



Peace, War and the World in European Security Challenges

Perceptions of Turkish Think-Tanks on the Syrian Refugees and Syrian War in Turkey: An Overview

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Aim of the study:

- **Perceptions of the leading Turkish think tanks on the Syrian refugee crisis**
Perceptions: their general outlook and key concerns on refugees.
- **CAVEAT:**
Refugees: Does not carry a legal meaning in this study.



1. To assess the threat perceptions of Turkish think tanks through their approach to Syrian refugees in Turkey.
2. To identify the underlying sources of *elite perceptions* of security in Turkey.

Key words: refugees, Syrian refugees, Syrian war, think tanks, Turkey, EU, security, perceptions, elites



Why focus on Syrian refugees in Turkey?

“Syrian refugee crisis”

- The Syrian war broke out in 2011
- **Since 2011, approximately 3.5 million Syrians have arrived in Turkey**
- EU (2016): 1.2 million asylum seekers
- **UNHCR (August 2018) report: Turkey currently hosts the largest number of refugees in the world.**

- **Turkish officials:** Many of the refugees may have to stay in Turkey indefinitely, and *people need to adjust themselves to this fact.*

Perceptions will matter



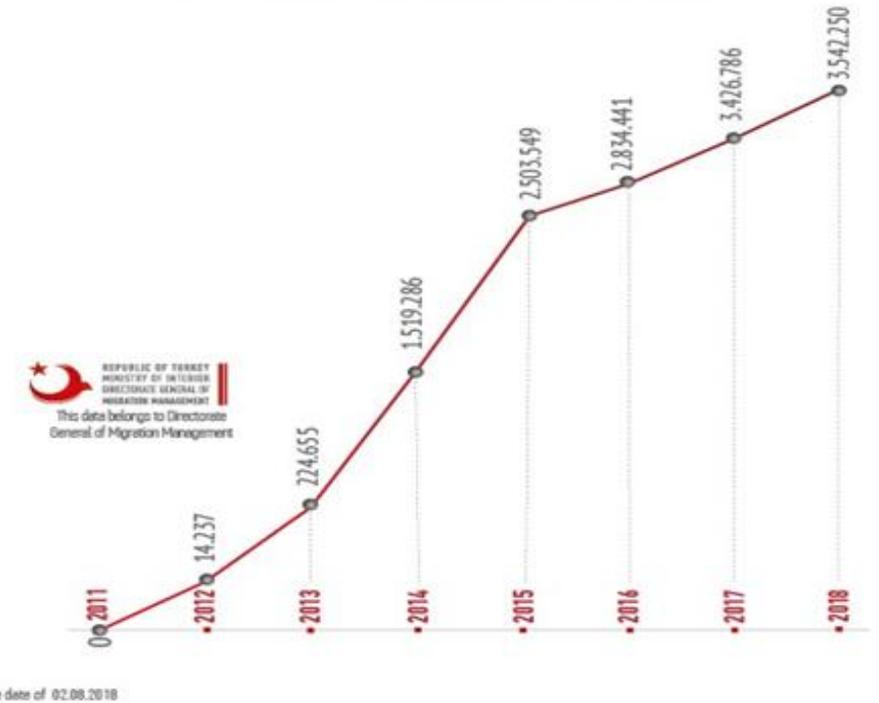
Why focus on Turkish Think Tanks?

- Literature on **Turkish society's** reactions to the refugees is growing.
- **No research on *elite perceptions*** of refugees.

FACT: Little research on think tanks exist worldwide

- Think tanks matter in opinion formation and policy making (e.g Villumsen 2007; McGann 2018; Abelson 2018)
- Studies on Turkish think tanks (e.g. Toktas and Aras 2012)

DISTRIBUTION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN THE SCOPE OF TEMPORARY PROTECTION BY YEAR



Source: ILO

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List of Turkish think tanks in this study:

- **BILGESAM** (2008) Center leaning (retired diplomats, retired military personnel, scholars)
- **EDAM** (2005) Liberal (journalists, economic analysts, area experts)
- **ORSAM** (2009) Center leaning, focuses on MENA region (area experts, scholars)
- **SETA** (2006) Conservative, strong ties with the government (area experts, journalists, scholars)
- **TEPAV** (2004) Liberal, focus primarily on economy (area experts, scholars)
- **TESEV** (1961) Liberal (area experts, scholars)



Selection criteria for Turkish think tanks

- Represent different ideologies on the Turkish political spectrum
- Well known among the Turkish political and academic circles
- Wide assortment of research interests, networks, as well as the number and quality of their publications
- Easily accessible on the world wide web
- Substantial amount of research on migration, Syrian war, and Syrian refugee crisis
- Research results available in multiple languages
- **Method of inquiry:** Selection of published materials available on the internet, descriptive



Turkish Think Tanks on Syrian Refugees: Turkey's Open Door Policy

Turkish Think Tanks on Syrian Refugees: Turkey's Open Door Policy

- **Turkey: open door policy for all Syrian refugees since the beginning of the conflict.**
- **All Turkish think tanks approve of Turkey's decision** with slightly different reasons
- **BILGESAM:** Refugee numbers are well beyond the psychological barrier, but Turkey's action was right in the legal and ethical sense.
- **ORSAM:**
 - Turkey never closed down its borders for any reason, including security.
 - Turkey initially assumed that the refugees would not stay long, so they were let in based on humanitarian reasons, and did not have a legal pretext.
 - Later, the possibility of turning the refugee influx into an advantage has also reinforced the open door policy
 - Millions of refugees have forced Europe to take Turkey seriously as a form of self-preservation

Turkish Think Tanks on Syrian Refugees: Turkey's Open Door Policy

- **TEPAV:**
 - i. Turkey initially sought for a temporary solution, but later decided to explore the possibilities for integration.
 - ii. Turkey could not have prevented the war in Syria, and the ensuing civilian crisis is not its fault.
 - iii. Closing the doors would not have stopped the refugee inflow, and would have exacerbated the civilian casualties.



Turkish Think Tanks on Syrian Refugees: Turkey's Open Door Policy

- **EDAM:**
- Syrian refugees have a significant impact on the foreign policy decisions of Turkey
- **SETA:**
- Turkey is not exceptional in its actions: The sheer number of refugees would have caused problems in any part of the world.
- Turkey has adopted a line between obligations and choices
- Syrian refugees have a great influence on the foreign policy choices of Europeans as a security concern



Turkish Think Tanks on Syrian Refugees as viewed by the Turkish society

Syrian Refugees as viewed by the Turkish society

The society's views on Syrian refugees as depicted by Turkish think tanks

Pessimistic



Optimistic

- SETA: the most optimistic
- The other think tanks are more cautious



Syrian Refugees as viewed by the Turkish society

- **SETA:**
 - Most Turkish people display a humanitarian point of view toward refugees
 - A few people are hostile because
 - i. They have ties with and benefit from the Assad regime, and seek to provoke the local people
 - ii. They seek to use the refugees as a political rent
- Political opponents act “irresponsibly” by pursuing “populist,” “nationalist,” “sectarian” or “anti-Islam” discourses against the refugees



- A significant topic of debate for Turkish think tanks
- General concern about the clarity of the refugee status
- **SETA:** Further complications caused by the use of different concepts by public authorities and media

- **TEPAV:** Current framework on refugees/immigrants is outdated; not sufficient for the current situation.
- Transitory measures (e.g. temporary protection)
 - i. Succeed in addressing the most pressing problem
 - ii. Increase the compatibility of Turkish laws with EU norms on immigration and asylum
- BUT

- **TEPAV (cont.ed):**
- Transitory measures technically not covered under the current legal system
- **Other think tanks:** similar points raised by TEPAV
- *Failure to settle the legal status of refugees will exacerbate the existing problems later.*

- **BILGESAM:** Turkish people fear being exposed and feel vulnerable to potential terror attacks perpetrated by terrorist organizations (e.g. ISIS, PKK/KCK).
- Such public fear is not baseless given earlier explosions, bombings and other terrorist attacks in various border locations, (e.g. Cilvegözü [2013], Ceylanpınar [2019] and Reyhanlı [2019])
- Border controls and security need improvement ASAP



Cilvegözü 2013



Reyhanli 2019

- **BILGESAM:** Tighten up identification controls at the camps to prevent security leaks.
- **SETA:** Terrorist organizations (e.g. ISIS) can increase the securitization of refugees by encouraging people to associate them with violence and terrorism.



- **TEPAV:** Syrian refugees and increasing infant death rates in Turkey
- **The large number of refugees contribute to the problem**
- **Refugees are hardest hit by its effects**
- **Refugees have free access to all levels of healthcare like Turkish citizens, BUT**
 - i. language barrier
 - ii. lack of education
 - iii. psychological distress
 - iv. decreasing physician-patient ratio
 - v. unawareness of available free vaccination programs

make it difficult to utilize the system to its fullest, and increases the risk of infant death.

- **TEPAV, ORSAM, BILGESAM:** The increased risk of violence between Syrians and the local people is serious
- **ORSAM:** Greatest security risk: Public reactions against the refugees turning into mass violence through provocation.
- **BILGESAM:** Most refugees live outside the camps and reside in shantytowns as closed communities, which compounds this risk.
 - There is the possibility of a violence spiral forming between the locals and the Syrians, if not checked.
 - **Public outbursts can increasingly encourage the refugees to take matters into their own hands, and try to establish their own security and justice system that would scare and provoke the local communities even further.**

- Refugees living in shantytowns:
 - isolation from the local people increases security risk
 - significant delays in their incorporation into the Turkish society
 - explicit adjustment problems based on language, culture and lifestyle differences
 - evokes [negative] reactions from Turkish people
- **BILGESAM:** The appearance of formerly uncommon social practices like **polygamy** and increasing rates of **polygamy induced divorces** in those **regions with high refugee concentrations**. (An estimated 20% of all divorces in border cities)

Syrian Refugees and Demographic Change

- Rapid demographic changes triggered by the **high concentration and birth rates of refugees** increase perceptions of insecurity for people living in border provinces.
- **ORSAM and BILGESAM:**
 - The perception of becoming a minority at home getting stronger among people
 - Syrians in border provinces change the delicate demographic structure, and exacerbate the feeling of insecurity among the locals.
- Kilis (19 September 2019): 116.025 Syrian refugees **81.40%** of the city population
- Istanbul (19 September 2019): 548.926 **3.6%** of the city population
<https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>

- Most Turkish think tanks are cautious to comment on the issue
- Stress the need to weigh the pros and cons of the phenomenon.
- Recognize/calculate underexplored risks
- **BILGESAM:** Large number of refugees
 - inflate the rents and house prices
 - increase the overall living costs in those locations with large refugee populations
- **The inflation rate among border cities is thus also higher than the rest of Turkey**

- **General opinion:** Turkey singlehandedly shoulders the responsibility of refugees
- It increases the burden on Turkish economy
- **ORSAM:** Turkey spent over \$5 billion between April 2011-March 2015. Some argue that it is roughly 2% of Turkey's gross domestic product. (excluding the aid distributed through civil society organizations operating beyond the Turkish border)

- **Public perceptions of the refugee impact on economy**
- **BILGESAM:** Turkish people are sensitive to the economic burden that refugees have brought:
 - According to a state university survey
 - **70%** of the people are convinced that Turkish economy suffers from the Syrian refugees.
 - **61%** of the people are averse to the idea that Syrians receive aid from the state, and argue that local poor people should receive it instead.
- **The greatest fear is that the refugees will take away their jobs**

- **TEPAV:** “Integration into the formal labor market has remained a hot potato, largely going unaddressed for the first five years of the crisis.” Since 2016, refugees are able to get work permits for legal employment

- The legal arrangement protects the local labor, but would also likely to drive up competition in the labor market

- **Potential contributions of Syrian refugees on Turkish economy:**
- **TEPAV:** There are an increasing number of Syrian entrepreneurs in Turkish economy.
- **2015:** The number of **Syrian entrepreneurs** reached its zenith (1,600+) i.e., **2.4% of the total number of new firms in Turkey.**
- **SETA:** Turkey should strive to keep those highly qualified Syrians in the country
- With their rich diversity, the Syrian refugees would positively contribute to the economic development of Turkey.

Conclusion



Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

- Turkish think tanks have significantly contributed to the ongoing debates on Syrian refugees in Turkey.
- They cover a broad range of topics on the issue (e.g. border security, infant death rates and public health, polygamy, and Turkish labor market)
- The intensity and intricacy of their discussions alone indicate the topic's level of complexity for Turkish elites.

Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

- Some common general characteristics:
 - 1. All discuss the refugees to some degree, but their level of involvement varies**
- Mainstream think tanks that tend to focus on classic security, strategy and foreign policy issues (e.g. BILGESAM and EDAM) publish on Syrian refugees, *but mostly approach the subject as a subset of the Syrian war and Turkish foreign policy.*

Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

1. (Cont.ed) Restrictions on doing research on Syrian refugees in Turkey has affected research output

- Subject treated as a sensitive national security issue by Turkey
- Earlier, all academic or other research on refugees depended on getting initial approval from Turkish authorities.
- These *bureaucratic restrictions no longer exist, but many researchers remain unaware of this change, and are hesitant to conduct research on the subject.*

Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

2. Some Turkish think tanks collaborate with/received support from other Turkish or foreign think tanks to produce their reports. (e.g. ORSAM-TESEV [2015], ORSAM-Konrad Adenauer [2014], TEPAV-Heinrich Böll Stiftung [2019])
- **Joint research suggests that the elite attitudes on Syrian refugees in Turkey are not insular and introverted, but convergent, and open to discussion and input from other (including foreign) institutions.**

Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

3. Many think tanks organized conferences (Bilgesam, ORSAM, SETA), roundtable discussions and briefings on refugees.

These activities are not covered in this study, but their outlines are available on each think tank's website.

Such meetings can indicate the level of their interest and willingness to inform and disseminate their ideas to other elites and the public.

Turkish think tanks: General characteristics

4. Reports on the classic security concerns (e.g. terrorist infiltration through refugee influx, border control) exist.

- **Turkish think tanks generally focus more on the humanitarian, social or economic issues related to the refugees**
- Warn about the need to discuss things delicately to avoid fanning any extremist tendencies and violent outbursts in public
- Are well aware of the complexity and sensitivity of the topic for both Turkey and beyond.

- 4. Recommend policymakers to act quickly and decisively to develop new policies that address the needs and realities of the situation.**
- Warn that failure to act quickly would almost certainly exacerbate the already significant difficulties in the years to come.

THANK YOU

