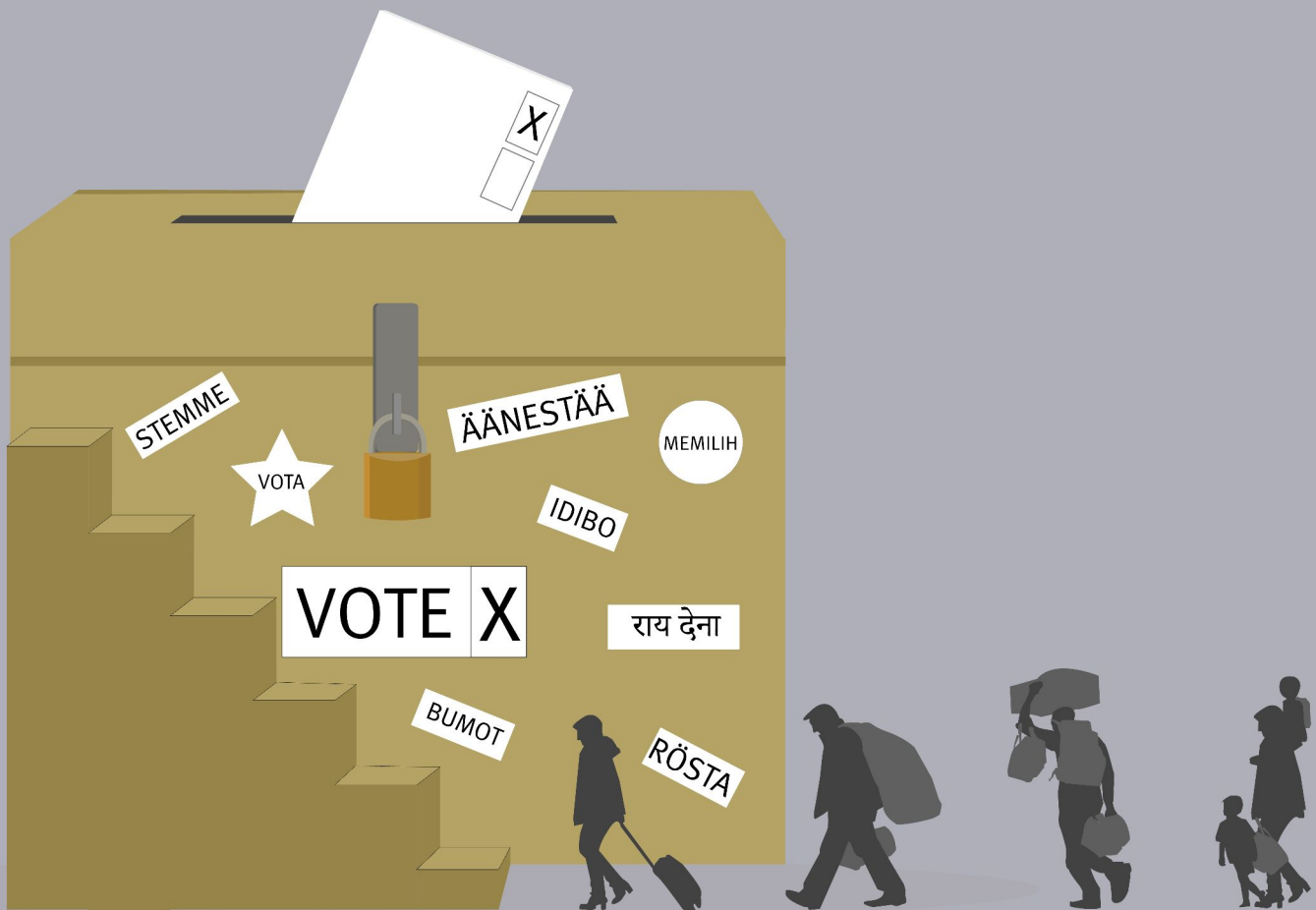


Political Participation of Refugees

The Case of Syrian Refugees in Turkey





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Ezra Mannix
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Abbreviations



AKP	Justice and Development Party
CHP	Republican People's Party
CSO	Civil society organization
DGMM	Directorate General of Migration Management
HDP	People's Democracy Party
MHP	Nationalist Movement Party
MSF	Médecins Sans Frontières
NCSROF	National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces
OCV	Out-of-country voting
TP	Temporary protection
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1. Introduction



This case study explores the opportunities and constraints facing Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey, and is part of a larger research project on the political participation of refugees (Bekaj and Antara 2018). First, it considers their participation in the political life and decision-making of their host country. Second, it explores their potential to contribute to democracy-building processes in Syria. The study is based on desk research of the relevant literature, as well as field research carried out in Istanbul and Gaziantep in May–July 2017. Qualitative data was gathered in one-to-one interviews, as well as a paper-based and online survey, in order to best capture the unique context of displaced Syrians in Turkey. Sixty-one Syrian refugees and asylum seekers participated in the research (52 men and 9 women), 13 of whom were based in Gaziantep, 13 in Istanbul, and 35 completed the questionnaire online.

Table 1. Case study respondents' profiles and locations

Research site	Syrian		TOTAL
	Male	Female	
Gaziantep	7	6	13
Istanbul	10	3	13
Online/written	35	0	35
TOTAL			61

The ethnicity, age and socio-economic background of the participants were monitored as far as possible. Ten respondents identified as Muslim Arab males with university diplomas. In addition, 29 per cent identified as members of one of the following groups: Kurdish, Sunni Arab, Druze or Turkmen. The rest identified as Arab. The majority of those employed were working legally, but there were some exceptions. Of these, two respondents, both female, bounced from job to job due to harassment or substandard wages, while two others were working illegally for friends or family. The vast majority (21) of respondents were aged between 18 and 45 and had been in Turkey for a period of one to five years.

Section 2 provides an overview of the host-country context, including a summary of Turkey's refugee and asylum policy, and the requirements for refugees' political participation and naturalization. Section 3 presents the key findings from the field research, focused on the perspectives of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers of their political participation in Turkey. In particular, the issues of access to citizenship, and formal and non-formal political



participation are examined. Section 4 outlines the Syrian context and delves into the issues of formal and non-formal political participation by the Syrian refugee diaspora in their country of origin, drawing on insights from the interviews and qualitative surveys. Finally, the study concludes with a set of recommendations on the political inclusion of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and country of origin.

2. Host-country context: Turkey



Turkey is host to the largest number of displaced Syrians in the world (UNHCR 2017). As of April 2017, 3.08 million registered Syrian refugees were living in Turkey (UNHCR 2017). This figure represents more than 3.5 per cent of the total population of Turkey and does not include the hundreds of thousands of irregular migrants. In addition, 300,000 are currently ‘pre-registered’, meaning that they are in the process of applying for temporary protection (TP). Thus, the actual number of displaced Syrians in Turkey could be more than 4 million.

At least 90 per cent of displaced Syrians live in urban areas, while only 8 per cent live in camps (European Commission 2017). Istanbul has the largest Syrian diaspora population (approximately 420,000), followed by the south-eastern provinces of Şanlıurfa, Hatay and Gaziantep, which host 402,000, 377,000 and 319,000 people, respectively. It is likely that Istanbul has far more Syrians due to economic pull factors. As a proportion of the total local population, the border province of Kilis has by far the highest percentage, with Syrians almost outnumbering the local population (130,000 locals compared to 122,000 registered Syrians). The average length of stay for Syrians in Turkey is approximately 3 years, and this is growing.

Turkey initially practiced an open-door policy with regard to accepting the flow of cross-border migrants, but this changed in 2016. Turkey has closed 17 of its 19 border crossings and is erecting a concrete border wall along its border with Syria (Coşkun and Butler 2016).

Overview of Turkey’s refugee and asylum policy

According to the Turkish Government, Syrian migrants are under ‘temporary protection’ and considered ‘guests of the state’. Turkey is party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its subsequent 1967 Additional Protocol. However, it attached a geographic restriction to its ratification: only displaced European nationals can be considered refugees, even though most countries assess the ‘situation’ of asylum seekers to determine eligibility for refugee status (United Nations 1967a). States had the option in 1951 to restrict the definition of asylum seekers to those from today’s Council of Europe member states, as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was originally formed to seek solutions for the 1.2 million refugees on the continent after the end of World War II. Governments were given the option of placing this geographic restriction, but only three— Hungary, Malta and Turkey—chose to do so. The 1967 Protocol was meant to apply the 1951 Convention without temporal or geographic limitations (United Nations 1967b). Turkey, however, acceded to the Protocol with the same reservations as it had put on the original Convention.

In principle, asylum seekers are given temporary residence in Turkey while the UNHCR evaluates their claims and works to resettle them elsewhere. Before 2012, refugees applied for ‘temporary asylum’ in Turkey while living in 30 ‘satellite cities’ and were required to apply for police permission to travel between cities. The complex bureaucracy meant long waiting times (Levitan 2009). A shortage of interpreters, lawyers and legal aid organizations meant those caught trying to cross the border illegally were detained without adequate representation and risked refoulement (Levitan 2009). Prior to the Syrian conflict, reports were rampant of police restricting asylum seekers’ access to the UNHCR and unlawful detentions and deportations (Eissenstadt 2011). Since the Syrian war, the UNHCR’s capacity in Turkey has been rendered largely symbolic as a ‘complementary’ protection actor. The organization makes resettlement referrals in tandem with the government, but the government-established Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), an ‘EU-style civilian agency’ established under the Ministry of the Interior with a legal mandate to take on and manage asylum cases, is the sole decision-maker (Refugee Rights Turkey n.d.).

Turkey’s Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which has been in effect since 2014, maintains this refugee status limitation but has added several forms of protected status (Zeldin 2016). TP status was codified in the Temporary Protection Regulation framework passed in 2014, which creates a type of dual recognition for displaced persons in Turkey from an international legal perspective. In theory, they are refugees/asylum seekers according to the international community but in practice they are ‘guests’ under TP according to the Turkish state. TP is the lowest rung on the resultant domestic legal hierarchy, below other categories such as ‘international protection’, ‘conditional refugees’ and ‘refugees’ (from Europe) (Erdoğan 2017).

In short, with this framework Turkey has created its own asylum system, under the supervision of the DGMM (Refugee Rights Turkey n.d.). TP status ‘grants beneficiaries the right to legal stay as well as some level of access to basic rights and services . . . acquired on a prima facie, group-basis, to Syrian nationals . . . originating from Syria’ (Refugee Rights Turkey n.d.). The TP system, while providing short-term protection and for humanitarian needs such as health care, does not guarantee civic and political participation. There is no stated duration for TP, and those who apply for it cannot apply for any other international protection status (Refugee Rights Turkey n.d.).

Requirements for refugees’ political participation and naturalization

Access to citizenship

In order to acquire Turkish citizenship, migrants must have resided in Turkey for an uninterrupted period of five years. Furthermore, they must speak an ‘adequate’ amount of Turkish, have a self-sustaining income or profession and not be an ‘obstacle’ to national security. They may also have to relinquish previous citizenships. The government can grant citizenship based on these requirements—or otherwise by the decision of a ‘competent authority’—although none of this guarantees a positive decision on naturalization (Turkish Citizenship Act 2009). Moreover, Turkish citizenship is not automatically gained by marriage: aliens must be married to a Turkish citizen for three years before being considered eligible (Turkish Citizenship Act 2009). While children born to stateless parents are usually given Turkish citizenship automatically, this does not apply to births of Syrian refugees (Baladi 2015).

Access to voting rights and political parties

The right to vote in Turkish local and national elections is only reserved for citizens. Approximately 70 per cent of the population of Turkey is of voting age (18 years old and above) (International IDEA n.d.). Voter turnout in Turkey is generally quite high: more



than 84 per cent voted in the 2015 parliamentary elections; voter turnout has not been below 75 per cent for more than 40 years (International IDEA n.d.); and 87 per cent of voters voted in the April 2017 constitutional referendum which gave the President of Turkey an expanded executive mandate (International Foundation for Electoral Systems n.d.).

Furthermore, any group of citizens over the age of 18 can form a political party. Parties must adhere to the 1982 Constitution and be approved by Turkey's constitutional court. However, parties are evaluated not under universal principles of democratic participation, but on the basis of ideologies such as 'Ataturk nationalism' and 'Turkishness', which has led to the dissolution of Kurdish parties that take a different approach to the 'Kurdish question' (Unaldi 2014). There is no political party in Turkey supported or represented by Syrian refugees in any official capacity, most notably because only Turkish citizens are constitutionally allowed to become party members or form parties (Constitution of Turkey 1983). Parties are mostly dependent on public financing, although they can collect funds from party membership fees and accept donations from Turkish citizens, trade unions, cooperatives and other non-state entities, which can contribute to campaigns (Constitution of Turkey 1983). Foreign organizations, foreign citizens and governments are forbidden from donating to parties. The fact that political parties are so reliant on public funding is to the detriment of smaller parties, given that a minimum 10 per cent threshold is required to hold seats in parliament and thus be entitled to critical public funding.

At the municipal level, political engagement with refugees occurs on an ad hoc, inconsistent basis that varies from municipality to municipality. Turkey's municipal legal code includes the concept of 'fellow-citizenship', which opens the door for municipalities to carry out activities for non-citizens. However, it does not make service provision for refugees mandatory (Erdoğan 2017). In particular, article 13 of Municipal Law 5393 states:

. . . fellow citizens shall be entitled to participate in the decisions and services of the municipality, to acquire knowledge about municipal activities and benefit from the assistance of the municipal administration. . . . The municipality shall perform the activities necessary to improve social and cultural relations between fellow citizens and to preserve cultural values.

However, the 2014 laws on international protection give little capacity to local authorities to provide services to refugees. As a result, most municipalities are reluctant to involve refugees in local decision-making and instead task their social assistance directorates with dealing with refugee issues. A recent survey of municipal authorities in Istanbul revealed that the language barrier is among the biggest perceived hindrances to refugees' participation in decision-making processes at the municipal level, and public language courses for Syrian refugees are seen as a positive step (Erdoğan 2017).

Access to civil society organizations

With regard to other forms of political participation by refugees, there is some space for direct engagement in civil society organizations. In order to form a *dernek* (non-profit association) in Turkey, an interested party must apply to the Turkish Interior Ministry Bureau of Associations (*Dernekler Dairesi Başkanlığı*) (Turkish Interior Ministry Bureau of Associations n.d.). The organization must have seven founding members, who should be Turkish citizens or foreigners with proof of permission to settle in Turkey, such as a residence or work permit (Turkish Interior Ministry Bureau of Associations n.d.). Furthermore, a *dernek* requires 17 board members, who can be foreign nationals. The board can comprise the seven founding members and 10 additional members or 17 different citizens or resident non-citizens. As of June 2017, there was one community centre NGO founded by a non-Syrian foreign national working with refugees in Istanbul. It was in the

process of applying to become a *dernek*, and planned to have one Syrian with temporary protection on the board, pending government approval. While the NGO founder faced inquiries from the government regarding the number of foreigners on the board, she had been told that there was no limit to the number of foreign nationals with residency who could serve on it (Turkish NGO founder, instant messaging communication with author, 2017).

3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country



Access to citizenship

In the run-up to the 2017 referendum, the Turkish government announced that 'more than 10,000' highly skilled Syrian refugees would be granted citizenship at an unspecified time prior to the referendum and would be eligible to vote (Yeni Akıt 2017). An assistant to the prime minister, however, denied that this would be the case in a February 2017 meeting with the non-governmental organization Women and Democracy Association, stating that no Syrians would be given citizenship in the months leading up to the election (Arslan 2017). It is not clear how many Syrian-born Turkish citizens actually voted, as the government authority on elections does not collect or disseminate voter registration data disaggregated by ethnic group. In the run-up to the referendum, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), a left-leaning, secular opposition party, argued that 4 million refugees would be given citizenship if the referendum was won (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2017).

In 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly supported giving citizenship to Syrian refugees, although he did not specify any eligibility requirements (Al Jazeera 2016). He stated that this provision would apply to those with high-level professional skills (Al Jazeera 2017). The subsequent backlash became one of the top-trending topics on Twitter at the time (Girit 2016). The two main opposition parties, the CHP and the Nationalist Movement Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), opposed the idea, arguing that citizenship would discourage Syrians from returning home, and the policy discriminated against less qualified refugees (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2016a). They also felt that the ruling party was seeking to benefit from grateful refugees. On the other hand, the leftist pro-Kurdish People's Democracy Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP), a pro-government newspaper and at least one academic scholar argued that the policy was meant to reduce the demographic influence of the Kurdish population in the south-east (Çetingüleç 2016). Instead, the HDP advocates granting Syrians internationally recognized refugee status (*Hurriyet Daily News* 2016b). In short, Turkish voters are proud that their country has absorbed more than 3 million refugees on humanitarian grounds, but concerns arise when the discussion turns to naturalization and long-term integration (International Crisis Group 2016). Political parties and politicians tread carefully between being seen as welcoming of their 'guests' while opposing the potential economic and political disruption of granting citizenship en masse.

None of the Syrian refugees and asylum seekers participating in this study had been given Turkish citizenship and therefore voting rights in Turkey. As a result, many participants expressed a low sense of belonging to Turkish society and highlighted the temporary nature of their stay in Turkey. This resulted in a lack of interest in pursuing naturalization. Indeed, when asked about the country in which they planned on settling, all but one indicated that Turkey was a stopover for either Europe or North America, or that they ultimately wanted to return to settle in Syria. Some were satisfied with Turkey for the time being, but not particularly happy: ‘Turkey is not my country, I don’t feel any moral obligation [to participate in Turkish politics] . . . if I were given the right to vote, I would have to stay in the country, but I don’t want to stay here’ (Syrian male refugee 5, humanitarian worker, Gaziantep, 2017).

One respondent who identified as Kurdish mentioned military service as the primary reason for not wanting Turkish citizenship, while others mentioned the political instability and the fragility of their legal status as reasons for not wanting to remain in Turkey in the long term: ‘It was our plan to stay for a long time, but now we think it will be bad for us. We are afraid of having our temporary protection taken back. Also, political stability is a concern: if another party takes control, they won’t agree on what to do with us’ (Syrian female refugee 4, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017); ‘I don’t want to be a citizen of Turkey because I don’t want [to go to into the Turkish] army. I want to go where I won’t be stressed for being Kurdish or supporting these movements. Nobody will say anything bad’ (Syrian male refugee 4, hostel worker, Istanbul, 2017).

Formal political participation

Since none of the participants included in this study had Turkish citizenship, they did not have the right to vote in Turkish elections. Nonetheless, many participants voiced an interest in obtaining voting rights and participating in Turkish political life even as non-citizens, acknowledging the importance of being represented and having a voice in decision-making. Some stated that they would cast ballots with enthusiasm, others with reservations: ‘I would vote if I had the chance because I want to choose the right guy to be in the right place. It’s a basic human right to choose who represents you in government’ (Syrian male refugee 7, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017); ‘I might vote. I would see, stop and think to compare the parties—this party did this, this party did that. Then maybe I would vote’ (Syrian male refugee 3, factory worker, Istanbul, 2017); and ‘I would vote . . . I would choose the person that I believed would make my situation better’ (Syrian male refugee 6, NGO translator, Gaziantep, 2017).

Should refugees acquire electoral rights in the future, the need to receive civic education and adequate information about the Turkish political system from an early stage was highlighted as an important condition for the effective exercise of the right to vote in the host country. In particular, participants expressed a desire to gain a better understanding of the ideologies, practices and histories of the political parties, as well as public opinion on the different parties, to be able to make informed choices: ‘I don’t even know the name of the parties well. I don’t know about their beliefs and there is a language barrier’ (Syrian female refugee 3, monitoring/evaluation professional, Gaziantep, 2017); ‘Right now there is a lack of political knowledge. If I had the time to study the parties and their platforms, I would vote’ (Syrian female refugee 4, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017).

In terms of support for or membership of political parties, more than 80 per cent of participants denied implicit or explicit support for any party in Turkey. The inclusion of refugees’ issues on the agendas of Turkish political parties and the adoption of policies that would improve the situation for refugees emerged as important aspects that would determine refugees’ voting preferences. One respondent stressed that he would vote for the party that



brought 'something to the table' for refugees (Syrian male refugee 2, English teacher, Istanbul, 2017). Furthermore, several participants highlighted that their party preferences would be affected by a party's ability to accomplish public works projects and deliver services. Refugees' ethnic and religious backgrounds, and their flight histories, also played a role in their engagement with Turkish political parties. For instance, one respondent who identified as Kurdish supported the pro-Kurdish HDP, while another Gaziantep-based refugee from Idlib who escaped from the Islamic State group supported the centre-left secularist Republican People's Party because of its commitment to the separation of church and state. On the other hand, many participants claimed that no parties reflected their interests.

However, some interviewees expressed a lack of interest in voting in Turkey even if given the chance: 'I wouldn't vote. I pay the [Turkish] residency fee, but besides that I have no rights. I will not play with the future of Turkish people just to say I am living in a democracy. But if I were a refugee in Sweden, where I had rights, I would vote' (Syrian female refugee 5, political activist, telephone interview, 2017).

Furthermore, a Syrian NGO worker stated that, despite the fact that he had been living in Gaziantep for more than five years, he did not feel he had the 'moral' right to vote because it was not his country and he did not 'feel' as if he should have that right. Indeed, most of the participants who expressed no interest in obtaining voting rights stated that the main reason was that Turkey was not their country and its politics were 'none of their business'. Those who voiced the strongest views on not voting tended to be more educated and in professional/semi-professional positions. In addition to their perceived isolation from the host society and the language barrier, another identified factor limiting refugees' and asylum seekers' civic and political inclusion in the host society was the precariousness of their legal and residency status, and the fact that Syrians in Turkey are considered guests: 'Since we are guests, we can't have a voice. If I had refugee status, I could have more of a say. Legal status hinders how much of a say we have in decision-making' (Syrian male refugee 5, humanitarian worker, Gaziantep, 2017)

When asked to identify and elaborate on ways that refugees could have a larger say in host country policymaking, participants expressed the need for—at least symbolic—representation of refugees in parliament, and the need for consultative bodies that would represent Syrian refugees at the national and municipal levels:

We need some kind of committee or representative body in countries where there is a large number of refugees. Such committees would regularly visit the refugee camps and places where there is a concentration of people. They would then be in contact with the government and advocate for refugees' interests.

—Syrian female refugee 1, fashion designer, Gaziantep, 2017

Some of those who mentioned representation also cited help from donor countries and international organizations, stressing the importance of regular communication with the diverse sub-communities of Syrian refugees in Turkey. A substantial number also mentioned financial and economic security, and independence as the best pathways for having a stronger say in domestic affairs that affect them. The importance of refugees knowing and understanding their rights and responsibilities in the host country was also emphasized.

Non-formal political participation

The presence of Syrians in Turkey and policies towards them have fuelled further polarization in an already politically divided country. In the long run, the government will have to deal with the political fallout from its policies towards refugees, as exemplified by the

late 2016 withholding of exit visas to Syrians with university degrees (Hintz and Feehan 2017). There have been reports of cases of exit visas being refused to those who have had their asylum applications approved in other countries, while a German Interior Ministry spokesperson raised 50 cases of Turkey refusing exit permits to Syrians granted visas for Germany while nearly 300 refugees were allowed to leave (Hintz and Feehan 2017). The government has stated off the record that it is allowing refugees whose situations are most precarious to leave (Hintz and Feehan 2017). Syrians are at present too vulnerable to openly protest such a measure. Given that they do not have a single domestic political voice in Turkey, there is a lot of uncertainty about when, how and where Syrians will become politically active in the domestic political arena in Turkey. To date, very little overt self-advocacy, protest or marching, or other conventional forms of self-determined democratic participation have taken place on the part of Syrians in Turkey with regard to domestic politics. A notable exception was the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, when scores of Syrians took to the streets to protest against the coup for fear of military rule leading to a crackdown and perhaps refolement, citing how the coup in Egypt had led to harassment of refugees by coup supporters (Porter 2016).

The vast majority of participants in this study have not openly participated in any protests or similar public expressions of political belief, generally citing the riskiness of such involvement in terms of their temporary protection status. However, there were some exceptions: ‘Since I came, I have participated in some pro-Syria sit-in protests, mainly protesting regime violations in Syria. Nothing succeeded’ (Syrian male refugee 1, development professional, Istanbul, 2017).

For their part, Syrian-led or Syrian-focused civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs continue to focus on closing the gap in government provision of essential, short-term services rather than on long-term rights such as civic and political participation. According to the Interior Ministry, Turkey has more than 109,000 non-profit associations (*dernek*) and 4,500 larger foundation (*vakıf*) CSOs and NGOs, either based or licensed to operate in Turkey. This is a 19 per cent increase since the beginning of the Syrian conflict (Mackreath and Sagnic 2017). While it is not clear how many are operating to help displaced Syrians, the fact that Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa saw the biggest increases in association/foundation licensing suggests that these primarily work with displaced persons. The organizations can be broadly divided into the needs-based and the rights-based (Mackreath and Sagnic 2017).

The NGO Citizens for Syria lists 67 NGOs that have headquarters or offices in Turkey and work in the areas of health, development, politics, emergency relief and the media. In addition, there are many more organizations in Turkey with varying capacities, missions and scopes. These include for-profit ‘consulting’ firms based in Gaziantep which are run by and employ Syrians in Turkey to carry out monitoring and evaluation services or cross-border capacity building projects (Citizens for Syria 2017). While the lines between needs and rights are blurred and their missions are sometimes vague, a typology created for this study (see Table 2) showcases the various CSOs and NGOs working in Turkey based on their scope and scale.



Table 2. Cross-section of refugee NGOs and CSOs in Turkey

Scope of work	Community/informal organizations with/without donor support	Formal local and national NGOs with significant international donor funds	International NGOs operating in Turkey
Needs-based	Imece Turkey Volunteers	Support to Life Mülteciler Derneği ASAM-SGDD	Danish Refugee Council Welthunger-hilfe Caritas
Rights-based	Hamisch Ad.Dar Pages Bookstore Woman to Woman Refugee Kitchen SPI	Support to Life Refugee Rights Turkey Mazlumder	Helsinki Citizens Assembly Amnesty International
Service vendors/ consultancies	Trust Consultancy and Development RMTeam (Gaziantep)		

In addition, semi-formal CSOs and NGOs (defined here as smaller capacity organizations with little or no obvious institutional donor support) in Turkey often provide activities and vocational training to urban Syrians in Istanbul (Small Projects Istanbul, Ad.dar, Yusra Community Center, Pages Bookstore) and Gaziantep (Kirkayak). They also often double as cultural and education centres. For example, Pages Bookstore in Istanbul sells Arabic language books and organizes live music performances and plays, Ad.Dar offers Turkish and English lessons, Small Projects Istanbul offers skills development programmes specifically for Syrian women by teaching them handicrafts and Woman to Woman Refugee Kitchen provides refugee women with kitchen space to produce homemade dishes and foodstuffs to sell at fundraisers in Istanbul's Okmeydanı district.

Major Turkish relief organizations, such as 'Support to Life', use international donor funding to provide a blend of needs-based and rights-based programmes, such as cash transfers and child protection services. Support to Life's rights-based activities facilitate the strengthening of civil society groups by attending and hosting gatherings and conferences to mitigate potential future crisis and emergency situations (Support to Life 2017). One unique organization that has blended government services with its own needs-based services, and is open to foreign NGO support is Mülteciler Derneği. Supported by Deutsche Welthungerhilfe and the UNHCR, the organization is based in the working class Sultanbeyli district of Istanbul. The same building houses the government's Bureau of Migration Affairs, where asylum seekers can register for temporary protection, a social services bureau, a health clinic, an activity centre and even a Syrian cafe and boutique. Another example is Refugee Rights Turkey, which provides pro bono legal assistance to Syrian refugees, with a view to mitigating the challenges linked to refugees' access to justice. Overall, the organizations with the greatest capacity and freedom to operate inside Turkey are those that assist with the immediate and humanitarian needs of Syrians. Meanwhile rights-based organizations lack capacity, such as human resources, organizational structures and staffing, and lack support from the government, all of which are needed to carry out their missions.

4. Country-of-origin context: Syria



Since government security forces opened fire on protesters in the city of Daraa in March 2011, more than half of the pre-war Syrian population of 22 million have been affected, 470,000 have been killed and 6.3 million displaced. Around 4.8 million have fled the country, including nearly 1 million since March 2015 (Mercy Corps 2017).

Of those who have fled to Turkey, 47 per cent are female and 55 per cent are over 18 years of age. Pre-war, the Syrian population was 60–70 per cent Sunni and the vast majority of the insurgency are Sunni. The majority of displaced Syrians in Turkey are therefore Sunni Arab (60–70 per cent of the refugee population), while 10–15 per cent are Kurds and 8–15 per cent are Alawites, which adds an ethnic-sectarian dimension. Across the border, there are approximately 1 million Turkish people of Arabic descent in the south-east. Turkey has a significant minority of Arabs following inflows linked to the two world wars, the Iran–Iraq War and other conflicts. Officially, 1.5 million Arabs resided in Turkey between 1970 and 2000 (Sarıkaya 2014). While these are mostly Sunni, Syrians in cities such as Antakya near the Syrian border have ethno-religious (Syrian Alawites distinct from Turkish Alawites) bonds or relatives across the border in regime-held territory (O’Toole 2016).

In 2000, following the death of his father, Hafez, Bashar al-Assad was elected president by referendum. He was the only candidate and turnout was nearly 95 per cent. Much as his father did in the 1970s, Assad made concessions to the Sunni Muslim majority by allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to function in Syria, a departure from the previous two decades when the Brotherhood had been barred from the country (Rassas 2014).

Assad quickly resorted to his father’s authoritarian ways. Syrians were allowed to develop their lives economically and educationally under the motto ‘run your own lives privately and enrich yourselves as you wish, but do not challenge my government’ (Polk 2013). GDP grew to nearly USD 5000 per capita in the pre-war Assad years and literacy and school attendance rates grew to over 80 per cent. However, the worst drought in modern Syrian history in 2006–11 put tremendous strain on resources, forcing migration to the cities (Polk 2013).

Assad’s rule continued unchallenged and unabated. He won the 2007 referendum on re-election with more than 99 per cent of the vote on a 94 per cent voter turnout. As in 2000, voters were asked to mark ‘yes’ or ‘no’ on the ballot to confirm or dismiss him. In separate parliamentary elections, only parties affiliated with the Baath Party’s National Popular Front were able to stand. They comprised two-thirds of the candidates, while independent candidates (also allied with Assad) formed the rest of the candidate pool (IFES 2007).

During the civil war in 2012, a constitutional referendum was held to pave the way for multiparty parliamentary elections and a contest for the presidency. In fact, new parties had been licensed prior to it but parties based on religion or sect were made illegal, thereby



banning the Muslim Brotherhood, and presidential candidates were required to have lived in Syria for 10 consecutive years (barring those in exile from running) and to have the support of 35 parliamentarians (Reuters 2012). All the parties vying for parliamentary representation also required government approval. Roughly 8 million eligible votes were cast in the 2012 constitutional referendum, a turnout of 56 per cent. The referendum was won with 92 per cent of votes. Opponents boycotted the election so it is possible that voter fraud was minimal (Macfarquahar and Cowell 2012). Western diplomats and opposition groups described the process as a farce, while major allies Russia and China called it a step towards reform (Macfarquahar and Cowell 2012). Refugees have not been granted any political representation in Damascus.

The constitutional referendum paved the way for the 2014 presidential election. Although the new constitution capped presidential terms at two of seven years, this provision does not apply retroactively so Assad was on the ballot with two opposition candidates (of the 24 who submitted candidacy documents). The two eligible candidates, who were not well-known to the Syrian public, were Maher Hajjar and Hassan al-Nouri. The former is an MP from Aleppo, the latter a former minister from Damascus (Atassi and Chughtai 2014). Voting was restricted mainly to government-held areas, which saw a high turnout, while opposition areas either did not have access to ballot boxes or boycotted the election. Opposition groups outside the country also called for a boycott. Election monitors were invited, made up of parliamentarians from selected countries rather than IGO monitoring bodies (Syrian Human Rights Committee 2014; Atassi and Chughtai 2014). Assad won the election with nearly 89 per cent of the votes on a turnout of 71 per cent of the eligible voters (IFES 2007).

Syrians living abroad could cast advance votes in some 43 countries, as long as they had entered those countries legally (Cousins 2014). Notable among these were Lebanon and Jordan. Turkey did not allow voting at the Syrian consulate in Istanbul and the Ankara embassy has been closed since 2012. Countries such as Germany, France and the USA also banned the Syrian election from taking place on their territories. Syrians in those countries were encouraged to go back to Syria to cast their ballots. No official statistics on the number of Syrians in Turkey who returned to their homeland to vote have been disseminated. Diaspora voting took place one week before in-country citizens went to the polls (Gorzewski 2014). The Syrian Government stated that 200,000 of the 3 million refugees residing outside its borders at the time were eligible to vote in the election (Carney 2014).

International intergovernmental efforts to include refugees in political decision-making processes have included UN Security Council Resolution 2254 of December 2015, which 'expressed support for free and fair elections, pursuant to the new constitution, to be held within 18 months'. One month prior to that, the Vienna peace talks of the International Syria Support Group took place with the aim of achieving an international ceasefire. However, at issue was a clause in its final communiqué stating that all Syrians in the diaspora should be able to vote. The regime argued that this as a way for foreign powers to interfere by allowing refugees to vote even though they are 'subject to all kinds of material, moral and even administrative blackmail' (Agence-France Presse 2015). Experts say such a free and fair election would lead to the regime's ouster, while the regime's opponents lauded this stipulation (Agence-France Presse 2015).

5. Refugee diasporans' political participation in their country of origin



Given the ongoing armed conflict and the limited space for formal political participation by the Syrian refugee diaspora, few of the participants interviewed for this study remain politically active in Syrian domestic politics. There are a few notable exceptions, such as building local councils and organizing communities and people of similar opinions, cultural/language exchanges, social and political capacity building in communities inside Syria, and social media awareness raising and campaigning. The mechanisms through which refugees in Turkey participate in the political life of their country of origin are also limited, largely by the logistical realities of transferring capacity as voters and advocates in an extremely volatile country.

Formal political participation

Although some participants had voted in elections prior to fleeing Syria, none had participated in out-of-country voting (OCV) since, or expressed any desire to do so. As noted above, there are no OCV mechanisms for Syrian refugees based in Turkey. Thus, there is no widespread, formal political participation by displaced Syrians. In terms of OCV in the 2012 referendum or the 2014 presidential election, most respondents believed that voting in their home country was pointless, and none of them indicated that they had participated in OCV while in Turkey. 'Why vote when you know your vote doesn't matter? The results are already in place' (Syrian female refugee 2, learning/development professional, Gaziantep, 2017).

The primary data collected indicates that the vast majority of respondents had the right to vote in parliamentary and presidential elections when inside Syria, but the vast majority had not used this right. Several raised serious doubts about the integrity of the process. Even though they had the right, they did not participate because it would not affect the outcome—Assad, the Baath party and Baath affiliated politicians would remain in power. The interviews also illustrated the irregularities, harassment, coercion and other ways in which the integrity of elections in Syria was compromised. For example, one participant mentioned that someone was looking over his shoulder, while another person nearby voted 'no' but was given another ballot in order to correct his 'mistake' (Syrian male refugee 8, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017). One respondent described her younger sister's experience of crossing the border after visiting family in Iraq, only to be granted re-entry to her country on condition that she vote for Assad. The sister was 16, below the legal voting age (Syrian female refugee 4,

NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017). Another described watching polling officials checking voters' Baath Party memberships, then cursing at those who were not members, before sending them away from the polling station (Syrian male refugee 1, development professional, Istanbul, 2017). Another said that although he never voted, he was shocked when, after being arrested for political activism, the authorities told him that he had voted 'yes' for Assad (Syrian male refugee 8, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017). Another interviewee was given an already sealed ballot to merely drop into a box (Syrian male refugee 5, humanitarian worker, Gaziantep, 2017).

With regard to participating in post-conflict Syrian elections in the future, most respondents emphasized the importance of free and fair, multiparty and competitive elections that would allow for real change: 'I would vote if there were free and fair elections monitored by different countries . . . only if it is clear that the country is heading in a democratic direction' (Syrian male refugee 1, development professional, Istanbul, 2017).

Several participants noted the need for Syrian refugees to be exposed to different models of democracy and receive education on basic concepts of democracy and civil rights in order to enhance their understanding of democratic practices and to prepare them for conducting free and fair elections in the future. Others mentioned the need to expose Syrians to models of democracy in other countries, and to take elements from those countries and apply them to the Syrian context. Box 1 shows participants' perceptions of democracy.

Box 1. What is democracy, in your own words?

- 'Let all the people with different religions and nationalities live how they want', Syrian male refugee and hostel worker, male, Istanbul, 2017
- 'Freedom of the people to choose political leadership or authority', Syrian male refugee 8, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'The most effective ruling system', Syrian female refugee 2, learning/development professional, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'It's the most important thing. If there is no democracy, there is dictatorship', Syrian male refugee 3, factory worker, Istanbul, 2017
- 'I am satisfied with the laws and living them in dignity', Syrian female refugee 3, monitoring/evaluation professional, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'Majority rules', Syrian male refugee 6, NGO translator, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'Insulting other people is not democracy', Syrian male refugee 11, salesman, Istanbul, 2017
- 'To be able to make up my mind while respecting other people's personal space and ideas', Syrian male refugee 5, humanitarian worker, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'When people rule', Syrian male refugee 10, NGO worker, Gaziantep, 2017
- 'Freedom of speech, freedom for expression of opinion', Syrian female refugee 6, student, Gaziantep, 2017

Non-formal political participation

While in Turkey, the non-formal means for Syrians to get involved in Syrian domestic politics are fairly limited, mostly to protesting against the regime's activities along with sympathetic Turkish citizens and communities of intellectuals, artists and students. These communities are generally in districts of Turkish cities, but outside of areas where Turks of Arab descent are in the majority. Syrians often perceive Turkish citizens of Arab descent to be at least symbolically sympathetic to the Assad regime. Other non-formal participatory acts whose outreach efforts were observed for this case study are documentary screenings, theatre productions, book talks and similar cultural activities in districts of and venues in major Turkish cities with high concentrations of well-educated citizens, such as Kadiköy in Istanbul. Organizations such as Pages Bookstore, Kirkayak and the Komşu Collective are examples of places that provide physical spaces for participation. Another option for Syrian CSOs such as Hamisch is to have a mainly online presence. Facebook is often the preferred mode of outreach for these groups and their events.

The Syrian Interim Government and the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces

This section provides an overview of the largest—at least officially—political opposition group in exile, which provides an alternative for political participation by the Turkey-based refugee diaspora, and describes the cross-border involvement of Syrian refugees in NGOs and CSOs.

The Syrian Interim Government is the largest political group claiming to represent the Syrian diaspora in Turkey and worldwide. However, it has not organized political events for the wider Syrian population in Turkey. The Syrian Interim Government is a technical and representative alternative government, the aim of which is to represent the Syrian opposition on the ground in Syria and, *prima facie*, among the entire Syrian diaspora in Turkey and the world. Representatives are elected in an Internet election conducted by its umbrella organization, the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces (NCSROF n.d.). The government thus governs the organization and implements programmes inside Syria. Formed in Qatar in 2012, the organization has had six presidents since 2012 and claims to be the sole representative opposition government body. The organization reportedly has a presence in Gaziantep, Istanbul and Ankara, but has increased operations in Azaz, just south of the Turkey's Kilis province. Its mission is to 'facilitate the transactions' of Syrian refugees in Turkey, coordinate with NGOs and other aid agencies for the benefit of refugees both inside and outside of Syria, and connect with Turkish media to deliver a 'clear picture to the Turkish public about Syria' (NCSROF n.d.).

In November 2012 the Turkish Government recognized the group as the sole 'legitimate representative' of the Syrian people. The group claimed to represent 80 per cent of President Assad's opponents at that time (RIA Novosti 2012). However, none of the group's dozens of representatives are elected by a plurality of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. Rather, they are elected online by a limited number of politically active diaspora citizens. Their governing council of 110 people includes various ethnic minorities such as Turkmens and Kurds, but only five women and no youth representation, according to a Syrian refugee and political activist interviewed for this case study. However, most of the people interviewed, primarily Syrian NGO workers, highlighted the ineffectiveness of the council in improving their livelihoods (Syrian female refugee 3, monitoring/evaluation professional, Gaziantep, 2017).

On the other hand, the political activist interviewed for this case study was more optimistic about the prospects of a successful expatriate government, noting that the interim government has ministers in Homs and other 'liberated' areas. It also maintains regular



contact between activists in Turkey and Syria, even in the form of visits. As a former representative on the governing council, the participant also noted that Saraqib in Idlib province—the site of an alleged 2016 chemical weapons attack and continued intra-insurgency clashes—held local debates prior to a city council election: ‘They are practicing democracy in Saraqib. I was so excited to watch a local debate online before the council election. They also called for independent organizations to monitor their elections’ (Syrian female refugee 5, political activist, telephone interview, 2017). However, the activist also cited the lack of gender balance as a reason for her leaving the organization.

Civil society in Turkey working on behalf of Syrians in Syria

There are at least 82 non-relief CSOs reported to be functioning inside Syria, in the areas of capacity-building, good governance, peacebuilding, the rule of law and the media (UN OCHA 2016). However, the extent to which they have formal connections to Syrians in the diaspora is unclear. There are several examples of International NGOs implementing cross border, needs-based and rights-based operations inside Syria from Turkey. These have Syrian staff working in a logistical and administrative capacity to move the required supplies, and implement humanitarian programmes with Syria-based partners. Needs-based organizations include the medical organizations that coordinate with hospitals and clinics inside Syria, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), for which several of the report participants work, and the Independent Doctors Association (IDA). MSF and IDA have mandates only for inside Syria and their staff often function without an office in Turkey.

Rights-based organizations, on the other hand, are attempting to promote civil society growth and an inclusive and democratic future with long-term stability. In particular, service providers function as facilitators for cross-border capacity-building. Their work in Syrian communities within Turkey consists mainly of informing others, enlisting volunteers and acting as Arabic-language resource hubs and cultural centres. Examples include the non-profit Baytnasyria, and the for-profit Trust Consultancy and Development Team. The latter employs mostly Syrians to design, monitor and evaluate projects within Syria, which include building the capacity of local, unelected community councils and CSOs to implement public works projects on a small scale, usually limited to water, sewage and electricity, in addition to community youth centres:

I am the secretary general of a working group for Syria, a political group that organizes Syrians who believe in democracy, freedom and human rights, and have secular views. We recruit members inside Syria and in the diaspora, and we support our members inside Syria to organize activities and campaigns in their local communities.

—Syrian female refugee 2, learning/development professional, Gaziantep, 2017

In a capacity assessment, Baytnasyria notes that among the hundreds of CSOs it has surveyed inside Syria, the majority have basic organizational deficiencies in developing expertise, setting goals, and improving transparency and accountability (Abdulhussien and Bali n.d.). Remarkably, 70 per cent of the CSOs surveyed mentioned ‘influencing policymaking’ among their long terms goals. However, there are no publicly available evaluations of CSOs and projects focused on civic and political participation within Syria.

6. Conclusion and recommendations



This case study has shed light on Syrian refugees' and asylum seekers' participation in and perspectives on formal and non-formal politics in Turkey and Syria. Given the ongoing fighting in Syria and Turkey's commitment to a locally developed asylum system, it appears unlikely that asylum status will change in the near future. None of the participants interviewed for this study had the right to vote because they did not meet Turkish citizenship requirements. Most of the interviewees do not follow Turkish politics closely, mainly because of the language barrier and the belief that they are guests, so Turkish domestic politics do not concern them. However, a slight majority of them would vote if given the chance. While a few refugees mentioned supporting the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), the vast majority did not support any party. However, in terms of non-formal participation, and liaising with the government, financial security and economic independence were mentioned in interviews as the ways in which Syrians might have 'more of a say/a stronger voice' on policies that affect them.

Most of the participants remain inactive regarding formal political participation in Syria, with a few notable exceptions. The overwhelming majority of respondents would participate in future OCV if they were assured that their vote would be counted and that the process would be free and fair. Non-formal political participation among the participants on matters related to their country of origin has been sparse and sporadic, and limited to minor protests. As Syrians stay longer in Turkey, some of them are likely to qualify for naturalization, but most will continue living under temporary protection. There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Syrians inside Turkey who will not be able to formally participate in either their host country or country of origin elections in the medium term and beyond.

In light of the above, the following recommendations are made to enhance political participation by Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey and Syria.

Recommendations

For the host country

- The Government and decision makers in Turkey should consider providing a clear path to naturalization for long-term refugees, with a view to increasing the prospects for their social and political integration.



- Government institutions and local authorities in Turkey should in collaboration with Syrian refugees, consider establishing an independent agency with advisory councils representing the needs of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers. Given the existence of Syrians in every Turkish province, these advisory councils could be comprised of Syrians in each province. They should be elected by those Syrians under temporary protection and conducted in a manner that is accessible to all segments of the population. The councils' mandate should be to liaise with the municipal government and government-supported NGOs, meet with them regularly, submit programme requests, and assist with evaluations and needs assessments.
- Along with advisory councils at the municipal level, a national council could perform a similar advisory function with the central government. This organization could provide up-to-date demographics, conduct needs assessments and analyses among the represented population, and work alongside leaders of state-sanctioned CSOs and state organizations that provide humanitarian aid in order to identify and implement areas of greatest need, and provide long-term strategies for integration.

For the country of origin

- Free and fair OCV is encouraged for all Syrians no matter their legal status, as stated in the final communiqué of the Vienna peace talks of the International Syria Support Group.
- Civil society organizations should provide civic education programmes to inform the Syrian diaspora in Turkey of their rights and responsibilities when participating in democratic decision-making, so that they can take these lessons to their country of origin should the opportunity arise. Recognizing that children and youth are most amenable to formative education and experiences of governance, education programmes could be adapted as curricula for training Syrian youth inside Turkey.
- Direct online elections of at least a portion of the interim government would go a long way in boosting the perceived, and perhaps actual, legitimacy of the body. Elections could be run online and monitored by a neutral electoral monitoring organization. Prior to this, a mechanism should be implemented that allows any Syrian of voting age under TP to become a candidate and campaign for him/herself. In addition, an engendered component, such as a minimum number of members of the government who identify as women, would provide for broader perspectives from the underrepresented half of the population.
- The Syrian refugee diaspora should be given access to more independent reporting on the progress of the activities of CSOs operating inside Syria in order to ascertain the reliability of partners and their ability to deliver on goals. These successful examples could then be communicated to the general diaspora through online and offline channels.

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- Syrian female refugee 3, monitoring/evaluation professional, author's interview, Gaziantep, 1 June 2017
- Syrian female refugee 4, NGO worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 31 May 2017
- Syrian female refugee 5, political activist, author's telephone interview, 14 July 2017
- Syrian female refugee 6, student, author's interview, 31 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 1, development professional, author's interview, Istanbul, 27 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 2, English teacher, author's interview, Istanbul, 27 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 3, factory worker, author's interview, Istanbul, 6 June 2017
- Syrian male refugee 4, hostel worker, author's interview, Istanbul, 27 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 5, humanitarian worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 1 June 2017
- Syrian male refugee 6, NGO translator, author's interview, Gaziantep, 1 June 2017
- Syrian male refugee 7, NGO worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 31 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 8, NGO worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 1 June 2017
- Syrian male refugee 9, NGO worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 1 June 2017
- Syrian male refugee 10, NGO worker, author's interview, Gaziantep, 31 May 2017
- Syrian male refugee 11, salesman, author's interview, Istanbul, 24 May 2017
- Turkish NGO founder, instant messaging communication with author, 6 July 2017

Annex. Glossary of terms



Asylum

A form of protection given by a state on its territory based on internationally or nationally recognized refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in her or his country of nationality and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Asylum seeker

A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than her or his own and is awaiting a decision on an application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.

Country of origin

A country from which people leave to settle abroad permanently or temporarily (IOM 2011).

Diaspora

A group of individuals (and members of networks, associations and communities) who have left their country of origin but maintain links with their homeland. This concept covers more settled communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the nationality of the host country, dual nationals, and second- and third-generation migrants.

Formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, formal political participation is understood as participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties and parliaments.

Host country

The country where a refugee is settled. In the case of asylum seekers, the country where a person has applied for asylum.

Internally displaced person

A person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular because of (or in order to avoid) the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-induced



disasters, but who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights 1998).

Migrant

Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from her/his habitual place of residence, regardless of (a) the person's legal status; (b) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (c) what the causes for the movement are; or (d) what the length of the stay is (IOM 2011).

Naturalization

Granting by a state of its nationality to a non-national through a formal act on the application of the individual concerned (IOM 2011).

Non-formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, non-formal political participation is understood as participation in political affairs through non-formal means, such as civil society organizations, trade unions, consultative bodies, community organizations, grassroots movements and so on.

Refugee

'A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Refugee Convention, article 1A(2), 1951). In addition, article 1(2) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention defines a refugee as any person compelled to leave her or his country 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality'. Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration states that refugees also include persons who flee their country 'because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' (IOM 2011).

Resettlement

The transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another state that has agreed to admit them (IOM 2011).

Transnationalism

The process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders (IOM 2011).

About the authors



Ezra Mannix is a writer, web editor and teacher who lived in Istanbul in the period 2009–16. He returned to his native United States in 2016 to study for a masters in law and diplomacy from the Fletcher School at Tufts University. After working in magazine journalism and NGO communications in Florida and New York, he taught English to university students in Istanbul and maintained a website, ezramannix.com. His interests include development and the economic and political integration of refugees.

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About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project



Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host countries and their countries of origin, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time becoming part of their host society. Recognizing the dual role of refugees as political actors, the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities related to the political participation of refugees in their host countries and countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the project explores issues of access to citizenship in host countries, electoral rights in both host countries and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, acknowledging that political life is not only confined to electoral processes, the project examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

In 2018 the project produced a report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, which draws on eight case studies carried out through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees and key informants in host countries with high numbers of refugees. It offers cross-country insights into the experiences of refugee communities originating from five of the largest source countries.

The Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Download the case studies and the full report:
<<https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/migration-democracy>>

About International IDEA



The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

<<http://www.idea.int>>

Drawing on individual perspectives of Syrian refugees in Uganda, this case study explores the formal and non-formal political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and the ways in which they are able to participate in peacebuilding and democracy-building in their countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the case study explores issues of access to citizenship in the host country, electoral rights in both the host country and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, it examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

This case study is part of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project and has informed the development of a longer report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, published by International IDEA in 2018.