

# Why are Municipalities So Important for Syrian Refugees in Turkey? - Rabia Karakaya Polat & Vivien Lowndes



Over 5.6 million people have fled Syria since 2011. Turkey hosts the world's largest community of displaced Syrians ([about 3.6 million](#)). Nine years after the arrival of the first group of Syrians to the country, their future in Turkey is still uncertain. In our [latest article](#) as part of a British Academy funded project, we explore the role of municipalities in interpreting, enacting and contesting Turkey's refugee policy.<sup>[1]</sup>

As of 2020, more than [98% of Syrians in Turkey live in urban settings rather than camps](#). Half of the urban refugees live in border provinces; others are spread

across the country, particularly in metropolitan areas. Istanbul, where we conducted our field research, hosts the largest number of refugees, more than [half a million](#).

From 2011, Turkey pursued an open-door policy based on [narratives of hospitality and religious solidarity](#). However, this narrative is shifting towards cohesion, as the temporary character of Syrian settlement looks less likely. The Turkish government is also encouraging '[voluntary return](#)' as a response to the unfolding economic crisis, the possibility of new mass arrivals and the risk of losing votes as compassion fatigue looms in Turkish society. Municipal actors struggle as they cannot influence these official policies but they are the ones who have to solve problems on the ground, with extremely limited resources and in a context of political risk.

Despite not recognizing Syrians as refugees, Turkey gradually offered them free public health care and education as part of a [temporary protection scheme](#). In 2016, Syrians also obtained limited access to the formal labour market, thanks to a new law on work permits. As of 2020, over 110,000 have been granted citizenship mostly based on skills and capital. But there is a lot of policy ambiguity. This ambiguity and the absence of a universal rights-based refugee policy in Turkey leads to significant variation in local responses to refugees, and in their living standards and level of integration with the local community.

As it is becoming clear that millions of Syrians will stay in Turkey, municipalities increasingly focus on social cohesion programmes such as Turkish language courses, vocational training projects, and cultural activities bringing together the two communities. These municipalities are in a very difficult position for many reasons. First, the role and responsibilities of municipalities have not been clearly defined. Therefore, municipal actors do not know what they should be doing in relation to Syrian refugees and they have to operate within a very ambiguous policy environment. Second, they do not get any extra budget to spend on refugees. Municipalities in Turkey receive money from the central government based on their population. Even if they host as many refugees as their own population, they do not get an extra penny from the central government. Third, as

vote-seeking organisations they have to deal with [anti-refugee attitudes in the society](#), which are on the rise especially in the context of [economic crisis](#).

But municipalities in Turkey are extremely pragmatic organisations. They know how to operate in a centralised and increasingly authoritarian political system. They often cooperate with NGOs as a way to access international funds available for refugees. A municipal actor who we interviewed said: “Spending 1 lira on refugees today prevents you from spending 100 lira tomorrow”. EU funding is important for municipalities that are struggling to finance their refugee services in the absence of any additional funding from the national government. Despite the [national government’s frequent accusations of the West in relation to ‘burden-sharing’](#), municipalities are developing creative projects in cooperation with NGOs to access international funds for refugees. These include community centres built to serve Syrian refugees, cash-for-work projects aiming to increase their employability, and several cohesion projects such as language classes, drama lessons for kids, and women’s clubs.

Our research identified five distinctive policy narratives emerging in these municipalities. A powerful narrative during the initial years of the refugee arrival, *humanitarianism* is now declining but still acts as a driving force for municipalities. *Pragmatism* is also widespread as municipalities believe that, if needs are not addressed and opportunities provided, there will be bigger policy challenges in the future. *Equality* is another powerful narrative as some municipal actors believe that Syrians should be provided with equal rights with Turkish citizens. A municipal actor said: “We shouldn’t be providing aid. We should be serving their rights”. The gradual decline of the ‘guest’ narrative at the national level has led to a *social cohesion* narrative gaining ground, expressed in projects to integrate Syrians into district life. Finally, *anti-refugee narratives* also exist in these localities. We frequently came across community leaders complaining about economic implications (rising rents, unemployment), cultural differences, language issues and a perceived lack of social mixing.

Despite its increasingly authoritarian character, the national government’s policy narratives do not go unchallenged. In seeking to address practical challenges on

the ground, both AKP and opposition controlled municipalities are developing their own understandings of refugee policy - becoming storytellers and performers in their own right - even where this directly challenges national policy narratives (notably anti-Western, religious and heroic elements). Our research shows that international or national policy pronouncements cannot be taken at face value. Instead, we need to understand the active construction of what refugee policy means at the local government level, in situations of intense need and limited resources. Despite being weak *vis-à-vis* the central state, municipalities have been able to develop creative and varied responses to meeting refugee needs, even within the same province. In policy terms, this points to potential benefits from harnessing local government creativity and flexibility, in preference to a 'one-size fits all' approach to refugee policy.

<sup>[1]</sup> Our article published in *Local Government Studies* is based on research funded by the British Academy Newton Advanced Fellowship (NAFR1180177). In this article, we unpack the empirical puzzle of how formally weak local governments respond to refugee needs in Turkey. Drawing upon interpretive policy analysis (IPA), we identify distinctive local narratives and examine how these local interpretations are enacted in specific approaches to refugee service delivery. Vivien Lowndes and Rabia Karakaya Polat (2020) How do local actors interpret, enact and contest policy? An analysis of local government responses to meeting the needs of Syrian refugees in Turkey, *Local Government Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2020.1825386.

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