

## Analysis

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**Summary:** As immigrants in Turkey became more visible, so did a previously hidden problem: the intolerance of Turkish citizens toward immigrants. Several surveys reveal that Turkish citizens have a less than welcoming attitude regarding immigrants, and this attitude is often fanned by politicians and the media. This policy brief explains the reasons for this and recommends actions to reverse this trend.

## Unwanted, Unwelcome: Anti-Immigration Attitudes in Turkey

by Emre Erdoğan

Until the spread of the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria, Turkey was known as a “sending” country in terms of international migration. When it was founded in 1924, around 60 percent of the citizens of the young Turkish republic were either first- or second-generation immigrants from the former Ottoman realms. More recently, according to available statistics, only 2 percent of Turkey’s population immediately before the Arab Spring consisted of immigrants and the majority of those were from ex-Ottoman territories, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bulgaria. Immigrants became visible in Turkey when the direction of migration flow changed. Turkey became a “transitional country” hosting more than 500,000 migrants from the Middle Eastern, Asian, and African countries who were looking for a way to Europe. There are also 500,000 guest workers from former-Soviet countries, and Turkey has become very attractive for asylum seekers first from Iraq, and now from Syria.<sup>1</sup> Currently, more than 1.1 million Syrians who have fled the conflict in their country live in Turkey, and two-thirds of them are living outside refugee camps.

As these people became more visible, so did a previously hidden problem: the intolerance of Turkish citizens toward immigrants. Syrian immigrants have become frequent targets of physical violence, especially in the southeastern regions of country and suburbs of larger cities. They have replaced Africans and Eastern Europeans as targets of “hate speech” in written and social media from almost every segment of society.

This situation is not surprising if the results of several surveys are compared. In the *World Values Survey* covering 51 countries, Turkey is ranked in 13<sup>th</sup> place — third on the European continent — in terms of intolerance toward immigrants and foreign workers. The results from the “Life in Transition Survey II (LITS2),” conducted in 2010, named Turkey as the most intolerant nation among 34 European and Asian countries, tied with Mongolia.

The *Transatlantic Trends* 2014 Survey of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) provides further evidence for the worsening perceptions of immigrants. According to this survey, 42 percent of the Turkish population thinks that there are too many foreign-born people in Turkey,

1. Ahmet İçduygu, “Turkey’s Migration Transition and its Implications for the Euro-Turkish Transnational Space,” [http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE\\_WP\\_07.pdf](http://www.iai.it/pdf/GTE/GTE_WP_07.pdf)



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a 17 percentage point increase over 2013. Moreover, 66 percent of the respondents from Turkey support more restrictive policies toward refugees. This score is the highest among the 13 countries covered by the report.

These negative perceptions are naturally associated with the recent developments in the region. Sixty percent of the Turkish society thinks that immigrants' most common motivation is seeking asylum. The second-most popular answer is "seeking social benefits" (17%). Although the number of asylum seekers and foreign workers is almost equal in reality, only 13% of Turkish respondents state "working" as a major reason for immigration. This gap gives hints about the "immigrant" stereotype in Turkish society: they are asylum seekers.

Although negative perceptions about immigrants increased in one year and there is a strong support for restrictions of Turkey's policies toward refugees, this issue has not yet been transferred to political sphere. Only 4 percent of Turks say that immigration is Turkey's most important problem. By comparison, this figure is 25 percent in the U.K., 11 percent in Germany, and 9 percent in the United States. Meanwhile, the percentage of those approving of the government's immigration policies is 27 percent; two-thirds of respondents disapprove of them.

Considering the fact that almost half of the respondents approve of how the government is handling international policies in general, a 67 percent disapproval rate of immigration policies indicates a broad criticism of the government in this area.

The *Transatlantic Trends* findings are supported by other surveys as well. According to a recent survey about nationalism in Turkey, conducted as a part of the International Social Survey Programme, 65 percent of respondents think that immigrants are increasing crime rates. More than half of respondents think that immigrants are taking jobs away from locals and that they undermine Turkish culture.<sup>2</sup> These are clear indicators of an anti-immigrant public sentiment.

The reasons for this negative sentiment are numerous and open to speculation. Political scientists tend to explain anti-immigrant attitudes from a "threat" perspective. As nationals perceive a threat from immigrants, their anti-

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immigrant attitudes increase. This threat may be a materialistic/realistic threat, such as when immigrants and nationals compete for jobs and newcomers challenge the country's low-skilled labor force. These threat perceptions are not necessarily objective; they are highly affected by group identities. Moreover, competition is not limited to the jobs market. Nationals may also perceive newcomers as burdens on social service budgets and welfare expenditures.

The second dimension of threat perception is symbolic, the threat posed to the values, religion, and culture of the host country. If citizens tend to perceive a gap between their morals, values, norms, standards, beliefs, and attitudes and those of immigrants, they tend to have more negative attitudes about them. Threat perceptions may be multiplied or reduced with the degree of contact with immigrants, education, media literacy, social capital, or other political variables, and these interactions vary from one country to another.

In the Turkish case, all of these explanations are valid to some extent. A recent paper tried to discover determinants of anti-immigrant attitudes in Turkey by using the LITS2 data.<sup>3</sup> The analyses showed that a higher level of media literacy contributes to anti-immigrant attitudes in Turkey, while there is no difference across socio-economic and demographic groups. This finding is not surprising considering the xenophobic nature of Turkish media, which amplifies politicians' often negative statements about immigrants. Another finding is that a materialistic/realistic threat is not valid in the Turkish case, since there is no difference between the responses of employed and unemployed and lower and higher socio-economic status.

Meanwhile, analyses showed that the most important determinants of anti-immigrant attitudes are intolerance toward others in general. As one becomes more intolerant toward

2 Findings of "Nationalism in Turkey," <http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Dunyada-ve-Turkiyede-Milliyetcilik-SON.pdf>.

3 Emre Erdoğan and Pınar Uyan Semerci, "Turkey: A Puzzling Case to Understand Public Attitudes toward Immigrants," forthcoming.



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others, his/her propensity to also have an anti-immigrant attitude almost doubles. For example, people who are intolerant of drug addicts, people who have AIDS, or heavy drinkers are two times more likely to have an anti-immigrant attitude. This shows that intolerance of immigrants is a part of the overall intolerance of Turkish society, which is known for a high level of xenophobia and where the presence of foreign workers/immigrants is perceived as a moral threat.

This means that the anti-immigrant climate of Turkish society is not a short-term problem but can be traced back to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the humanitarian tragedy caused by this dissolution and the resulting independence wars.<sup>4</sup>

The Turkish education system fosters xenophobic attitudes through its very nationalistic and exclusionary content. Politicians exploit these attitudes to mobilize voters and consolidate their constituencies by creating virtual eternal enemies.<sup>5</sup> The Turkish media, which is largely dependent on the government resources, amplify these techniques, and independent voices are rarely audible. Turkish citizens are “naively proud of themselves,” according to the nationalism survey: “Turks are Turks and one striking fact is that we [asked] if everybody would be a Turk, would the world be a better place, and Turks gave a very high rating.”<sup>6</sup>

*Transatlantic Trends* shows that these characteristics have been accentuated by the emergency situation in Syria. The increased visibility of Syrian refugees has created significant public discontent, shown by hate speech and physical violence. Very low support for government policies about immigration and large demand for restrictive policies are more indications of a xenophobic climate and hostility toward immigrants and refugees. These fault lines may contribute to political polarization in Turkey, along with rising nationalist tensions.

Deep-rooted problems cannot be solved with quick therapies. This xenophobic environment is a product of decades and it will take decades to remedy it. However, the emergency situation in the region and a possible flow of more

refugees to Turkey, not only from Syria but also from Iraq — Yazidis, Kurds, Turkomans — cannot wait for slow-motion solutions. Some urgent measures need to be taken in order to create a welcoming environment for those are in need. These measures would ideally include a public campaign to reduce the negative stereotypes about immigrants and encourage citizens to adopt a more hospitable attitude toward them.

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### About the Author

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4 More on this can be read in *The Unbearable Heaviness of Being a Turkish Citizen*, by Dr. Emre Erdoğan.

5 <http://www.gmfus.org/archives/the-unbearable-heaviness-of-being-a-turkish-citizen/>

6 Barçın Yinanç “Turkish people are naively proud of themselves, survey shows” <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-people-are-naively-proud-of-themselves-survey-shows.aspx?pageID=238&nID=69912&NewsCatID=338>