

Ganna Omar  
Ames High School  
Ames, Iowa  
Turkey, Education

### **Turkey And Refugee Education: Building Reconciliation and Reconstruction**

On March 15th, 2011, the Syrian Arab Republic broke out into civil war. What began as a few protestors joining the Arab Spring - a series of anti government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East in late 2010 - soon became a conflict immeasurable and incomparable to its neighbors in North Africa and the Middle East. With the conflict still raging on eight years later, and with about five million Syrians displaced outside the border of their country as reported by World Vision, there seems to be little to no hope that there will be a fast and easy resolution to the conflict. So where are Syrian refugees going, and how will they fare in the meantime until this war comes to a stalemate?

Out of the five million Syrian refugees, 3.5 million of them currently reside in Turkey, and according to Brookings Institution, their numbers are increasing (through births and new arrivals) by approximately 1000 individuals per day. The results of this drastic change in population have been the proactive attempts by the Turkish government to integrate these “guests” into Turkish society. Since Turkey has taken the firm position that the new Syrian arrivals are not refugees, it has denied itself the monetary aid usually extended by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and thus has had to address the increased presence of these displaced people on its own. This sacrifice comes due to the desire of the Turkish government to continue having a presence in the Syrian civil war, allying itself with anti-Assad parties, and thus being unable to accept heavy aid from UNHCR (contrary to, for example, Jordan) because of the presence of displaced people of a conflict they are involved in.

Nevertheless, Turkey has proved a pioneer nation in its adaptation to the influx of refugees and the dramatic effect on population. Most refugees have settled in Turkey’s urban areas, with the city of Killis hosting more Syrians than it does Turks, and Istanbul hosting about 560,000 of them. The dramatic shift in the density of many cities has caused many local governments to instill social support programs; and over 300 local governments in Istanbul have come together to house a migration policy center that “enables its constituents to share best practices, coordinate refugee support activities, and develop evidence-based policies to promote integration” (Brookings).

The government has also shown leniency in giving Syrians the ability to open and run their own businesses, as well as apply for work permits to legally be employable. However, the process of applying for a work permit is a long and tedious one, and thus far only about 20,000 refugees have received their work permits out of the millions who reside in Turkey. As a result, most Syrians work informally, earning meager wages and replacing many Turkish laborers due to the efficiency of their employability for business owners. According to reports from inside Turkey, this has had the effect of causing resentment between many Turks and Syrians, with the people of Turkey feeling as though they are sacrificing too much as a nation for them to be able to continue living their lives comfortably. On the other hand, leaving millions of displaced people without work or a means to rebuild their lives makes for an unsettling atmosphere in the Turkish nation, and less than hopeful prospects on the rebuilding of Syria should war end and these refugees return.

However, while most of the displaced individuals in Turkey live in urban areas and face the aforementioned problems, over 250,000 of them remain residing in camps in 22 different locations, as reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. These individuals encounter very different lifestyles and remain disconnected from Turkish civil society.

The big challenge for all these displaced families, regardless of where they reside in Turkey, is the continuation of their lives in such a way that they are able to build their futures and, hopefully, the future of their country of origin. For many Syrians, war has disrupted their pursuit of education and knowledge, and left them displaced where they either have to labor to help their families or there simply isn't an available adequate education program where they are. For many other Syrians, they were born into this conflict, and thus have never even began foundational schooling. Nearly all Syrian children in Turkey do not have a comfortable or effective educational institution for them to attend, and nearly one third of them are not in school at all. The average refugee is in exile for about fifteen years of their life, and their rates of the pursuit of secondary and higher education are feeble when compared to global rates: 23% to 84% (UNHCR). Moreover, according to research done by the United Nation's sister organization Girl Up, the lack of education coupled with the exposure to violence and war heightens risk of a continued cycle of violence in the region, and significantly decreases the likelihood of a new and reconstructed Syria from thriving once more. Furthermore, the absence of schooling would mean Turkey's necessary continued efforts to maintain and attend to the refugees, rather than having them quickly integrate into Turkish society and find a place for themselves amongst the educated Turkish public, or elsewhere in the world.

Syrian refugee's lack of adequate education has several dangerous potential consequences, one of them being the impact that this will have on food security in Turkey, not only amongst the refugee population, but even the general public. If refugee adolescents and children lack education, it will be difficult for them to go on and rebuild their communities to provide those essential necessities such as food, water, and shelter. Furthermore, they will be largely unemployable, thus resulting in them pursuing the same means that the majority of adult refugees are using to earn money: informal work without permits from the government. This would mean earning meager wages and being susceptible to potential exploitation, not to mention affecting the security of employment for Turks, and thus creating a destabilized economy. All of this would ultimately affect food security. In addition, it is imperative that a curriculum is used as a means to educate refugees on the importance of nutrition and health in order to sustain their already fragile communities. Likewise, the process of proper nutrition and health contribute greatly to a child's academic success and motivation, so both conflicts mutually impact one another. Finally, it is worth mentioning that not only will education impact the upholding of food security in Turkey, but should there be a day that the Syrian civil war subsides, Syrian refugees will be better off being able to rebuild their societies and implement food security upon return to their homelands.

My proposal is one that would require proactive effort from the rest of the international community more than anything else. I propose the development of an organization, independent of any one government or special interest group, and overseen by the Global Education First Initiative (which works to address and support the attainment of the fourth global Sustainable Development Goal: Education). The development of REAL - Refugee Education And Learning - would see to the global effort of educating refugee children around the world, with priority on the refugee children in Turkey who have been largely ignored by international coalitions.

This organization would be responsible for employing teachers in geographic locations dense with refugees, who speak both the language of the refugees (Arabic) and the language of the country they reside (Turkish). Doing so would eliminate the language barrier that students may face if they are to pursue higher education in Turkey, and heighten their employability status as a result of being able to communicate more effectively. These teachers would be paid and licensed by said organization, with approval from the Turkish government to have them on the grounds and teaching. Individuals who

already are licensed to teach and/or have completed their higher education and thus are at least qualified to teach would have to undergo a one year training with REAL in order to adapt their abilities so they may deal with children of war and trauma. In addition, they would revise a curriculum catered to refugee children that would encompass both the basic requirements of Turkish educational practices, Syrian educational practices, *and* standardized content that is expected internationally. This curriculum would serve displaced adolescents and children so that they may be able to advance to higher education in Turkey, Syria, or elsewhere in the world. The curriculum revised by teachers would also place high emphasis on the importance of rebuilding a damaged nation, so that refugee children are encouraged to seek a day of rebirth for their homeland, and thus comply with the Turkish government's wishes that there will be a day when Syrians are able to return home.

The funding for this initiative would come from monetary aid that is already extended to the Turkish government via UNHCR in order to at least address the need to further educate this population increase. Because, as aforementioned, this funding isn't extensive due to Turkey's refusal to officially label the displaced people refugees, this funding isn't sustainable on its own, nor is it currently being directed effectively. The funds are used to enhance existing public Turkish schools, which are not effective at integrating refugee children given their traumatic backgrounds, cultural differences, and language barriers. The funds are also used to maintain temporary school houses where books and other materials are scarce and inconsistent with one solid curriculum. Rather than continue this dispersion of these specific funds, REAL would receive them instead and use them to employ teachers and solidify curriculums and materials. As these funds aren't adequate on their own, funding will also come from the US State Department and the US Agency for International Development. As of January 15, 2019, the US government passed the Protecting Girls' Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act into law. This law requests of USAID and the State Department to "build the capacity of institutions in countries hosting displaced people to prevent displaced children from facing educational discrimination" and to "work with domestic and foreign private sector and civil society organizations to promote safe, primary and secondary education for displaced children," among other things. Though the United States has revoked its role as a potential hosting grounds for refugees, it has at least pledged its support of governments that do, and thus its monetary support is expected in this case. This would not have a dramatic effect on US spending, since foreign aid is only 1% of the total federal budget. This would also be appropriate of the United States, as the country has a presence in the Syrian conflict and thus a responsibility to address consequences of that conflict. Other governments may be asked to contribute based on their policies on foreign aid and refugee education.

Cultural differences between Syrians and Turks have also played a role in deterring Syrian refugees from enrolling their children in Turkish public schools. At the forefront of these differences is the insistence of several Syrian families that the separation of sexes in an academic environment is imperative. This has particularly come to affect the education of Syrian girls and young women, as they are more likely to be married off by their parents than they are to be sent to school in a mixed environment. Because this organization's mission is to cater to the academic needs of these displaced people, it will honor their culture and thus ensure that boys and girls are in different classes, assigned to a teacher of the same gender.

Upon finishing secondary education, REAL will aid in the process of getting ready to pursue higher education. For example, REAL will provide the opportunity to take standardized tests like the SAT or ACT, that are means to enter many universities around the world. REAL will also build connections with specific universities that would like to diversify their student body and/or have scholarships for children of war or similar difficult circumstances that might stand in the way of their pursuit of higher education. Should REAL build these connections with educational institutions, it will connect suitable candidates with universities that they may do well to apply to. These universities may be in Turkey or abroad. These connections with several institutions also grants the organization additional reassurance of sustainability, as their involvement with REAL would be a pillar of the organization's success.

Finally, if a Syrian refugee is to graduate from higher education, the Turkish government is to see to that they are automatically and without additional question granted a work permit, as they would if they were Turkish. Not only will this legalize and officilize their employability and credentials, but it will also help rebuild the current fragmented state of job security in Turkey. There would be no limitations on where the graduate could work upon finishing higher education. That is, if they wanted to leave the country, they could, as Turkey already has an appropriately competitive job market.

As there are many Syrian refugee families located in urban areas, REAL would not rule out the possibility of online education in the future, which would be more sustainable in an age of worldwide internet access and could be facilitated through what are now the temporary Turkish school houses. However, this would not serve refugees in camps, as they would not have the means to access any kind of sustainable electronic device to regularly learn from, and providing those means would be dangerous and costly given the close proximity of the camps to war zones. The development of an online curriculum that could communicate the same principles as proposed above would most probably be better developed after the trial of on-the-ground teachers and the collecting of data on how refugee children are adapting to a more conformed method of learning again (research collection is part of USAID and the State Department's pledge in the Protecting Girls' Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act). The decision to have an online curriculum would also be dependant on the strength and reliability of regular internet access in different respective locations in Turkey, which further complicates the proposition.

The future for Syrian refugees is one that is currently unbalanced and unstable. With conflict still pervading in their homeland eight years later, it is imperative that there is definitive action taken with regards to how Syrian refugees in Turkey will rebuild their own future and the future of their country. This reconstruction can only happen if there is an attentive effort to educate the refugee masses and thus prevent additional violence. While complications arise in any attempt to create mass positive change, it is a step in the right direction to consider that the children of war should be offered the same rights to knowledge as others, and should be given the opportunity to rise up and heal a society wounded by conflict of its time.

## Works Cited

*Global Education First Initiative / United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization*,  
[www.unesco.org/new/en/gefi/home/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/gefi/home/).

“Education -.” *UNHCR*, [www.unhcr.org/tr/en/education](http://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/education).

“Education - United Nations Sustainable Development.” *United Nations*, United Nations,  
[www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/](http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/education/).

“Education for Refugees.” *Girl Up*, [www.girlup.org/take-action/education-for-vulnerable-girls/#sthash.zwfKOXAp.dpbs](http://www.girlup.org/take-action/education-for-vulnerable-girls/#sthash.zwfKOXAp.dpbs).

Kirişçi, Kemal, et al. “Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Beyond the Numbers.” *Brookings*, Brookings, 19 June 2018, [www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/19/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-beyond-the-numbers/](http://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/06/19/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-beyond-the-numbers/).

Rubio, and Marco. “S.1580 - 115th Congress (2017-2018): Protecting Girls' Access to Education in Vulnerable Settings Act.” *Congress.gov*, 14 Jan. 2019, [www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1580](http://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1580).

“Syrian Refugee Crisis: Facts, FAQs, and How to Help.” *World Vision*, 14 Feb. 2019,  
[www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts](http://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts).