Crisis of Syrians in Turkey
Challenges and Suggested Solutions

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Introduction:

After fleeing the Assad regime’s barbaric bombings of civilians, massive numbers of Syrians are flowing over the border to find refuge in Turkey. Additionally, a large number of Syrian opposition institutions and international organizations working in Syrian affairs operate in Turkish cities, especially in provinces on the southern border.

Three and a half years after the start of the revolution, the bloody conflict is still ongoing. Approximately 1,358,000 Syrians have entered Turkey since the start of the war, with 218,000 residing within 22 camps and 1,130,000 spread throughout the 81 Turkish provinces. This corresponds with Turkey’s open-door policy, but has presented a number of social challenges and increased tension between Turkish citizens and their Syrian guests.

Although the Turkish and Syrian people have much in common, there are many key cultural distinctions between the two. One of the largest is the language barrier, mostly resulting from a general lack of prior integration between the two societies.

Recently, tensions between Syrians and their Turkish hosts have increased. A number of riots and protests have broken out among the refugees, who feel that their basic needs (including for healthcare and education) are not being met. Syrian beggars are now common in Turkey, and many Syrians are willing to work for extremely low wages. All of this has fueled recent problems between Turkish and Syrian citizens.

In Gaziantep, these tensions have led some Turkish citizens to protest against the Syrians’ presence in their country. In spite of the relatively low turnout at these protests, they have pushed the Turkish government to issue several new instructions pertaining to Syrians. Hadi Al-Bahra, President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, met with the Governor of the Turkish Province of Gaziantep and its Security Director, and presented the most important observations by the security directorate concerning the Syrian portfolio. According to the Head of the Foreigners Division in the Turkish Ministry of Interior, the number of Syrians in Gaziantep has recently reached 251,000 persons, 201,000 of whom are registered and 50,000 of whom are not. He emphasized that the total number of Syrians in the province “did not exceed 29,000 persons [as recently as] 2012.”

The Head of the Foreigners Division has compared the percentage of crimes in which Syrians were involved in 2011 versus 2014. The percentage was “less than 1% (0.030%)” in 2011. In 2014, the percentage reached 5.13%; out of 24,000 crimes committed thus far in 2014, 1,276 involved Syrians. He also confirmed that a project to monitor and regulate the use of Syrian-
owned cars in Turkey is underway, in response to a recent increase in car accidents and traffic violations in Gaziantep. It is estimated that Syrian-owned cars now exceed 1% (approximately 5,000) of all the cars in Gaziantep.

**Findings of Research:**

In response to the issues above, the Syrian Economic Forum (SEF) conducted a study of the major challenges stemming from the presence of Syrians in Turkey. After examining these challenges, SEF offers solutions to the problems between Turks and Syrians, as well as strategies for providing a decent quality of life for Syrians living in Turkey in the event that the Syrian crisis continues for further years.

SEF interviewed one hundred Syrians living in Gaziantep and Kilis cities about the problems they face while living in Turkey and their perspectives on improving their lives until they are able to return to Syria. Most responses centered on the following:

1) **Employment and Enterprise Challenges:**

   Syrians experiencing employment challenges are divide into two groups:

   a) Those searching for employment—a large group which exceeded 55% of those interviewed. Their challenges include: a lack of job opportunities, very low wages, lack of insurance registration, mistreatment by employers, partial payment of wages, dismissal from work without cause, and difficulty in communicating with employers or customers due to lack of proficiency in the Turkish language.

   b) Those searching for any investment opportunities: a small group which comprised approximately 13% of the people interviewed. Their challenges include: complicated procedures in licensing the desired investments; continuous need for a Turkish partner to facilitate the procedures; lack of Syrian parties to explain Turkish laws and procedures and facilitate transactions; lack of knowledge of Turkish investment laws; unfamiliarity with the Turkish market; unavailability of capital to fund projects; and difficulty in communicating with Turkish institutions due to insufficient proficiency in the Turkish language.

2) **Housing Challenges:**

   Over 40% of those interviewed experienced housing challenges, including: continuous raises in rents, indecent living conditions, lack of rental contracts/leases, unjust lease terms, and difficulty communicating with landlords due to insufficient proficiency in the
Turkish language. The language barrier also leads some Syrians to sign Turkish-language contracts that they are not able to understand, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

3) **Education Challenges:**

SEF conducted interviews with parents of children in primary and secondary schools and universities. Education challenges are divided in two sections as per the experience of those interviewed:

- **a)** Primary and Secondary School Education Challenges: 26% of those interviewed reported problems obtaining pre-college education. These problems include: a lack of schools for Syrian students (which results in many Syrians of primary and secondary school age being unable to attend school); inability to obtain permits to open schools for Syrian students in some Turkish cities; and the dominance of inefficient and corrupt personnel in many Syrian schools that were permitted to open (hired mainly for their knowledge of Turkish language and their ability to communicate with the Turks, rather than broader-based merit). In addition, most Syrian schools do not meet basic conditions, such as availability of restrooms or educational equipment. Most of them are operated in rented houses that are turned into makeshift schools.

- **b)** Higher Education Challenges: About 20% of those interviewed identified challenges in university education. These included: limitations on Turkish colleges’ ability to accept Syrian students (typically no more than a few hundred students per college); colleges only granting Syrian students guest status (making them ineligible to receive a graduation certificate); difficult procedures for accepting transfer students (due to insufficient travel documents or lack of original copy of secondary-school certificate); absence of permission from the Turkish government to open universities for Syrian students; and difficulties functioning in Turkish colleges due to insufficient Turkish language proficiency. The same challenges exist for graduate students (Masters and Doctorate degree candidates).

4) **Documentation Challenges:**

17% of those we interviewed experienced challenges obtaining legal documentation. Without sufficient documentation, they could not obtain authorization from Turkish institutions for certain activities. For example: couples that could not document their marriage or divorce faced legal difficulties. Many parents could not document their
children’s births, which could deprive the children of rights such as access to education. Additionally, inability to document deaths led to problems with inheritance.

5) **Healthcare Challenges:**

Only 11% of those interviewed were experiencing health problems. This rate is very low, in part because the Turkish government has largely opened the healthcare sector to Syrian patients. Yet some problems still exist, such as: the inability to communicate with the medical staff in Turkish hospitals due to the language barrier and the inability of Syrian doctors to practice medicine except through very difficult procedures. These procedures include obtaining a certificate of Turkish language proficiency, recognition of a Syrian medical degree in Turkey, and a work permit. As of this writing, Syrian doctors are unable to open private clinics, and no hospitals for Syrians have been allowed to open.

6) **Transportation Challenges:**

7% of those interviewed reported having vehicle problems. The rate of car ownership within the Syrian population is very low overall because generally only wealthier Syrians own cars. Nevertheless, some problems identified by those interviewed include: unfamiliarity with Turkish traffic laws; lack of awareness of traffic violations and how to pay fines; inability to perform periodic maintenance checks because the cars are not registered in Turkey; Turkish prohibitions on certain vehicle modifications; and vandalism and harassment of Syrian-licensed vehicles.

7) **Residency Challenges:**

32% of those interviewed reported difficulties with residency documentation. These difficulties include the following:

a) Temporary residencies are only valid for one year, and only those holding a valid passport may obtain temporary residency. Even with temporary residence, Syrian citizens need to comply with additional procedures and obtain approvals in order to work at a Turkish company or organization.

b) Some temporary residencies are currently being converted into more permanent foreign residencies in Turkey. Although foreign residency provides Syrians with rights equivalent to other foreigners in Turkey, the change requires residents to comply with difficult and expensive procedures, and Syrians have not been given instructions for how to comply with the procedures.
8) **Other Challenges:**

Other problems include: lack of authorization for Syrian lawyers to practice law in Turkish courts (rendering them unable to effectively defend Syrian clients); lack of opportunities for Syrians to voice their concerns (particularly in the media); and discrimination on account of differences in behaviors and culture.

The following diagram ranks the most prominent challenges that Syrians in Turkey are currently facing, based on the opinions of Syrians interviewed in the cities of Gaziantep and Kilis.
Suggested Solutions to the Crisis of Syrians in Turkey:

Intensive meetings (organized by the Turkish government and Syrian organizations) have been held between Turkish officials, representatives of the Syrian opposition, and civil society organizations interested in Syrian affairs, in order to mitigate tensions between Turks and Syrians. SEF has participated in multiple such meetings in Gaziantep and Kilis. The participants addressed many problems that both Turkish citizens and Syrians face, and produced a number of practical steps toward solving these problems to the satisfaction of both parties.

Below are some of the proposed scenarios to address the Syrians’ challenges in Turkey. These proposals are directed mainly to Ministries of the Syrian Interim Government and civil society organizations, such as business associations, to communicate with Turkish government officials and businesspeople in order to find solutions to the aforementioned problems.

1) **Securing Enterprise and Job Opportunities for Syrians in Turkey.** (directed to the Ministry of Economy and Finance and Ministry of Industry in the Syrian Interim Government, Syrian and Turkish business associations, and the Turkish government).
   
a) Build a database to capture the numbers and qualifications of Syrian workers available in Turkey in order to provide them with job placement services.
   
b) Build a database of Syrian investors and their fields of interest, in order provide them with services to facilitate investment.
   
c) Establish temporary chambers of commerce and industry for Syrian investors, and empower them in order to mobilize financial capacity in solving the Syrian crisis.
   
d) Facilitate and streamline procedures for licensing industrial, service, and commercial projects, so that Syrian businesspeople are able to participate more fully in the local economy. This will preserve and build Syrian capital and in turn provide employment for large numbers of Syrian workers.
   
e) Establish a free economic zone on the Syrian–Turkish border in order to attract Syrian and Turkish investment, facilitate the transportation of Syrian–made goods to Syria, and employ the maximum number of Syrian workers.
   
f) Establish Turkish and Syrian joint ventures, in which both Turkish and Syrian businesspeople would contribute capital. These joint ventures would create job opportunities for Syrian workers. SEF recommends that priority be given to those
ventures that engage in commercial activities that fulfill daily needs and services for Syrians, such as providing housing, transportation, clothing, sanitation, etc.

**g)** Provide banking facilities for Syrians that would increase investments and create job opportunities.

2) **Housing**: (directed to the Ministries of Justice, Ministry of Economy and Finance and Ministry of Industry in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government)
   - **a)** Improve housing conditions, especially drinking water sources, bathrooms, restrooms, and kitchens.
   - **b)** Limit high rents and monopolies.
   - **c)** Write rent contracts in both Turkish and Arabic languages.
   - **d)** Allow Syrians to own houses once residency is obtained.
   - **e)** Construct new residential buildings, especially for low-income Syrians and near Turkish cities.

3) **Education**: (directed to the Ministries of Education in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government)
   - **a)** Provide sufficient schools to accommodate all Syrian students.
   - **b)** Set up an internal procedures to manage staff hiring, student admission, attendance records, exams, and other administrative issues. These procedures would help schools improve educational conditions, especially in the selection of managers and teachers.
   - **c)** Teach subjects that would directly benefit Syrian students, given their current situation. Since civic education subjects could be particularly beneficial, teachers should be given training courses on a civics curriculum that can be integrated in their classrooms.
   - **d)** Increase the number of Syrian students allowed into Turkish colleges.
   - **e)** Accept Syrian college students whose studies were interrupted by the conflict, even when they lack the required documentation as a result of the conflict.
   - **f)** Establish one or more departments of a Turkish college specifically for Syrian students, which would convene when the regular semester ends and during holidays in order to maximize educational opportunities for Syrian students.
g– Permit Syrian colleges for Syrian students to be established. These colleges would be established in Turkey for the time being, then transferred into Syria when circumstances allow it.

h– Open institutions to teach Syrians the Turkish language at no or reduced cost to the students.

4) **Documentation of Life Events:** (directed to the Ministries of Justice in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government)

a) Open joint Turkish–Syrian offices to register Syrian births and mortalities in Turkey.

b) Open joint Turkish–Syrian offices to register marriages among Syrian refugees, both amongst themselves and with Turkish spouses, in order to preserve the rights of married Syrians.

c) Open joint Turkish–Syrian offices to document sales and purchases of assets amongst Syrians and between Syrians and Turks.

5) **Healthcare:** (directed to the Ministries of Health and the Free Doctors Syndicate in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government)

a) Facilitate acceptance of all Syrian patients in Turkish hospitals.

b) Recruit a sufficient number of translators in all Turkish hospitals that are attended by Syrians.

c) Hire Syrian medical staff in Turkish hospitals, especially those attended by Syrians.

d) Establish temporary hospitals designed to serve the Syrian population, employing both Turkish and Syrian staff.

6) **Cars:** (directed to the Ministries of Transportation in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government)

a) Clarify traffic laws to Syrian drivers, through a direct campaign (SMS) and public education.

b) Facilitate payment methods for traffic violations, through a web application in the Arabic language.

c) Permit Syrians to own Turkish–titled vehicles.

d) Replace Syrian license plates for cars that have been in Turkey for more than a year with temporary Turkish plates.

e) Conduct a periodic mechanical check on Syrian vehicles in Turkey.
f) Facilitate the necessary repairs of Syrian vehicles and document repairs in the vehicles’ records.

g) Document car sales and purchases among Syrians themselves and between Syrians and Turks.

h) Write contracts for selling, purchasing, or renting Syrian cars in both Turkish and Arabic languages.

7) **Residency:** (directed to the Ministries of Justice in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish government)

a– Facilitate the residency procedures for Syrians, taking into consideration their current circumstances.

b– Allow Syrians to practice their careers, regardless of residency status.

c– Rely on the smart ID card\(^1\) as proof of residency for Syrians.

8) **Integrating Syrians into Turkish Society:** (directed to the Ministries of Culture and Education in both the Syrian Interim Government and Turkish Government).

a– Initiate efforts to involve Syrians in Turkish television programs and movies, as a platform through which to voice their perspectives and to facilitate mutual understanding between Syrians and Turkish citizens.

b– Provide Syrian youth with courses on how to adapt to Turkish society, including an introduction to Turkish customs and traditions and how to respect them.

c– Hold joint educational conferences between Syrians and Turkish citizens.

d– Encourage friendly and respectful relations between Syrian and Turkish citizens.

These recommendations are directed to the Turkish Government, the Syrian Interim Government and civil society organizations, especially Turkish and Syrian business associations. Lately, the Turkish government has taken rapid steps toward forming Turkish–Syrian joint councils in most cities accommodating large numbers of Syrians. These joint councils would help to expose, clarify, and achieve understanding of the major problems that Turkish citizens experience due to the presence of Syrians, as well as those challenges that Syrians are facing. SEF will cooperate with these councils, especially the members representing Syrians, in order to discuss and promote these potential solutions.

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\(^1\) The smart ID card is issued to Syrians by the Turkish government.