efforts reflect the Council's progressive ongoing efforts for Syrian students to access higher education.

The main option for access to education for Syrian students to register 114 state and 76 private universities in Turkey is through entering foreign student exam for the acceptance of overseas students programs within the procedures revised for Syrian students. The requirements and process for registration and admissions are announced on the websites of the universities and executed directly by them. The education fees of all the students entitled to study at the state universities with valid foreign identity cards (beginning with 99) are covered by Prime Ministry Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities.¹

Besides the education fees, Prime Ministry Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities also provides monthly scholarships for covering education and accommodation costs. Thus, the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative which is the biggest scholarship program of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, supports the Syrian refugees' access to higher education in collaboration with Prime Ministry Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities.

And the third topic is, in addition to the institutional regulations, informing the public correctly about the issue. In our country, higher education is a competitive field on which families spend great amounts of effort and money for the future of their children. It should be conveyed to each and every group of the society that access to education for the newcomer Syrian population is a human right. Access to education beyond being a human right; the social, economic and cultural contributions of

¹ Established on 6 April 2010 as a public institution having the status of under secretariat associated with the Prime Ministry, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities assumed the duties of coordinating efforts aimed at our citizens, kins and related communities abroad and students studying in Turkey with international scholarship, and improving services provided and activities carried out in these fields. (<https://www.ytb.gov.tr/kurumsal.php>)

the refugees to our country in both short and the long term aspects should be emphasized within the relatively positive progressing social acceptance until today.

For the necessity to support access to higher education, there are various reasons stated in the related literature. The first point to be underlined is to support the hopes of victims of forced displacement and to make a positive impact on their desire to set up a good life for themselves and their family for the future. Higher education, particularly at this point, supports the hopes for a better future and social adaptation positively. The direct relation between education and income status also increases the hopes to live in better conditions.

According to a report of the World Bank, a year of increase in the average level of education, has an effect on the GDP of 0,39 % in short term and 12 % in the long term. Furthermore, higher education creating a more qualified potential, contributes the country's social capital and infrastructure. Especially in this sensitive age range, the protective side of higher education is that young people who have hopes for a better future, would less likely approach terror organizations and the results by means of the safety of the country should seriously be considered.

The increasing number of immigrants and diversity in higher education, their access and participation to be evaluated as an acquisition for the societies have an undeniable impact on the visibility of the positive contributions of the immigrants to the society. For this reason, all these humanitarian and social determinations should be well conveyed to the public and it has to be emphasized that as a matter of fact, the provided support for the Syrian youth has a legal basis, limits and certain conditions like all the other public supports. It should be kept in mind that the hopes of Syrian children and youth, with whom we will share a common future in our country, should be supported not only for their own personal development but also for the future of the society they will live in.

As of February 2017, Istanbul is hosting 466.301 Syrians, the biggest Syrian refugee population in Turkey, outgrowing the numbers near border cities. Istanbul is not only Turkey's biggest city, thus the capital of higher education which is accommodating 9 state and 33 foundation universities and 777.631 students. There are around 3.200 registered Syrian university students in Istanbul and Istanbul University is alone hosting one third of them. University, as the oldest and biggest state university of Turkey, has 7.600 foreign students from 139 different countries and the most populated group is the Syrian students. Considering 693 Syrian students enrolled to İstanbul University last year, just within a year Syrian students has increased significantly over the 2015-2016 academic year.

Considering the "purgatory" status and conditions of Syrian students, Istanbul University has significant duties and responsibilities within the above mentioned framework. Along with efforts to increase the enrollment rates, facilitating their engagement with their studies, campus and city, increasing their participation is very important. Orientation and support mechanisms are necessary from application to registration and all through their education in order to respond the diverse needs of students from refugee back grounds. It is of vital importance to increase Syrian youth's access and participation to higher education in order to contribute to their self-sufficiency, well-being and integration to host community.