

# **The Response of Turkish Government towards Refugees and Asylum Seekers Amid the Covid-19 Pandemic**

**Lalu Jeffrey Alim Wahtum**

The Faculty of Political and Science Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: [lalu.jeffrey.fisip18@umy.ac.id](mailto:lalu.jeffrey.fisip18@umy.ac.id)

**Sugito**

The Department of International Relations, The Faculty of Political and Science Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: [sugito@umy.ac.id](mailto:sugito@umy.ac.id)

## **Abstract**

Turkey is one of the most bypassed countries and is occupied by refugees and asylum seekers coming from the Middle East. The problem of refugees in Turkey has become more complicated after the outbreak of the Corona Virus (COVID-19), so that according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), refugees are the most vulnerable to COVID-19. This study aims to describe how the Turkish government's efforts in providing protection to refugees from the dangers of the spread of COVID-19. This study adapts qualitative methods by utilizing news, journals and books as secondary data. This study found that Turkey has made various efforts by following the guidelines of the World Health Organization (WHO) and also collaborating with UNHCR to protect refugees from COVID-19.

**Keyword:** COVID-19, Refugee, Turkey

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## **Abstrak**

Turkey merupakan salah satu negara yang paling banyak dilewati dan ditempati oleh pengungsi dan pencari suaka yang datang dari timur tengah. Permasalahan pengungsi di Turki semakin rumit setelah merebaknya Corona Virus (COVID-19) sehingga menurut United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) pengungsi menjadi pihak yang paling rawan terkena COVID-19. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menderkripsikan bagaimana upaya pemerintah Turkey dalam memberikan perlindungan kepada pengungsi dari bahaya penyebaran COVID-19. Penelitian ini mengadaptasi metode kualitatif dengan memanfaatkan berita, jurnal dan buku sebagai data sekunder. Penelitian ini menemukan adanya berbagai upaya Turki dengan mengikuti pedoman World Health Organization (WHO) dan juga menjalin kerjasama dengan UNHCR untuk melindungi para pengungsi dari COVID-19.

**Kata kunci:** COVID-19, Refugee, Turkey

## **INTRODUCTION**

Refugees and asylum seekers are rampant in the European Union, especially in Turkey. Most refugees come from the Middle East due to war and conflict. Most of these refugees came using land and sea routes. The first place to go is Turkey (UNHCR, Refugee Crisis In Europe, 2021). Turkey is already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees. In 2016, Turkey promised to combat unlawful migration as part of a refugee accord with the European Union. The agreement also states that the European Union has the authority to deport all refugees and immigrants who enter Greece illegally through Turkey. In exchange, the EU receives Syrian refugees from Turkey on a regular basis (FRANTZMAN, 2020).

According to the UNHCR, the economic slowdown caused by the COVID-19 outbreak has put hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries offering sanctuary in jeopardy. Turkey is home to more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees, making it the world's largest refugee population. Many refugees live in poverty and find it difficult to make ends meet. According to the UN refugee agency, a growing number of refugees are losing their little income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic's economic depression, pushing them to take extraordinary means to survive (UNHCR, Global Trends Forced Displacement, 2018).

Refugees are the most vulnerable to COVID-19's effects. Many refugees are vulnerable to COVID-19, according to the UNHCR, since they lack access to clean water, soap, and sanitizers, as well as the inability of social distancing, which is a requirement for COVID-19 protection. The enormous number of refugees living in camps will greatly increase the risk of COVID-19 spreading quickly. Furthermore, the fact that refugees in the camps are suffering from starvation, lung difficulties from cooking and inhaling bonfire smoke, tuberculosis, battle wounds, and other pre-existing diseases means their immune systems are weakened (Murdock, 2020). Many people are finding themselves in situations where they have limited access to doctors and hospitals, much alone testing, face masks, experts, and critical care units with ventilators, as a result of COVID-19. Limited access to credible information, the spread of misinformation, a lack of effective communication networks, language obstacles, and, in some circumstances, distrust of authorities are additional challenges for displaced groups (Emily Priborkin, 2020).

Refugees who are the most vulnerable to COVID-19 will be a challenge from Turkey. Turkey itself during this pandemic is still accepting refugees who continue to arrive.

Therefore, this study aims to find out how the policies taken by Turkey towards refugees during this pandemic and how the government provides policies to protect refugees from COVID-19.

## **Literature review**

Turkey is a country that shares direct borders with both the Asian and European continents. Due to its history and geography, Turkey is at the epicentre of the refugee crisis. As a result, Turkey has a refugee policy. Turkey has signed the 1951 convention and the 1967 protocol with geographical limits, according to Dilek Latif (2002). Since Turkey has signed this, the legal situation of non-European refugees in Turkey is governed by the Asylum Ordinance of 1994, which allows non-European refugees temporary asylum while they await resettlement in a third country. Turkey was obligated to implement its own refugee status determination, which was promulgated in November 1994, because the majority of non-European refugees arrived illegally.

Turkey sees the influx of refugees from non-European countries (the Middle East and Asia) as a potential security concern, because there is a large refugee population that might influence social, economic, and political issues. In the case of national refugees, however, the criteria for assessing refugee status include a mix of cultural, historical, and religious aspects. Migration to Turkey is governed by the Settlement Act (No. 2510). Only persons with ethnic Turkic origin and a Turkish culture are eligible to migrate, settle, and earn Turkish citizenship under this Act.

In 2013, more than half a million Syrians fled to Turkey, seeking sanctuary in cities and refugee camps. This was due to Syria's civil conflict, which resulted in a large-scale refugee crisis in neighbouring nations. According to Marcel

van den Berg (2015), Syrian refugees in Turkey have had an impact on food prices, employment levels, and internal movement patterns in the areas where they were housed. Housing and food prices skyrocketed as a result of this effect, although the indigenous population's employment rate remained relatively unchanged.

Compared to other neighbouring nations such as Lebanon and Jordan, Turkey is one of the Syrian adjacent countries that gets the most refugees, with a total of 2.6 million refugees. Turkey's involvement is critical in this regard because it is not only a host country but also a transit country for millions of refugees fleeing Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other Asian countries. Syria has surpassed all expectations in terms of population. As a result, Turkey has become a transit country for Syrian refugees' route to European countries. Since March 2011, Turkey has had an open-door policy for Syrian refugees, according to Eka Noermanita (2017). This means that Turkey will grant "temporary protection" to Syrian refugees as part of its asylum acceptance system. The next refugee will be transported to a third nation as quickly as possible under temporary protection.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic becomes the main enemy of all countries, including Turkey. Based on ÖMER AÇIKGÖZ and ASLI GÜNAY (2020), COVID-19 has caused global problems and the economy has become unstable. Even people infected with COVID-19 have the potential to have an impact on health and economic well-being. This study aims to determine the potential first reaction of the global economic impact of the pandemic through sectors by assessing the costs according to the published data for both the world and Turkey. This pandemic most likely causes a global economic recession. In addition, due to the uncertainty of the end of this pandemic, the length and scale of this contraction cannot be predicted.

Research on Previous studies have focused more on how Turkey responds to large numbers of refugees and their impact. The above studies also mostly focus on the policies taken by Turkey with the arrival of refugees. One of them is that Turkey applies an open-door policy and temporary protection in responding to refugees who keep coming, especially refugees from Syria. Another study explains how Turkey's policy in filtering refugees from outside by implementing its own policy. In addition, one study explains how COVID-19 can lead to an economic downturn which will have an impact on refugees.

This study tries to focus on how the Turkey government policy in providing refugee protection during the pandemic. Refugees are ones of the most vulnerable to COVID-19 transmission. Therefore, this study focuses on how the Turkish government provides protection to refugees during a pandemic. The author also discusses how the actions and policies of the Turkish government in accepting refugees who keep coming.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **Refugee Crisis**

The refugee crisis is part of a global humanitarian problem, which is the responsibility of the world community. This crisis is getting more and more complicated every year, the number of world refugees has not subsided. The fate of refugees is the biggest humanitarian problem. According to the United Nations, there is now "the highest rate of human displacement ever recorded in history." Driven by conflict and persecution, the number of refugees is expected to increase further in the future, as wars and climate change push people to seek a better life.

A refugee is defined as a person who is forced to flee his country due to persecution, persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a fear of persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, politics or membership of a social group. Most of them are unable to return to their home countries and are even afraid to return to their homes. War, civil strife, famine, natural disasters, persecution based on ethnicity, and religion are usually the main causes of refugees fleeing their countries.

According to Weiner (1992-1993), Weiner characterizes three types of motivation that can make a citizen a refugee. They are:

- Politically motivated refugees: Those who have majority support at home with reference to their reasons for leaving their homeland. They stay in touch with their homeland and try to contribute to the local resistance/liberation movement.
- Economically motivated refugees: Those who seek economic security and move to wealthier countries to achieve it are economically motivated refugees.
- Environmentally motivated refugees: Those who are displaced due to natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, famine, global warming and other environmental disasters

Weiner's work is also very important not only to explain how refugees leave one country and enter another, but also to mention that entering a new place creates a certain level of opportunity and constraint for the host country. These constraints can range from cultural assimilation to economic burdens, from border security to internal security threats.

The refugee crisis has occurred in recent years. This crisis is caused by the massive displacement that occurred due to conflict and climate change. In addition, there is a health disaster that has affected countries, namely the Covid-19

pandemic. Therefore, the occurrence of a large-scale refugee crisis and the occurrence of covid-19 make countries think again about their security for both refugees and their own citizens, one of them is Turkey. By understanding the concept of the refugee crisis, this study will review Turkey's effort to deal with wave of refugees that hit its territory.

## **Migration Policy**

The size of the population that migrates either voluntarily or under pressure across international borders has grown rapidly. The growth of international migration has been facilitated by many factors. However, policy measures against migration clearly play an important role in shaping its global scope and pattern. Therefore, the migration policy framework provided by each government and migration regime largely determines the scope, volume, and direction of such migration.

According to Hammar (1985), this can be realized by the fact that migration policy is placed in two separate boxes which provide a clear gap between immigration regulations (rules and procedures governing the selection and admission of foreigners), and immigration policies, i.e., conditions provided to resident immigrants (e.g., working and housing conditions, welfare provisions, and educational opportunities) in their enforcement in the field. Furthermore, some experts put three aspects of migration policy into context: regulation of immigration flows, namely, immigration control; management of ethnic relations and integration of minorities living in the host country; and in anti-racism and anti-discrimination policies.

In recent years there has been migration by such a large number of refugees. This is caused by deteriorating conditions in the political, economic, and social spheres of a country, forcing its people to leave the country and seek safer shelter in other countries, with the reason that they want to seek protection and save themselves from harm that threatens physically. According to Kemal Kirisci (2003), Turkey has long been a country of emigration, immigration and asylum, Turkey has also become a transit country for immigrants. Therefore, by understanding the concept, this study will review what migration policy is applied by turkey in dealing with migration on refugees.

## **METHODS**

This study focuses on Turkey's policies in accepting refugees and Turkey's protection of refugees during the COVID-19 is period. This study will use a descriptive qualitative method. The data used is in the form of primary and secondary data. This data will be obtained from the official website, literature, books, journals, news, and other sources that support and are relevant. This data will then be analysed, the results will then be described or interpreted. With the results of this qualitative method, it is possible to explain Turkey's policies towards refugees in a pandemic and how Turkey's policies protect refugees.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Turkey's Policy in Accepting Refugees**

Turkey is the world's greatest refugee host country, having taken in over 3.6 million refugees. The majority of these refugees are Syrians who were displaced as a result of the civil war in 2011. In 2017, Turkey took in 54 percent of all Syrian

refugees, with Afghans hosting 15.7 percent (UNHCR, 2017). Therefore, Turkey has its own internal displacement policy. One of them, Turkey has a migration strategy which is quite essential in terms of assisting poorer countries.

As a result of this migration policy, refugees and asylum seekers will be able to earn greater wages, gain access to knowledge, develop vital skills, and send money home. In their host countries, refugees might not only find safety, but also possibilities to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Turkey has made it easier for refugees to enter the formal labor market, with more than 7,000 enterprises employing them. Despite some progress, many people continue to be unable to reach the regular work market (Mitchell, 2019). Other new policies include funding education through Conditional Cash Assistance for Education and work permit programs for Syrians, despite the fact that these policies are unpopular and plagued by barriers and disincentives, as well as prohibiting refugees from working in the provinces where they are registered, which are frequently not located in the province where the larger labour market resides.

The Turkish government exhibited interest in awarding citizenship to potential and skilled refugees in 2017, but public opposition prompted strong suspicions that this was done for political reasons (Shamahi, 2017). In keeping with this, Turkey's refugee policy has been updated to match EU requirements. Furthermore, Turkey might be argued to be forced to accept refugees and asylum seekers because the EU supplies them with funding and assistance in order to ensure that the migrants are cared for and that they do not travel to the EU. On the Turkish side, it serves as a negotiating chip with EU countries who are vocal in their criticism of Turkish foreign policy (Noermanita, 2017). On the other hand, to reduce the number of irregular migrants, the EU implements policies such

as creating buffer zones, strengthening border controls, and taking full control of mixed migration by signing re-admission agreements and establishing concepts such as "safe third countries" or "safe countries of origin."

The EU and Turkey have agreed on a program that calls for Turkey to beef up border security while allowing Greece to return all new irregular migrants to Turkey. In exchange, the EU promised Turkey a three-billion-euro grant in two instalments to help refugees and strengthen border security. In addition, the agreement contemplates resettling one registered asylum applicant from Turkey for every irregular migrant returning from Greece, in order to promote a regulated road to refuge. Finally, through the visa liberalization program, Turkey's EU admission effort will be re-energized, and a new chapter in the membership negotiation process will be begun. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 forced Turkey to reconsider the agreement in order to avoid the pandemic's worst impacts (Long, 2018).

On March 11, 2020, Turkey announced its first case of COVID-19. Turkey had taken containment efforts in early January and February, including sealing its borders with Iran (one of the nation's severely hit by the COVID-19 pandemic) and Syria. Flights from some of the worst-affected countries, such as China and Italy, have been impacted by COVID-19. The original limitations were gradually strengthened, and the Turkish government has now enforced a travel ban on all foreign flights as well as harsh local travel restrictions across regions (Jazeera, 2020).

COVID-19 has had a terrible influence on people's well-being around the world, both in terms of health and economics. Those at the bottom of the social scale have been impacted the hardest, and migrants and refugees have been particularly hard hit, as has Turkey. Although the Turkish

government does not keep separate information on the number of refugees infected with COVID-19, the majority of Syrian refugees reside in highly populated urban areas with high infection rates (Yavçan, 2020). It is commonly acknowledged that the pandemic has had a double impact on their lives: adequate hygiene is impossible in crowded houses, and the epidemic has made meeting basic necessities and accessing livelihood opportunities more challenging. Given the impact of the pandemic on the Turkish economy, this situation is expected to worsen. Turkey has reported over 170,000 cases, thereby avoiding the high death toll experienced by Italy and Spain (Aksüt, 2020).

Despite initial efforts to stem the virus' spread, Turkey's refugee and migrant population of more than 5 million people, of which 3.6 million are Syrian refugees, remains one of the country's greatest concerns. Many refugees, due to social isolation and marginalization, as well as language issues, may be unable to obtain accurate information on COVID-19, as well as adequate preventative measures and COVID-19-related services, putting them at greater risk of transmission (Council, 2020). However, as in many other countries, Turkey will bounce back and face challenges.

### **Turkey's Protection of Refugees during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

COVID-19 has spread to practically every country since it first appeared in early 2020. The globe is facing one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, COVID-19. Travel bans, school closures, social event cancellations, quarantining certain zones, and even economic lockdowns have all been enacted in a number of countries (Erdogan, 2020). COVID-19 can spread in microscopic fluid particles from an infected person's lips or nose when they cough, sneeze, talk, sing, or breathe, according to the WHO. Larger respiratory

droplets to smaller aerosols are among the particles. Infected persons can be contagious whether or not they have symptoms, and the virus can transmit from them to others (World Health Organization, 2020). Refugees are among the most vulnerable to COVID-19, according to the World Health Organization, since they live and work in often poor conditions with limited access to health, housing, water, sanitation, and other essential services (World Health Organization, 2021). Therefore, Turkey wants to provide protection for refugees who are one of the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Turkey now has the world's highest refugee population. According to new policy records compiled by the World Bank, the Turkish government puts the overall number of refugees registered under Temporary Protection at 2,225,147, one of whom is from Syria. According to the policy note, Turkey's reaction measures have two basic characteristics: 1) a non-camp strategy; and 2) a government-funded method — which dramatically differed from many refugee-hosting countries' responses, which tended to divert refugees to camps financed by humanitarian organizations. In development-oriented response activities, this note covers the most prevalent challenges faced by refugees and host communities, including income, welfare, and employment; strain on housing and services, especially health education; and social tensions and public relations (Bank, 2015).

Turkey is adapting its programs and cooperating with its partners, including UNHCR, to improve help for refugees, in line with the precautionary steps adopted by the Turkish government to contain the spread of the Corona virus. Additional UNHCR assistance is focused on emergency financial transfers, hygiene and other essential items distribution, community communication, and refugee efforts.

UNHCR is also collaborating with its education and livelihood partners to help mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on distant learners and, more broadly, refugees who have lost their jobs. UNHCR, which focuses on COVID-19 emergency financial transfers in close collaboration with the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), initiates emergency cash transfers to meet the most pressing needs of refugees who are at risk from COVID-19. With a one-time financial transfer of TYR 1,000 per household via the Turkish Postal Service, the help targets vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers who do not benefit from other aid programs (PTT). The implementation will begin in April 2020 (UNHCR, UNHCR's emergency cash assistance reaches over 85,000 families during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, 2021).

Cleaning materials and other in-kind support are provided to refugee members and host communities by UNHCR in collaboration with authorities. Goods are delivered to local governments, governors, municipalities, and other partners, who then distribute them to residents in need. Authorities across the country are also given Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to safeguard their safety while performing their tasks. UNHCR has distributed approximately 65,900 hygiene kits to refugees and host communities in 35 provinces through 61 partners, including local governments, municipalities, and non-governmental organizations. Turkish border authorities on the western frontiers of Edirne, Çanakkale, Izmir, and Mula received 5,000 PPE, 38,000 latex gloves, 6,550 masks, as well as goggles, thermometers, and sanitizers. For Turkish border authorities in Izmir and Mula, more than 3,600 parcels of food, drink, blankets, and hygiene items were delivered. Through 13 partners, 75 wheelchairs were distributed to refugees in 12 regions. More than 125,500 essential relief goods and personal protective equipment (PPE)

were sent to six temporary lodging locations in Southeast Turkey for refugees (El-Khalek, 2020).

UNHCR collaborates closely with local governments, municipalities, and other partners around the country to identify needs, provide material aid, and encourage refugee initiatives to mobilize themselves and their communities. Cleaning supplies and equipment are still being sent to disadvantaged groups across the country. The Metropolitan Municipality of Anlurfa in southeastern Turkey is producing face masks as part of a UNHCR-funded project. Around 350,000 face masks were created in the initial stage of production, which took place in December 2020, by Turkish women and migrants. One million masks are produced and distributed to refugees and members of the host community (UNHCR, *Engaging at the Local Level*, 2020).

In dealing with COVID-19, there are also activities by refugees. Twelve refugee ventures in Anatolia are producing soap bars, masks, and protectors for their communities. The program has brought together a group of refugees and Turkish residents in ten provinces to make commodities ranging from 700 to 55,000 mask and 2,400 to 3,000 bars of soap, which are subsequently given by 12 partners. More than 7,500 masks were made in Hatay using sewing machines purchased by UNHCR for a community development project. UNHCR updated a textile facility in Istanbul, which produced 45,000 reusable face masks. Turkish refugees, migrants, and women work together in Hatay and Istanbul to create masks that will be supplied to refugees and Turkish households (UNHCR, *UNHCR Turkey response during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the well-being of people in every corner of the world, both as a health and economic problem. Those at the bottom of the socioeconomic level have suffered the most, and within that group, refugees have been hit as badly as refugees in Turkey. These refugees mostly live in camps, where they lack adequate attention and facilities to support health and prevent catching COVID-19. According to UNHCR, refugees are the most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Therefore, Turkey, which is one of the countries that hosts the largest refugees, wants to protect refugees during this COVID-19 pandemic. To provide protection, the Turkish government establishes policies to protect refugees, one of which is the Migration policy. In addition, Turkey has cooperated with UNHCR to provide emergency cash assistance to refugees, provide provision and distribution of hygiene and other needed items, and support refugee initiative.

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