An Emergency Academic Support – Syrian Refugee Students in the Turkish Higher Education

Ahmet BARISCIL

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18662/rrem/2017.0901.03
An Emergency Academic Support – Syrian Refugee Students in the Turkish Higher Education

Ahmet BARISCIL

Abstract: Before the civil war broke out in Syria following the uprising in March 2011, Turkey and Syria had a rather good relationship permitting an easy crossing of the border and letting thousands of Syrian nationals to pursue their studies at the northern neighbor. With the deepening of the fights in Syria, the number of refugees flowing into the Turkish Republic was growing, and according to recent statistics, an estimated 3 million Syrian asylum seekers reside on Turkish soil. Some of them live in refugee camps, some of them with family members holding Turkish citizenship, and an increasing number of them made Turkey their home thanks to scholarship programs provided by the Turkish government, universities or civil society organizations. In our present paper, we would like to analyze the usage of the method of secondary data analysis the current situation of Syrian refugee students studying at Turkish universities. We would first concentrate on the statistical aspect of the issue using the tables provided by the Turkish pedagogical agent called Measurement, Selection and Placement Center (OSYM) and the Higher Education Board (YÖK), the total number of students and the academic and social background of those benefitting from the above opportunities. Later on, we project to highlight the main reason why a refugee can find Turkey an ideal place for his or her academic career and research, what their rights and duties and how can they contribute to the development of Turkey and the refugee community in that country. The story of refugee students in Turkey can prove how survivals of a disastrous tragedy can have a benefit from a quality education in order to be reintegrated into society and promote peace and understanding.

Keywords: Turkey, Syria, Refugee, Education.

1. Introduction

Turkey and Syria, these Middle Eastern nations do not only share a long common border but are known to have a joint past and a large number of cultural features. It is also important to note that both Syria had an ethnic Turkish (or Turkoman) minority and Turkey is home to a noticeable Arab-

1 PhD Candidate, Szent Istvan University, Gödöllő, Hungary, ahmetb121@gmail.com.
speaking community living near the Syrian border. Among the similarities between the countries, we can mention that they belong to the same sphere of Islamic civilization and due to this used to have a harmonious political and diplomatic relationship prior to the civil war. A part of this cooperation was the visible and mutual presence of students at various levels of national and higher education across the two nations.

Though the Republic of Turkey tried to play an active role to prevent a large-scale armed conflict after the beginning of the unrest first in the southern Syrian city of Deraa and other locations, later on, they were unable to stop the horrific scenes the world is still witnessing today. In the year of 2016, Turkey was obliged to intervene along its border, but the final resolution of the civil war can only base on the full cooperation of the international agents and parties involved in the conflict. Furthermore, it is in the interest of Ankara to find a quick solution to conclude the battles as it hosts according to the most conservative estimations up to 3 million asylum seekers and refugees are flowing in mass from other war-torn zones like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Among the refugees mentioned above, there is a high number of young people eager to learn and research the natural and social reality around them. By helping them, Turkey does not only have a group of loyal individuals, but it invests in the future of both the students and Turkish economy. Turkey has to look at these subventions as a grant or a venture. The refugee students for sure bring in a fresh look and new ways of understanding and addressing issues contributing to the reform of the Turkish higher education system. In our present paper, we would like to analyse how the increase in a number of the Syrian refugee students could change the pedagogical process at the Turkish universities. There is another aspect of the issue we would like to take into consideration, namely the impact of this phenomenon on the overall Turkish society. We would like to define whether the average Turk welcomes or fears the governmental scholarship programs or emergency academic support given to Syrian refugees.

2. Literature and Methodology

Due to the low number of Syrian students before the war, social scientists were not very much interested in their particular situation. Their number started to rise after 2014. As this is a very recent phenomenon, there is a shortage in an in-depth analysis of the case. Therefore, we would like to use our limited resources in order to highlight the main issues. We will use
An Emergency Academic Support – Syrian Refugee Students in the (...)  
Ahmet BARISCIL

special statistics on the number of Syrian students in Turkey given four our present study by Turkish pedagogical agent called Measurement, Selection and Placement Center (OSYM) and the Higher Education Board (YÖK), the rare scientific analyses and a set of short interviews with students of Syrian origin at the Karabuk University broadcasted on the Turkish national television called TRT. As an authentic document, we also utilize the Turkish governmental website promoting the scholarship program for Syrians.

First, we present the refugee crisis as such, then we compare the situation of Syrian students in Turkey before and after the war. Finally, we conclude on how to continue the ongoing policies of the Turkish government.

3. Influx of Syrian refugees to Turkey

The Syrian civil war started in early 2011 with some sporadic demonstrations in the southern city of Deraa inspired the so-called Arab Spring after angry crowds of opposition have ousted the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents. Syria, divided by religious and ethnic lines of demarcation, was and is ruled by the Al-Asad family. The regime throughout its existence drew criticism from the international public and was already hit by a violent uprising of the sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood organization in 1982, ended by a so-called Hama massacre leaving dead 1,000 government troops and an estimated 2-40,000 insurgents and civilians. After Hamas bloody repression in 1982, the Brotherhood was decapitated, pursued and defeated. The Syrian Parliament passed a law through which anyone who formed part of the Muslim Brotherhood was sentenced to death. (Alcoverro, 2012, p. 1)

The first Syrian refugees, 252 persons made their entry into Turkey on 29th April 2011, and a smaller refugee camp has been established near the border in the Turkish province of Hatay (Kap, 2014, p. 30). A month later a massive influx of asylum seekers have shown up at the border as the forces loyal to the Al-Asad family ran down an important urban center in the north-west of Syria, Jisr al-Soughour (Oweis, 2011). By the month of November of the same year, the number of Syrian refugees on Turkish soil had reached 10,000. The six temporary residences assigned to the Syrian refugees hosted up to 19,000 people around the end of the year. One can say that on a daily basis 3-6,000 destitute persons cross the border letting the number of refugees to grow to 2,969,669 displaced according to the United Nations in March 2017 (UNHCR, 2017) or even more according to certain
estimates. The scope and benefits of Turkeys temporary protection status were expanded and better outlined by the Regulation on Temporary Protection (TP) passed in October 2014, which further strengthened humanitarian aid by providing those granted temporary protection with access to health and education systems, labor markets, social assistance, interpretation and other similar services. (Içduyuğ & Millet, 2016, p. 4)

A large number of incoming Syrian young people forced the Turkish government to act. Though there are still young Syrians who could not attend classes, a certain number of nurseries, primary and secondary schools have been established within the walls of the refugee camps. For instance, the Islahiye Refugee Camp, 30 teachers are working with 710 pupils making classes overcrowded (Ozden, 2013, p. 7). Though there are teachers among the Syrian refugees, only the ones licensed in Turkey can educate since they have to follow the program of the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Universities were not opened in the camps, but the mainly Turkish-speaking Turkomans were let into seven higher educational institutions near the border without any proof of their studies in Syria as many of them ran away from home without their documents.

4. Syrian students in Turkey before the civil war

Prior to the civil war in Syria occurred in the 2010s, the number of Syrian students following their studies at Turkish universities was relatively low. There was not any special circumstances that could either raise this number or differentiate it from the number of any other foreign student community. Though the Turkish-Syrian political and diplomatic relations were on the rise, the border was busy with crossing traders, visitors and occasional tourists, they did not see much traffic in terms of Syrian student. It is also evident that exception made for some top higher education institutes scattered around Ankara and Istanbul, most Turkish universities did not seem to be very appealing for most of the Syrian young people. Most Turkish universities were recently created with less experienced staff and less renowned than many other institutions outside Turkey, in Europe or North America for instance.

Having said so, a slight increase can be observed while observing the number of Syrian youth pursuing their studies in Turkey since the academic year of 2007-2008. In that very year, 260 Syrian were registered by the Turkish authorities of OSYM and YOK. The following year 291 Syrians started their schooling. This means an increase of 11.19%. The next year spells and equal gain despite the beginning of the last global economic crisis.
In the academic year of 2009-2010, 339 inscriptions are shown by the statistics of the relevant Turkish government agents. In this year the percentage of augmentation was as high as 11.64%. In September 2010, not less than 455 Syrians were present at the opening ceremonies of Turkish universities. This increase was slightly higher than the average of previous two years with 13.42%. The following year meant a similar positive change. The number of Syrian nationals was growing from 455 to 608, representing an increase of 13.36%. The following academic year, the first one during which the first Syrians started to take refuge in Turkey could slightly anticipate the years to come with an increase of 15.82%, from 608 to 962 students.

Examining the above statistics, one can say that the academic year of 2013-2014 signifies the real rupture, that is the very moment until what time we can call the era the pre-war period. This means that the impact of war on the number of undergraduates is delayed by at least two years, and if we consider the dramatic change of the year of 2014-2015 than we might modify this number to three years.

**Table 1. Number of Syrian nationals studying at Turkish universities according to OSYM and YOK**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>962</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>1785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>5560</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>9689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>app. 15,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The one trying the study this pre-war period considerably lacks information. Already the low number of students and the problem-free integration of these few hundreds did not provoke polemics or even the slightest attention from the side of the general Turkish society or the academicians. Syrian students due to their cultural similarities to Turks went almost totally unnoticed.
If we come to the motivation and reasons why some Syrians preferred to go abroad to study, there is the very evident answer: the really low level of the Syrian higher education system. Alessandro Bacci, an Italian expert, then based in Damascus, the Syrian capital even warned the Syrian government about this issue as one of the main challenges of the near future. Syria at that time started to be overpopulated with 18.5 million inhabitants out of whom not less than 36% was under 15, meaning that more than the half of the population could fall into age categories of people typically served by the national and higher education of a country. (Bacci, 2009, p. 1) Syria seemingly was not prepared to deal with this dramatic demographic change and was lacking the appropriate infrastructure to house among other facilities- universities. The budget of the education system in Syria in 2000 was as low as 12.6%. In 2005, it was raised by the Syrian government then realizing the depth of the problem to 15.7%. (Bacci, 2009, p. 2) On the one hand it was not enough, on the other, it was too late. The ones willing to have a good quality higher education were more or less forced to quit the country and run for scholarships abroad. The essential problem was that the most popular lecturers attracted large crowds and the few universities were unable to accommodate the students. This meant that certain classes provoked the interest of up to 3000 students. The number of young people enrolling higher education has increased by 50% in the period between 2003 and 2007. At the University of Damascus already having 120.000 undergraduates this spelled a real disaster. In the academic year of 2008-2009, despite the growing economic crisis in the world not less than 264.550 were accepted by the five major higher education institutions in the Arab country. (Bacci, 2009, p. 3) So, during and after this period, not only the ones who were looking for quality education opted for studies abroad, but even the less fortunate who were not allowed into the classrooms.

5. Syrian students in Turkey since the outbreak of the civil war

As we already referred to it earlier, the academic years of 2013-2014 or even that of 2014-2015 show the real rupture and dramatic increase. In 2014, contrarily to the gains of 10 to 20% of the previous years, an increase by 300% is observed pushing the number of Syrian nationals at Turkish universities all of a sudden to 5.560. The proportion of increase decreases the next year, but according to the statistics provided exclusively to us for our present study by the Turkish authorities of OSYM and YOK, some
9.689 Syrian students were detected at various universities in Turkey. If the refugee crisis does not cease, there would further grow in the coming years.

What are the main reasons behind the slight delay in the above-detailed increase of Syrian refugee students? First of all, the first group of asylum seekers started to arrive in 2011 and most probably planned to stay in Turkey for a short period. They might have projected to stay a few months and then return to their home country as the hostilities are over. There were hopes to this to happen during the first one or two years of the conflict. Some other Syrians looked at Turkey as a country giving temporary shelter and were already planning to move further West. University education is a long term goal, and temporary residents do not necessarily seek it. Second, there was and is an important language barrier. Though a certain number of refugees come from the Turkish-speaking ethnic Turkoman minority of Syria, few were the Syrians who mastered the Turkish language at the level required by the Turkish universities. Therefore, the Turkish government tried to provide adequate training for the Syrian youth, but as the Turkish authorities realized too late that there is need from the side of the refugees, the courses could only start in the year of 2014 in most of the country. It was also a challenge for the authorities to find the required number of qualified language and literature teachers willing to teach under harsh working conditions (hot weather, poor infrastructure, remote border areas where the refugee's camps are mostly placed). Third, the lack of finances from the side of the asylum seekers. Syrian refugees in Turkey can be put into three main social categories. The first group is comprised of wealthy traders from the larger northern urban areas such Aleppo who could mostly leave the country with plenty of money and who could start a decent life and based themselves in the main centers of the country. The second is made up by Syrian having family ties in Turkey, either Turkomans of Arabs linked to the ethnic Arab minority tribes scattered along the border in the provinces of Hatay or Sanliurfa. The third and largest group is that of the destitute who are obliged to stay in the camps. Especially this latter one could not think of education without the proper scholarship programs. A fourth delaying factor was the question of inner need. To understand this, we have to ponder over the social strata to which the refugees belong to. A considerable part of the asylum seekers come from the northern rural areas, some of the refugees are even illiterate. It takes time for these subgroups of the refugees to realize that the only way to fully integrate into the Turkish society is through education.

If we analyze the present situation, we can say that there 1.3 million Syrian refugee children between the age 6 and 18, out of whom only 500,000
can attend formal education. This is a said 38.5% of the total. Two third of these children are schooled in camps, 186,000 are integrated into normal Turkish schools. (DHA, 2017) That means that only 14.3% of Syrian refugee kids are co-educated with their Turkish counterparts. If we take a look at higher education, the percentages are even lower, but there are a number of positive and hopeful phenomena, too. At a specialized conference, Prof. Dr. Yekta Sarac, the head of the Turkish Higher Education Board (YOK) has noticed that in the current academic year of 2016-2017, there are almost 15,000 Syrian nationals studying at Turkish universities, out of whom 5,000 are females. (DHA, 2017) The fact that one third of those attending classes at Turkish universities are young ladies is a good basis for optimism as most Syrians are still attached to old values and are less keen on educating their daughters. Sarac also mentioned that now there are up to 2,000 Syrians at private universities run by foundations. Another interesting aspect of the Syrian presence at Turkish universities is the visible appearance of Syrian teachers. As of now, there 400 academicians from the Arab country working at Turkish higher education institutions. (DHA, 2017) We have to add to this statistics that teachers in Syria are more targeted by the belligerents than people of many other professions. As they are in danger, they are more ready to flee the country. (Seydi, 2013, p. 226)

It is also interesting to look at the geographical aspect of the above statistics. During the first few years, the refugees could start their studies at smaller and less renowned universities located near the Syrian border. Today, the three most popular universities among the Syrians are two prestigious institutions: the University of Gaziantep and the University of Istanbul. Though Gaziantep is not far from Syria, it provides students with high-quality curriculum, whereas the University of Istanbul is one of the oldest and best places in Turkey. The third university on this list might surprise many. This is the University of Karabuk. Though Karabük is small place and is relatively far from their home country. According to their confessions broadcasted on the Turkish national TV of TRT, they choose Karabuk University because Arabic language social media outlets give very good coverage of the campus closed to nature, friendly and a good place to learn Turkish and socialize with locals to get proficiency in the language. Syrian student underline that their choice is influenced by their friends and they start to congregate to a place where they are warmly welcomed. (TRT, 2017)

To reinforce the presence of Syrians at Turkish universities, it is imperative to help them with scholarship programs as one of the main factors delaying their proliferation is indeed their material background. The Turkish government is launching such a program. The current inscription

46

period is until 31st March 2017 for the ones who want to start in September 2017. There a certain number of conditions to be fulfilled to get such a scholarship even though there are rumors stating that Syrians can study in Turkey without being qualified for it. The applicant must be accepted into a full-time undergraduate or postgraduate program should be under international protection given by the Turkish authorities or should have a residency permit in the country, cannot be supported by any other scholarship programs and should not be registered with a private university in order to obtain a government scholarship. The applicant has to produce the following documents: student certificate, passport and residency permit. For the ones having finished their secondary education in Turkey, it is also compulsory to show their graduation documents. (Turkey Scholarship, 2017)

As we can see, it is not without any condition that a Syrian refugee can get a Turkish governmental scholarship. This being a fact as we said it earlier- cannot stop false information the be reticulated. As the number of Syrians grow at Turkish universities, people uneasy with the supportive measures of the government are more and more vocal. For example, the scholarships worth 1200 TL (295 Euro) attracted very unhappy comments from social media users saying that there is not another country on Earth valuing more foreign citizens than their own nationals. Some of the Turkish opponents of this decision add that they even pay back their credits taken during their studies done years before and Syrians take easy money. (Ozdemir, 2016) The scholarship programs are necessary to promote the young Syrian refugees, but, as we see- it creates social frustration as Turkish higher education remain highly competitive and not easy to enter. Earlier in our paper, we were speaking about the three main subgroups of Syrian refugees in Turkey, namely the rich merchants leading an independent life, the ones having family ties in the country and the ones living in camps. Nowadays, the majority resides outside the camps. “The existence of 87 percent of Syrians outside the camps has led to the inevitable interaction with Turkish society and brought some anxiety. This not only gave rise to high levels of social, economical and political interactions but also reached what K. Kiriçi describes as the limits of hospitality.” (Erdogan, 2014, p. 67) So, if the limits of hospitality are reached, there is a higher chance to get to a situation of social tensions. Having said so, the number of atrocities or cases of discrimination against Syrian refugees in general and students, in particular, is still very low.
6. Conclusion

The Syrian higher education system was deteriorating in the early 2000s, the there was a demographic boom that met an inadequate schooling infrastructure. More and more Syrians opted by studies abroad, mainly in the West, but since 2006, the number of Syrians choosing the northern neighbour was rising. With a slight delay, around 2014, the asylum seekers established in Turkey following the brutal civil war started to appear at Turkish universities in mass helped by the governmental scholarship programs.

Turkey has to accept the idea that refugees would remain on its soil for long. Turkey has to profit from the presence of talented Syrian youth as there competitors in the world willing to get these people. We first think here of the European Union, the integration which is trying attract the most valuable part of the refugee population. Turkey has to give them long term perspectives with quality higher education and good employment option after their graduation. For this, Turkey first has to educate the refugees and sensible them. We mean that Turkey has to argue why it is better for them to remain in the country than to move to Europe. at the same time, Turkey has to educate its own population envying refugees for the support they might get. Of course, it would also include equal rights and duties for Turks and Syrians and more support for the ones who were born in Anatolia. The current infrastructure is good, but further increase in the number of Syrian students might provoke certain inevitable needs. On a long run, this might indulge in development an can be fruitful for the overall Turkish society.

On the other hand, The number of university graduates in Turkey is increasing, along with the number of unemployed university graduates. (Yavuzaslan, 2015; Yavuzaslan, et al., 2016) Therefore, it seems to be an economic burden for the Syrian migrants in Turkey. It seems difficult for Turkey to lift this economic burden in the long term. Therefore, various international organizations need to help Turkey.

References


