

SYRIAN SPILLOVER RISKS FOR TURKEY

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Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*

I. Introduction

Turkey's response to the Syrian crisis cannot be fully analysed without reference to the two countries' tangled history.¹ For four centuries both were mostly part of the Ottoman Empire, and for most of the past century since the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the province of Hatay (for Turks) or Alexandretta (for Syrians) has been an important geopolitical fulcrum of tension. Until 1938 the province was part of French-mandate Syria, which bequeathed it handsome buildings and bridges that still stand today. Amid Turkish agitation for annexation, France, seeking Turkish neutrality on the eve of the Second World War, allowed a referendum in 1938 that made it independent Alexandretta. The tiny state voted to join Turkey a year later.

A residual Syrian claim to Hatay/Alexandretta, never entirely relinquished, was a key factor in Ankara-Damascus ties that were usually strained. During the Cold War, NATO member Turkey and Soviet ally Syria put up minefields, barbed wire and watchtowers along their border, built dams on major cross-border rivers like the Euphrates and Orontes, and accused each other of backing domestic armed insurgents. Hatay's people lived in a backwater, cut off from their old Syrian hinterland and distant from Turkey's main commercial arteries. Along the border, divided families used to meet at holidays to throw presents over and shout greetings through the high fences that divided the two countries.

In 1998-1999, after Turkey threatened to invade Syria over its long-term support for the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (Partiya Karkarêne Kurdistanê-PKK), Damascus expelled PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Hatay then became a chief beneficiary of a regional realignment, which quickly made Turkey a major commercial and diplomatic partner of Syria, epitomised in the late-2000s by public closeness between Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.² Turkey's policy of "zero problems with neighbours" led to freer travel, trade agreements, infrastructure integration and regular high-level political meetings.³ Hatay boomed when Turkish and Syrian visa requirements were mutually

* Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralisme, de la sécurité humaine et du développement durable (Plusec) retained the International Crisis Group to conduct this research and analysis and to prepare this report.

¹ For previous Crisis Group reporting on the Syria crisis, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013; N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012; and N°128, *Syria's Mutating Conflict*, 1 August 2012.

² See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°92, *Reshuffling the Cards (I): Syria's Evolving Strategy*, 14 December 2009.

³ See Crisis Group Europe Report N°203, *Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints*, 7 April 2010.

lifted in August 2009 and old family, transport and commercial links revived. But this rapidly lost momentum as the Syria crisis began.⁴

For months after Syrians began demonstrating in March 2011, Turkey hoped to help achieve a smoother transition in Syria than in other Middle Eastern uprisings. Prime Minister Erdoğan and other officials pressed Assad to reform in repeated telephone calls and nine visits to Damascus by Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, including an epic seven-hour-long meeting with Bashar al-Assad and his team.⁵

When Assad brushed this advice aside, Turkey executed a 180-degree turn.⁶ It upped its sponsorship of an opposition Syrian National Council at a meeting in Istanbul in August 2011. In September, Erdoğan called unequivocally for Assad to go, saying he had been betrayed by Assad's broken promises to him and angered that civilian protesters were being killed.⁷ Turkey was convinced by an international consensus that the Damascus regime would quickly give way and did not want to lag behind any foreign intervention, as had been the case in Libya.⁸

Turkey abandoned its previous rejection of Western-led sanctions on Syria and recognised the Syrian National Council as the official representative of the Syrian opposition in November 2011. Its backbone was the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, some of whose members fled to Turkey during the Cold War and who shared Turkey's governing Justice and Development Party's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) Sunni Muslim world outlook. Although foreign backers tried to make the group non-sectarian, it never managed to be fully representative, partly because Syria's Kurds and secular groups remained suspicious of Turkey's involvement and motives.⁹

Meanwhile, military tensions began to rise in 2012. In June, a Turkish reconnaissance jet crashed in Syrian waters, with Syria saying it shot the plane down and Turkey responding with initially fiery rhetoric and sharper rules of engagement.¹⁰ As opposition fighters seized control of northern Syria, on 3 October five Turkish townspeople were killed and nine wounded by a stray shell in the more easterly town of Akçakale. On 4 October, the Turkish parliament approved a bill that would allow the government to order troops abroad, including to Syria. Turkish artillery batteries were moved to the border area and responded to any incoming fire,

⁴ For instance, more than 108,000 Turkish trucks carried goods across Hatay's border to Syria in 2010, more than six times the 2007 figure. In the first half of 2012, the number of trucks crossing fell back below that in 2007. Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' response to a written motion for information dated 9 July 2012 by Şefik Çirkin, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) deputy for Hatay, <http://bit.ly/1odPjtp>.

⁵ For a detailed chronology of Turkish actions on Syria since March 2011, see Aslı Ilgit and Rochelle Davis, "The Many Roles of Turkey in the Syrian Crisis", Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), 28 January 2013.

⁶ "The last visit [by Davutoğlu] was the straw that broke the camel's back. Assad promised to deliver certain things, to make a speech about clear rights. He made a speech, but not as agreed, then he attacked Hama [killing hundreds of Syrians in an effort to regain control of the Syrian city in August 2011]. We felt embarrassed. At the same time the British and others, were putting pressure on us [to break with Assad]. We understood that whatever we do [Assad] would use the recipes [methods to keep power]. We wouldn't be able to sway them and the credibility of Turkey will be damaged". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

⁷ "Erdoğan: Dünya Beşar'ın karşısındadır" ["Erdoğan: the world is against Bashar"], *Radikal*, 7 June 2012.

⁸ "The time of autocracies is over. Totalitarian regimes are disappearing. The rule of the people is coming". Quoted in "Syria's oppressors will not survive, Erdoğan says in Libya", *Today's Zaman*, 16 September 2011.

⁹ "We supported the SNC because it was the best show in town, the most comprehensive. We tried to show them the more comprehensive they are, the more powerful they can be ... but they got stuck in personal conflicts". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013. See also Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit.

¹⁰ However, no signs of missile impact were found on the wreckage of the plane, an F4 Phantom, a type that entered service in the mid-1970s.

sometimes for hours on end. Turkish warplanes were frequently scrambled when Syrian aircraft approached the border, although no hostile action appears to have been taken.

Feeling politically exposed and fearing the Syrian government's missiles and chemical weapons arsenal, Turkey asked for NATO support. In January 2013, U.S., German and Dutch Patriot missile batteries were stationed along the border. Stray bullets and shells continued to land on Turkish territory – for instance, twenty people have been injured since October 2012, some seriously, in eastern Ceylanpınar by bullets from fighting between Syrian Kurds and opposition fighters just over the border in Ras al-Ain/Kobane.¹¹

Turkey says it would prefer a negotiated transition between the current regime and a transitional government headed by Vice President Farouq al-Sharaa.¹² Foreign Minister Davutoğlu has set clear goals: Bashar al-Assad should recognise the opposition as legitimate and any dialogue should put in place an interim government to which Assad will relinquish all power.¹³ But Turkey's leadership has not flinched from its bet that the opposition will win, sooner rather than later, despite disappointments and a note of realism in some private conversations.¹⁴ Some in Ankara believe that Syria's Sunni majority will also naturally move to govern harmoniously over all of post-Assad Syria.¹⁵ Officials predict Assad's fall at anything from a few months to a year, looking hopefully at statements from some Western capitals about arming the opposition.¹⁶ Prudently, they also talk of the need for the international community to plan ahead in case regime change triggers massacres of some communities, notably Assad's Alawite co-religionists.

For sure, with a 900km border with Syria, Turkey cannot isolate itself from the Syrian conflict. As both countries have until recently sparred over Hatay, and because the ethnic and sectarian make-up of this province is a microcosm of Syria, it provides a clear example of the conflict's spillover effects. The longer it lasts and more violent it becomes, the more Turkey will feel its effects on its territory: in terms of present numbers of refugees, potential future refugee inflows, impact on domestic intercommunal tensions, the risks of Turkey's growing involvement in a proxy war in Syria and the consequences of a change in perception of its Middle Eastern profile from a neutral, secular power to a more partisan, Sunni Muslim actor. This report aims to analyse the impact of events both through the prism of Hatay and also by taking into account some of the broader policy challenges now confronting Ankara.

¹¹ Where Syrian towns have Arabic and Kurdish names, both are given.

¹² "Assad and his clan can leave the country ... it will be different from his being dragged on the street. It will be a smoother transition". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

¹³ Interview with Deutsche Welle, "Davutoğlu: Dialogue should not legitimize Assad", 5 February 2013.

¹⁴ "For us the end is inevitable. The regime will be defeated, the opposition will take power. It can't go on more than a year". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013. "The regime is losing blood and power, and I don't think they can sustain this. But they still have two thirds of the armed forces. Any military solution will take longer than expected ... neither side can inflict a definitive defeat on the other". Crisis Group interview, other Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁵ "There is a huge Sunni majority, 70 per cent. Unlike in Lebanon, it can be a binding factor ... international support for the opposition will increase. More aid will come from the Gulf. This can end in a year". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA) analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012. Such a view is not necessarily supported by Syrians: "Sunnis are from different places, different classes, different ethnicities. There is a sort of Sunni revival. It's not about what to do next, but it is a consensus on getting rid of Bashar. But there is no Sunni political or communal identity". Crisis Group interview, Syrian opposition activist, Istanbul, November 2012.

¹⁶ It "cannot happen [that the opposition accepts Assad, though they] might sit at the table with the other remnants of the regime ... despite all this, I tell you that al-Assad will go". Prime Minister Erdoğan, quoted in "Despite US opposition, oil trade with Iraq is legal, PM Erdoğan says", *Today's Zaman*, 8 February 2013.

II. A Rising Tide of Refugees

On 29 April 2011, a first group of 250 Syrian villagers fled the war into Hatay. The inflow grew from a few hundred daily arrivals to thousands crossing at a time in the summer of 2012.¹⁷ What Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu described in August 2012 as Turkey's "psychological threshold" of 100,000 refugees was crossed in October. By April 2013, government officials estimated between a minimum 300,000 and more probably 450,000 Syrians were in Turkish refugee camps, towns and villages, with each sudden worsening of fighting triggering new influxes.¹⁸ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) believes that numbers could double or triple by the end of 2013.¹⁹

A. TURKEY'S SYSTEM AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES

After almost two years, the direct cost to the main Turkish disaster agency is \$750 million. To this, some officials add another \$400 million in extra costs to the health and education ministries and other government agencies.²⁰ Turkey has treated more than 720,000 Syrian patients and is supporting schools for 26,000 Syrian children.²¹ This cost is likely to continue to spiral upwards as numbers rise and Ankara grants refugees rights to use more state services. In April 2013, Turkey was spending \$50-\$60 million per month on refugees.²²

Most Syrians who entered Turkey through Hatay moved onto other provinces, but, as in these other locations, many are still highly visible in Hatay's airport, bus stations, the main streets of the provincial capital of Antakya, and border districts like Reyhanlı and Yayladağ. With 277km or nearly one third of Turkey's 900km border with Syria in Hatay, the province's importance and vulnerability remain pivotal.

Turkey gives fleeing Syrians temporary protection, but not full refugee status. This is partly because it sees their displacement as temporary, as do most Syrians, many of whom continue to cross in and out of their home country. It is also because Turkey signed the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol with a geographic limitation and does not recognise refugees from outside Europe.²³ Under its April 2013 law on foreigners and international protection and its 1994 Asylum Regulation (amended in 2006 and supplemented by a government directive the same year), Turkey provides non-European refugees with "temporary asylum-

¹⁷ "There were 2,500 to 3,000 people crossing over in one night". Crisis Group interview, Celalettin Lekesiz, governor, Hatay, January 2013.

¹⁸ The difference relates to the number of Syrians outside the camps. A lower figure of 100,000 is the officially registered total, the higher 250,000 based on information given to Crisis Group by two different Turkish persons with knowledge of the matter. Turkey normally prefers a minimum official total, partly in order to avoid public alarm. Crisis Group interviews, April 2013.

¹⁹ See interview with UNHCR chief Antonio Guterres, "Guterres: UNHCR not to assume operational role in Turkish refugee camps", *Today's Zaman*, 10 March 2013.

²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Turkish officials, February-April 2013.

²¹ Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, speech to UN Human Rights Council, 25 February 2013, <http://bit.ly/WDvIV7>.

²² Senior Turkish official's statement, Istanbul Conference on Mediation, 12 April 2013.

²³ But it still gives them right of asylum during their stay while they apply for refugee status in third countries. "Regulation on procedures and principles to be applied in cases of individual foreigners' demands for refuge in Turkey or for residence in Turkey while seeking refuge in third countries, for population movements and mass inflows for asylum purposes", No. 3191, 1994, available at www.mevzuat.gov.tr.

seeker status”.²⁴ The Syrians in Turkey are under such “temporary protection”, which does not legally allow their transfer to third countries as UN-recognised refugees, legal employment or education.²⁵

In practice, however, Turkey has been flexible and taken important steps to help Syrians regain a sense of self-reliance and integrate in their new environment. In November 2012, it allowed Syrians who are not living in collective centres and have passports to extend their stays with residency permits for up to one year. Turkey has turned a blind eye to the establishment of several temporary Arabic-language schools. Students can attend Turkish universities as guests. Since January 2013, all Syrians have access to free medical care.²⁶ A few refugees find local work unofficially, mostly as manual labourers doing seasonal fruit picking or construction, often for less pay than locals.²⁷ Some Turkish businessmen are eager to legally employ more Syrians and advocate proper regulations.²⁸

International partners, for the most part, publicly praise Turkey’s response and cooperation.²⁹ An EU official said, “we welcome the fact that Turkey has an open border and is taking on a significant burden. We are not emphasising the lack of status issue or lecturing Turkey. We are not exactly welcoming these refugees with open arms in the EU ourselves”.³⁰ Indeed, several European states make it extremely difficult for refugees to apply for even travel visas.³¹ However, in private, European diplomats still criticise the limits Turkey has placed on international humanitarian activities.³²

The EU does not have a common policy regarding Syrians fleeing the conflict and has not officially urged member states to resettle them, which means their asylum claims are handled individually. According to Frontex, the EU border agency, Syrians lodged 22,424 asylum applications in the 27 EU states in 2012, up from 8,180 applications in 2011.³³ The majority of them are in Germany and Sweden, where there are big Syrian diasporas and Syrian nationals apply-

²⁴ Turkey on 4 April approved a new law on foreigners and international protection, prepared in collaboration with UNHCR before the Syria crisis broke out, which includes a section on international protection and gives more social rights to asylum seekers, although it maintains the geographic limitation for refugee status.

²⁵ While deriving nominally from a concept first employed by several EU members states responding to the mass influx from the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s (see the EU directive at <http://bit.ly/10ByuWT>), the application in Turkey is different in that it does not grant some categories a residence permit for the duration of the protection period or work authorisation.

²⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013. “Turkey offers all Syrians free health care”, *Today’s Zaman*, 23 January 2013.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Hatay, January 2013.

²⁸ “Tekstildeki eleman ihtiyacına Suriyeli mülteci önerisi” [“Proposal to employ Syrians to cover the personnel gap in textile industry”], Anatolian Agency, 24 January 2013.

²⁹ “For us what mattered was that the doors were open and the refugees came to [the] safe zone We appreciate what Turkey is doing. We are sharing our standards and guidelines with the government [but] we can’t enter the camps to carry out operational activities”. Crisis Group interview, international expert, Ankara, December 2012.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, December 2012.

³¹ “The European policy is to keep Syrians out. If they make it here, for instance, we’ll give them refugee status *prima facie*. But at the same time we make it virtually impossible to come here legally. We deny all visa requests by Syrians of all walks of life. I can only think of two exceptions: one was an employee at our own embassy in Damascus, and even that was incredibly hard; the other was an activist who, through his connections, got support”. Crisis Group email correspondence, European immigration officer, April 2013.

³² “Someone should tell Turkey, ‘stop being a victim and work more easily with the international community’”. Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, February 2013.

³³ “Considering the total of applications, while Afghans still rank first, the most significant trend was the increased applications submitted by Syrian nationals This represented the most major influx of asylum seekers for many years”. Annual Risk Analysis, Frontex, April 2013.

ing for international protection are automatically granted some form of protection.³⁴ Frontex also reports a sharp increase in illegal Syrian immigrants crossing into Europe, mainly through the Greece-Turkey border.³⁵ Most EU states have in practice suspended deportations to Syria, but Greece, for instance, continued “forced returns” in large numbers in 2012, mostly back to Turkey.³⁶ In a January 2013 appeal, Amnesty International, the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) called on the EU to “respond decisively and effectively to protect refugees fleeing Syria in the surrounding region and in Europe”.³⁷

The EU is planning to set up a Regional Protection Program (RPP) in cooperation with UNHCR to enhance the capacities of authorities and organisations in neighbouring countries, such as Turkey, to cope with the refugees in compliance with international standards.³⁸ According to ongoing discussions, the program might explore a resettlement scheme to EU member states.³⁹

While the prevailing approach by most member states is not to deport Syrians, the uneven record that sees only Germany and Sweden offer automatically some form of protection amounts to a very limited response to the refugee crisis so far. Most recently, EU member states have voluntarily on an individual basis committed to a program of temporary protection for 50,000 Syrians, which is a step in the right direction.⁴⁰

³⁴ On 20 March 2013, Germany said it would grant resettlement to 5,000 more Syrian refugees, who will arrive in the country in June, bringing the total number of Syrian refugees taken in by Germany since the beginning of the crisis to 13,000. Germany gives most of them subsidiary protection while Sweden grants them three-year residence permits. “The European response to the Syrian refugee crisis: What next?” European University Institute Migration Policy Centre, 2012. In addition, according to Frontex, “a German court ruled early in 2012 that Syrian nationals applying for international protection are to be granted automatic refugee status on the grounds that the very act of leaving Syria presumably illegally, and then asking for international protection may, upon return to Syria, result in torture and imprisonment. Sweden also declared that Syrian nationals claiming for asylum would also be automatically granted protection, while other Member States are reviewing their policies”. Annual Risk Analysis, op. cit.

³⁵ “There were 7,903 illegal border-crossings by Syrians detected in 2012, the majority of them on the Greek land border with Turkey. In 2012, the nationality with the most dramatic change in the number of detections were Syrians, both in terms of relative growth and absolute number, from 1,616 in 2011 to 7,903 in 2012 (+389%)”. Ibid.

³⁶ According to Frontex, around 2,800 decisions to return Syrians were taken in Greece between July-September 2012, and “Greece reported a sharp increase in returns of Syrians as of June 2012”. “FRAN Quarterly”, Issues 2 and 3, 2012. “Many Syrians enter the EU through Greece, where they face a dysfunctional asylum system and are unable or unwilling to apply for protection there Since the beginning of 2011, more than 9,000 Syrians have been arrested for allegedly unlawfully entering and staying in Greece”. “EU: Provide protection for Syrian refugees”, Human Rights Watch, 23 December 2012. According to Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Syrian refugees made up 40 per cent of illegal registered entries in Greece in 2012, making them the second largest group after Afghans. “Syria refugees in Greece face lack of ‘humanitarian’ help”, Agence France-Presse, 14 March 2013.

³⁷ “Joint Statement: Syria Refugee Crisis – EU should do more”, 17 January 2013.

³⁸ The program was first discussed by the informal Justice and Home Affairs Council in July 2012 and then again in October when the council tasked the Commission to set it up as soon as possible. Justice and Home Affairs Council, Luxembourg, 25-26 October 2012.

³⁹ High Level Working Group on Asylum and Migration, Outcome of Proceedings, Council of the European Union, 22 February 2013. Governments and international organisations have been cautious to promise resettlement beyond the Syrian neighbourhood for fear of creating a “pull factor” that will worsen the refugee crisis. “Exchange of views with Commissioner Georgieva on the situation in Syria and the impact of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon”, European Parliament, 23 April 2013. RPPs provide for only a voluntary commitment from member states to offer durable solutions for refugees in their countries and resettlement. “Regional Protection Programmes”, Summaries of EU legislations, at <http://bit.ly/1ogS9dD>. Given the gravity of the humanitarian situation in Syria, the EU has a responsibility to offer such options in solidarity with, and to prevent the risk of political instability in, neighbouring countries that have reached the limits of their absorption capacity.

⁴⁰ “Exchange of views with Commissioner Georgieva”, op. cit.

B. THE BEST REFUGEE CAMPS EVER SEEN

Turkey established the first collective centre for Syrians in Hatay's Yayladağ border district in April 2011, followed by more facilities in the province and later elsewhere in the country's south east. In the two years since the Syrian unrest started, 286,000 Syrians have found shelter in collective centres in Turkey, around 95,000 have left and currently about 192,000 are housed in seventeen camps in eight provinces. Fourteen of these are tent camps.⁴¹ Four new container camps are being built for 40,000 people. One camp in Hatay, Apaydın, is reserved for defecting officers and their families.⁴²

In theory Turkey allows new arrivals from the thousands camped on the Syrian side of the border, but in practice it limits the number until space is available or new facilities are ready.⁴³ With daily arrivals at 1,000 in February 2013, officials privately estimate Turkey could have about half a million refugees in collective centres and a similar number in private accommodation by the end of 2013.⁴⁴ A Turkish official said among those seeking entry it now gives priority to the ill, women, children and elderly.⁴⁵ At times when panicked waves of Syrians flee new fighting, however, Turkey receives them on an impromptu basis.

Women and children make up 70 per cent of the camps' population.⁴⁶ While people in the camps are allowed to go back to Syria, there is no guarantee that they can re-enter when they want. Men who are registered often go back to Syria to fight and those at least one camp can stay out for up to a week and return.⁴⁷

The prime minister's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) is the main government body charged with coordinating the domestic and international humanitarian responses.⁴⁸ The Turkish Red Crescent is responsible inside the camps and delivers food and non-food aid. These agencies operate under the ultimate authority of the state-appointed provincial governor and district prefects. In January 2013, Turkey appointed a senior governor-level bureaucrat to oversee Syrians' needs in Turkey.⁴⁹ It has also organised elections of representatives in one camp.⁵⁰

⁴¹ Five are in Hatay, two in Şanlıurfa, three in Gaziantep, and one each in Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye, Adana, and Adıyaman. There are also three container camps, one each in Kilis, Gaziantep (Nizip) and Şanlıurfa (Harran). Three camps initially set up in Hatay were later moved elsewhere.

⁴² Officers' camps are governed by a Law No. 4104 (1941) and a 1995 Regulation on members of foreign armies that seek asylum in Turkey. Turkey denies allegations that Apaydın camp is used as a training ground for opposition fighters. "The camp is only 100 metres away from the village. Would we put it so close if we were to carry out military training there?" Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

⁴³ "We [Turkey] said 100,000 was our psychological threshold. But then Ras al-Ain gets bombed and 8,000 people flee. How can we turn them away?" Crisis Group interview, domestic Turkish aid official, December 2012. "Our policy is trying to keep the border open. If those on the other side are not under immediate threat, if there are no attacks and no health issues, we tell them to wait until we build new camps". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, December 2012. "They could come if they wanted to, but for now Turkey has convinced them to stay there. There is nothing Turkey can do to stop them if they all decide to come". Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, deputy president, İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH, The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), Istanbul, January 2013.

⁴⁴ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, March 2013.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, Celalettin Lekesiz, Hatay governor, January 2013.

⁴⁷ Camp residents can also take daily outings as long as they are back by 5pm. Crisis Group interviews, Yayladağ camp, Hatay, January 2013.

⁴⁸ It coordinates the humanitarian work of several ministries including those of the interior, foreign, health, education and religious affairs, as well as local governorates and the Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay).

⁴⁹ "It's just like the old days, with the Ottoman sultan appointing a *vali* [governor] for Syria". Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Hatay, January 2013.

⁵⁰ Some 14,000 Syrians voted to elect a headman in Kilis camp in January 2013.

The camps, whether with tents or containers, have standards sometimes described as “five-star” by international experts.⁵¹ An AFAD official said what they do is “much more than give them food and clothes”, and recounted how upon realising the Syrians were not eating the bread in a camp because it lacked a particular herb, they closed down a local bakery to make the type of bread they wanted. He defended the gifts of wedding dresses saying “our conscience wouldn’t let us [do anything less]. This is our tradition [as Turks]”.⁵² Similarly, a Turkish Red Crescent official said “we were told [by the government] to give [the Syrians] whatever they want”.⁵³

Most camps have classrooms, hospitals, areas for recreation, sports and religious worship, laundry and television rooms, meeting tents, and even hair salons where Syrians can train as hairdressers.⁵⁴ Psychological assistance is offered. For the most part, the centres are well-guarded and safe.⁵⁵ Reaching above-and-beyond seems to have worked as initial complaints by disgruntled refugees subsided; among several Yayladağ camp residents interviewed by Crisis Group in January 2013 in Hatay, a number of female refugees said they had no complaints at all.⁵⁶

In a second camp visited by Crisis Group in March 2013, Boynuyöğün, in Hatay, the nearly 4,000 Syrians lived in tents along immaculately maintained paved roads.⁵⁷ A well-stocked supermarket supplied food to refugees who used a per capita allowance put onto credit cards organised by the World Food Programme and funded by international donors.⁵⁸ The camp had two small tea shops and a cell phone supply tent. The Turkish government had given each tent a fridge and most had bought their own air conditioners. One family even built a little front courtyard under nylon with a dovecote with pigeons from home, fancy lamp fittings, and a canary in a cage around a working decorative pool.

⁵¹ “This is the highest standard of material aid we have ever seen in such a crisis”. Crisis Group interview, European official, Hatay, March 2013.

⁵² Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2012.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2012.

⁵⁴ While Turkish officials say children study a Syrian curriculum, camp residents said it is more a mixture of Turkish and Syrian programs. Turkish officials said parents had no hesitations about sending their kids to school, while a refugee said he was not happy with the Turkish curriculum. There are also classes giving vocational training to adults, such as sewing and hairdressing. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara and Hatay, December 2012 and January 2013.

⁵⁵ However, at least eighteen Syrians have reportedly died in a number of tent fires in Turkish camps over the last two years. The last fire on 24 April killed two in the south-eastern province of Şanlıurfa. “Fire in Syrian refugee tent kills 2, injures 4”, *Today’s Zaman*, 24 April 2013.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Yayladağ, Hatay, January 2013. “Most of the displaced are urban, civilised people. They have never cooked bread for themselves in their lives before, they have never lived in tents. They were initially complaining about the conditions in the camps, but that has stopped”. Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, January 2013.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group would like to thank the EU delegation in Ankara for inviting an analyst on this trip in March 2013.

⁵⁸ One card per family, usually issued to a female member. Each card has 40 Turkish Lira (TL) per person for fifteen days. Syrians in Yayladağ camp complained that local stores charge higher prices for card purchases, and that the money is insufficient as milk powder costs 12 TL. Some shops give money in exchange for a 10 per cent commission. WFP said it is looking into these claims with the Turkish Red Crescent. Crisis Group email correspondence, January 2013. A refugee in Yayladağ camp said they prefer the food cards to Kızılay giving them food. Crisis Group interview, January 2013. The food cards are currently used in all the Hatay camps except Apaydın and Kilis and will likely be available in more camps if WFP can maintain funding. Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, January 2013, and EU aid official, March 2013.

Nonetheless, inadequacies and crowding exist, especially in the big camps further east for up to 45,000 people.⁵⁹ Comprehensive registration and an integrated database on the refugees are lacking. Currently, all of them have registration cards assigned by camp authorities but exchange of this information between camps is poor. Someone who leaves one camp could technically go to Syria and come back to another.⁶⁰ In late 2012, the interior ministry started finger printing refugees in Kilis but the procedure has not yet been extended.⁶¹

Adequate training of state personnel sent to collective centres, care of vulnerable groups and the distribution of Syrians based on their ethnic or political orientation are challenges.⁶² Another issue is that some camps are closer to the border than international standards prescribe, in part because Turkey's 1994 regulation says camps have to be "as close to the border as possible" in cases of mass influx.⁶³

But ultimately the biggest question regards the sustainability of such high standards, given that a 10,000-person camp costs \$10 million to establish and takes a month to build, and aid costs between \$200 and \$300 per month per refugee.⁶⁴

C. SYRIANS IN PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION

A Turkish official told Crisis Group that in mid-April 2013 more than 200,000 Syrians were living outside the collective centres, supporting themselves in rented accommodation or staying with relatives, mostly in provinces along the border where there are frequent Syria-Turkey family ties.⁶⁵ The trouble with patchy registration is illustrated in Hatay, where the official count in January for the whole province was that 12,000 Syrians were staying outside the camps. Yet according to the district prefect of Reyhanlı, there were 11,000 in his district alone.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, the Reyhanlı mayor believed that there were in fact 30,000 Syrians living among the pre-existing population of 60,000 people.⁶⁷ Most feel well-off compared to other Syrians:

The best thing here is the security. We're safe. [In Turkey] they're a good people, they treat you properly, not like in Syria where you're treated with no respect. Like, my apartment in Syria is a mess, full of sewage now, and my landlord got in touch with me to say I had to get my things out. My Turkish landlord is good to me. Turkish citizens help more than the

⁵⁹ Refugees sometimes protest about camp conditions. For instance, water shortages caused a riot in Öncüpınar camp in July 2012 and a group of refugees demonstrated in October 2012 in Kahramanmaraş camp saying that they were not receiving food and other supplies.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, December 2012.

⁶¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

⁶² All camps are Sunni (90 per cent Sunni Arabs), while there may be a few Syrian Alawites in the cities. Yayladağ centre in Hatay, for instance, has both Turkmen and Arabs but they are separated inside the facility. Crisis Group interviews, January-February 2013.

⁶³ An international refugee expert said they must be at least 7 to 8km inland from the border. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, December 2012. Turkey's Economy Minister Ali Babacan said on 16 January that the monthly cost for refugees in total was around \$40 million. "Monthly cost of Syrian refugees reaches \$40 million", *Today's Zaman*, 16 January 2013.

⁶⁵ Carol Morello, "Turkish villagers take in Syrian refugees that humanitarian groups don't serve", *The Washington Post*, 3 January 2013.

⁶⁶ "90 per cent of those staying here are relatives of local people, they open their hearts, people are really sharing, it's a great advantage. It's actually an old tradition, because pilgrims to Mecca would often have to wait here as well for days before crossing the border". Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Güler, district prefect, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Şanverdi, mayor, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

government. When my Turkish neighbour realised that my daughter and I were just sitting in the cold, he brought me a small heater, which I couldn't have afforded.⁶⁸

But the generosity and capacities of local hosts risk wearing thin as the crisis persists. The Turkish Red Crescent is not assisting those outside the camps, but Turkish officials say a new government initiative is under way to deliver aid from Turkish and international NGOs to urban refugees under the coordination of local governorates.⁶⁹ In October 2012, the main Turkish NGO working on the Syrian crisis, İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH, The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief), scaled back its distributions of food boxes to Syrians living outside the collective centres. The refugees mainly live off remittances from relatives in the large Syrian global diaspora, selling off gold and personal possessions, or taking odd jobs including manual labour many never did before.⁷⁰ Rising rents, the cost of Turkish residency papers for those living outside the camps and who entered Turkey with passports (and fines of up to \$300 for overstaying visas) and the inability of many refugees to focus on long-term jobs or projects are real challenges.⁷¹

Schooling is a growing preoccupation for many parents who want their children to obtain diplomas that will be recognised when they return to Syria. Unofficial but tolerated Syrian hospitals treat Syrians, but there are concerns that children are not being adequately immunised and people are dying without costly treatment of chronic conditions like cancer.⁷² Syrian NGOs say they could do much more if Syrian doctors could obtain temporary authorisation to practice.⁷³ Since January 2013, Turkish state hospitals have treated Syrians for free. But education, health, housing and employment are most likely going to pose growing challenges for the refugees living outside the camps, and the government and non-governmental agencies assisting them. International NGOs might be able to help more in meeting the challenges but so far few are registered to do so (see Section II.D).

Even if Assad is ousted, there could be years of turmoil followed by reconstruction in Syria. This could leave hundreds of thousands of Syrians in Turkey for the medium term and they will need to increase their self-reliance. Some Syrian textile businessmen have already set up new sweatshops in Istanbul suburbs, some are finding niche businesses in Gaziantep and Syrian families can be found working increasingly in western agricultural towns. A Syrian refugee in Reyhanlı went into minority partnership with a Turkish restaurant owner, as Syrians cannot easily set up businesses on their own. New pressures for long-term economic and social normalisation will only grow as time goes on:

I used to be a schoolteacher in the morning and worked as a salesperson in a clothes shop in the afternoon. I have already sold all of my gold. The last was my daughters' earrings a month ago. There's no real work, we get paid half what Turks can get, rents are high.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Reyhanlı, January 2012.

⁶⁹ A pilot project under Turkey's state agency AFAD and the governor and funded by the UNHCR has started in Gaziantep province. Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, April 2013.

⁷⁰ "My sister had to get a job. She went to a pastry shop. She had to work twelve hours a day, they paid her 600 lira while Turks got 1,000 lira. She came back with feet like plates at first, crying. But she got used to it, learned Turkish and made lots of friends". Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Antakya, January 2012.

⁷¹ "We're forced to be here, we've no choice. Most of the people here are wanted by the Syrian government. They haven't started working for Turks because everyone is waiting. It's temporary for us here. Only about 5 per cent are working". Crisis Group interview, Dr Qusayr Sayyid Isa, director of the Orient hospital, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, Dr Khaula Sawa, Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations (UOSSM), Hatay, March 2013.

When I use the neighbours internet I have to pay her money. It's hard to do this kind of work. I can't stay [like this] for long.⁷⁴

Still, even in refugee-filled Reyhanlı, the upbeat mayor says that the only real problem is busier traffic, and that any extra use of municipal services is paid for. While Turkish officials acknowledge that the medium term is going to be more difficult, poverty and lack of shelter are still growing problems:

The Syrians were well-off. But the more this drags on, the worse their financial situation becomes. NGOs take care of them ... there were complaints that people were sleeping rough on the streets in Hatay. We collected them and took them in the [camps].⁷⁵

D. *TURKEY AND INTERNATIONAL DONORS TRIP OVER EACH OTHER*

1. International funding

Turkey has spent at least \$750 million so far on Syrian refugees, and has received around \$100 million from the outside world.⁷⁶ It wants its international partners to share more of the burden, especially because it feels the crisis is the result of a global failure at the UN Security Council and the West's inability to address the Assad regime's culture of impunity.⁷⁷

Turkey says donors should primarily give cash or provide food and health services. It accepts project-based funding to AFAD or the Turkish Red Crescent, but until recently it rejected most in-kind aid or personnel.⁷⁸ Now it has begun to accept material aid from the UN and other international donors.⁷⁹ But officials say they are frustrated with time-consuming paperwork for little assistance, and with offers of psychosocial care, which they believe Turkey can handle. In the words of a Turkish official, "traditional donor countries have very strict criteria for giving aid, and [Turkey] has very strict criteria for receiving it".⁸⁰

Turkish leaders have focused their criticism on the EU, but EU officials point out that the first Turkish letter asking for aid was received only in April 2012. The EU and its member states have now offered €600 million, of which €461 million has been disbursed.⁸¹ EU guidelines, however, restrict most funding to EU partner organisations – including international NGOs and

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee in Reyhanlı, January 2013.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turkish domestic aid official, Ankara, December 2012.

⁷⁶ This includes about \$2.2 million in in-kind aid, \$57 million cash and around \$42 million from the UN Regional Response Plan and a joint November 2012 appeal by the Turkish Red Crescent and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent. Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, April 2013. Some Turkish measures of total spending rise to \$1.5 billion. "What we've got is not even 5 per cent of what we've spent. The outside world has done nothing ... we have no need for [offers of] tents. Everybody has to help. This is not just Turkey's problem". Crisis Group interview, Bülent Arınç, deputy prime minister, Ankara, February 2013.

⁷⁷ "The regime has been living like this for the past 40 years. They've always managed to get away with it. That's why they were overconfident". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013. However, Turkey must share the blame, for instance supporting Bashar al-Assad in the 2005 Lebanese crisis, when the West sought to fault, pressure and sanction the Syrian regime.

⁷⁸ "We think cash is better. Production costs in Turkey are much lower. In-kind aid or used goods don't fit our standards. We even received used medical supplies or outdated drugs as in-kind aid. All of it was ... destroyed". Crisis Group interview, domestic Turkish aid official, December 2012. "Everybody should do their share. We want financial aid, or like WFP's [food cards project] specific tangible aid. We need help in providing health, education and food". Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

⁷⁹ The UN has supplied large amounts of material, including winterised tents, kitchen sets and money to the Turkish Red Crescent. The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) has agreed to supply material to schools inside the camps. Most Western state partners provide their help via the UN, but Red Cross societies from several European states have also provided in-kind aid.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, December 2012.

⁸¹ "ECHO Factsheet Syria", European Commission, 5 April 2013.

UN agencies.⁸² Plus, Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon needed – and still need – assistance more urgently than Turkey.⁸³ High standards in Turkish camps also discourage potential donors. A Western aid official said her country could not meet Turkey's request for items like flat-screen televisions because to spend money in this way would be unfair to refugees' elsewhere in the world.⁸⁴ As a result, the Turkish Red Crescent has only received €1 million out of the €190 million the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) spent so far on Syria. In December 2012, the EU pledged an additional €25 million to Turkey, mainly to be spent on AFAD's capacity building and local authorities' needs, but disbursement will start later in 2013.⁸⁵

Individual countries find ways to give help. A total of \$57 million cash support to Turkey has included \$50 million from the king of Saudi Arabia. In-kind aid includes about \$3.5 million from Germany, \$1.8 million from the Dutch Red Cross, and about \$1.5 million from the UK to help buy basic equipment like heaters and plastic sheeting for the camps, as well as the €500,000 Belgium gave to AFAD to build a school in Turkey's Akçakale border town.⁸⁶ Through the Turkish Red Crescent, the Norwegian government paid for meals in Kırkamış refugee camp for two months.⁸⁷ Outside countries are funding the World Food Programme's credit cards for food (see Section I.A above), a program that is now feeding nearly 100,000 refugees.⁸⁸ But other offers, like Germany's or Italy's to provide field hospitals, were not taken up, partly because Turkey apparently did not want to accept the foreign professionals that would have been sent to train staff to use the equipment.⁸⁹

Arabic-speaking countries from the Middle East such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia have pledged to help build hospitals and camps.⁹⁰ More than 870 Arab teachers are now teaching refugees.⁹¹ But Qatar, for instance, has focused on northern Syria. Turkish officials are disappointed with the overall response, "countries like Qatar and Kuwait with lots of oil money should be building prefabricated hospitals and schools in [Turkish] cities [where Syrians stay]. They should be sending teachers".⁹²

⁸² "We all have procedures we have to follow We need accountability". Crisis Group interview, EU official, December 2012.

⁸³ Turkey and inaccessible Iraqi border areas only receive about 10 per cent of EU refugee aid. Crisis Group interview, EU official, Hatay, March 2013.

⁸⁴ "High standards imply huge costs. [The Turks say] we can't do less for our guests. But we don't do cash aid ... and it is difficult to share the burden of these costs". Crisis Group interview, European official, Hatay, March 2013.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, December 2012 and March 2013. Of the €25 million, €8.2 million comes from the EU Regional Support Program under which the EU will work with UNICEF and UNHCR in Turkey; €4 million comes from ECHO, working with UNHCR and the Turkish Red Crescent Society; and a further €13 million from pre-accession assistance, to be disbursed based on proposals from relevant ministries, AFAD and partners. See EU Turkey delegation's website, <http://bit.ly/XgfKi2>.

⁸⁶ Henry Kenrick, "Humanitarian crisis in Syria: How Britain is helping", UK Foreign Office blog, <http://bit.ly/14Mr4Cs>. Aid usually has to be classified as capacity building or training projects rather than humanitarian assistance, due to the EU's strict criteria for the latter. Crisis Group interviews, European officials, February-March 2013.

⁸⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

⁸⁸ Crisis Group email correspondence, European diplomat, March 2013.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, February 2013.

⁹⁰ Saudi Arabian officials say they have also established a relief office in Gaziantep. Crisis Group email correspondence, Saudi embassy in Ankara, 7 March 2013.

⁹¹ Information note by Turkish Prime Ministry's Disaster and Emergency Management Directorate (AFAD), 4 April 2013.

⁹² Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

2. International organisations' activities

The main factor complicating outside contributions has been Turkey's hesitancy to register international organisations and NGOs and the degree to which it is ready to allow them to work directly on humanitarian issues. There is no specific law regulating international NGOs, but foreign organisations can register representative offices or branches. Officials from the interior ministry say this usually takes more than a year. A Turkish official said Ankara has fast-tracked registration to one or two months for NGOs working on the Syrian crisis, but cannot name them because the NGOs do not want to be identified by the Syrian government.⁹³ But by mid-April 2013, only three international NGOs had been fully registered, causing a host of problems for the others:

Though neighbouring countries tolerate NGOs engaged in cross-border humanitarian operations in Syria, they are not willing to grant them the logistical and administrative support that comes with official permission. Aside from slowing down the delivery of aid, this semi-underground status also conflicts with the financing rules for some donors What makes this even more of a paradox is that the EU, Turkey and almost 130 other countries recognise the Syrian national coalition as the sole representative over the Syrian people.⁹⁴

Obstacles are not only administrative in a country long suspicious of foreign activities on its territory. Just as the Syria refugee crisis escalated, Turkey asked the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to close its Ankara office because of unrelated disputes about the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's acceptance of the Republic of Cyprus as a member.⁹⁵ Another international NGO was blocked from registering for over a year, apparently because one government department had concerns about supposed past involvement in aid to Iraqi Kurdistan.⁹⁶

Ankara also strictly limits access to the camps and collective centres, from which the EU and UN are absent.⁹⁷ International delegations on occasion visit the camps, but they are not allowed to carry out activities there.⁹⁸ The UNHCR is not openly critical of Turkey's policy.⁹⁹ But other areas of potential support include monitoring, registration, screening of refugees, and making sure that camp administrations are taking full care of vulnerable groups like unaccompanied minors, people with different sexual orientations, those identified with the Assad regime and abused women.¹⁰⁰

Another important reason for international involvement would be to ensure that returns to Syria are voluntary. On 27 March 2013, news emerged that Turkey had deported between 130 and 600 Syrians back to their home country for taking part in a violent riot following a deadly

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, March 2013 and telephone interview, April 2013.

⁹⁴ "Syria two years on: the failure of international aid so far", Médecins sans frontières, March 2013.

⁹⁵ Turkey had wanted the ICRC and its affiliates to accept a Northern Cypriot Turkish Red Crescent at the same time, or to refuse membership to both. Crisis Group interview, Turkish person with knowledge of the situation, April 2013.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, international NGO, Istanbul, March 2013.

⁹⁷ "They don't want all those foreigners moving about". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2013. "This political decision of Turkey stems from the concerns regarding the security and privacy of the Syrians". Crisis Group email correspondence, Turkish official, April 2013.

⁹⁸ "There is this mystery surrounding the camps, people say no one is allowed in. But many countries have sent their ambassadors and representatives and we have walked them around the camps. We are working with the UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF with regards to the Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey". Crisis Group interview, Deniz Şölen, Kızılay, Ankara, December 2012. The administrator of Boynuyoğun said that by 11 March 2013 he had received 176 delegations of visitors. Crisis Group interview, Hatay, March 2013.

⁹⁹ "Not all governments have the capacity and the resources of Turkey ... The generosity of the Turkish government to receive, host and protect [the refugees] is something that [the] international community should recognize and support". "Guterres: UNHCR not to assume operational role in Turkish refugee camps", *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

fire in an Akçakale refugee camp.¹⁰¹ This led to an uncharacteristically harsh statement from UNHCR voicing concern over the allegations and a request for information from Turkish authorities.¹⁰² The Turkish foreign ministry in a 28 March statement said that 130 Syrians had returned to Syria voluntarily because they did not want to face charges in Turkey, and that Turkey respects the requirements of temporary protection status, including no forced returns.¹⁰³ If that is indeed the case, the presence of UN and other international aid personnel would have helped Turkey ward off accusations.¹⁰⁴

One reason behind Turkey's policy is that it wanted to avoid the NGO free-for-all of the Iraqi Kurdish refugee crisis after the 1991 Gulf war. But some diplomats point out that the sudden appearance of 500,000 traumatised Iraqi Kurds on Turkey's border was very different in many ways, and are more frankly critical of Ankara's current stance.¹⁰⁵

Turkey has some valid arguments for maintaining limited access. AFAD's busy Hatay coordinator complained that hundreds of international visitors have been inside the camps, and "each time they make promises, they don't follow through. This [creates expectations in the camps], and disturbs the peace". Officials also argue that camps cannot function properly if the management "constantly has to show visitors around There are hundreds of NGOs who want to provide services to camps. If I let one in, they all want to go in Plus, Syrians tell us 'we are not monkeys at a zoo'". Turkey also wants to protect refugees from being "marked by the regime".¹⁰⁶ Another reason for centralising control, officials say, is to maintain consistency in all the camps with locally procured, standardised items.¹⁰⁷ Finally, Turkish officials consider most international NGOs would contribute relatively little compared to the bureaucratic and political sensitivities they could give rise to, and blame the NGOs for holding back.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ A seven-year-old Syrian girl was killed and two of her siblings wounded when a fire broke out in Süleyman Şah tent facility in Şanlıurfa's Akçakale district on 27 March 2013. A group of around 200 angry refugees then attacked Turkish security forces with stones. Reports citing eye witnesses and camp officials emerged that security forces had identified the assailants through footage from the security cameras and summarily deported them along with their families. See "600 Suriyeli sınır dışı edildi" ["600 Syrians have been deported"], CNN Turk, 28 March 2013; "Akçakale'de 600 Suriyeli sığınmacı sınır dışı edildi" ["600 Syrian asylum-seekers have been deported in Akçakale"], T24, 28 March 2013; "Did Turkey deport Syrians?", *Al-Monitor*, 28 March 2013.

¹⁰² "UNHCR is very concerned with reports of a serious incident and allegations of possible deportations from Akçakale Tent City in the past 24 hours We strongly support the implementation of law and order in the camps and the use of the national legal system to bring the perpetrators of crimes to justice. However, forced returns of refugees to their country of origin cannot be used as a punishment or deterrent". Melissa Fleming, UNHCR chief spokeswoman, cited in "UNHCR alarmed by reports Turkey deported Syria refugees", Agence France-Presse, 28 March 2013. Reuters further quoted her as saying that UNHCR was not invited by the authorities during the return process to monitor the procedures. "U.N. rebukes Turkey over return of Syrian refugees", Reuters, 28 March 2013.

¹⁰³ Foreign Ministry statement SC-7, 28 March 2013, available at www.mfa.gov.tr. Also see "Turkey denies deporting refugees", *The Wall Street Journal*, 28 March 2013.

¹⁰⁴ UNHCR is now responsible for verification of voluntary return in Turkey.

¹⁰⁵ "The tragedy of the displaced Syrians leaves no room for expressions of pride or suspicion: humanitarian assistance is a duty and it is high time that the Turkish foreign ministry lifts the artificial restrictions it has put on the UN, EU, the United States, and reputable international NGOs". Marc Pierini, "Syria: The end game", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 11 December 2012.

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Hatay and Ankara, December 2012 and January 2013.

¹⁰⁷ "World Population Fund wanted to distribute 2,000 hygiene kits in the camps, we raised this to 20,000 [to make sure] every family receives the same thing. If you don't do an equitable distribution among the camps, there will be big problems". Crisis Group interview, domestic Turkish aid official, December 2012.

¹⁰⁸ "The NGOs are used to acting in areas where there's no rule of law, that's why they are complaining ... [and] they are very reluctant to start this process and apply to the ministry of interior. We cannot expedite a process which has not been initiated". Crisis Group email correspondence, April 2013.

Despite restrictions, more than 37 international NGOs are working in various guises along Turkey's southern border and inside northern Syria, seventeen of them with an informal green light from local Turkish authorities.¹⁰⁹ (See Section IV.B below). They are usually known and tolerated, even to the extent of holding an NGO forum in one Turkish border town. But most which are unable to formally register cannot open bank accounts, and find it harder to qualify for funds from major donors or operate with full transparency. Some have chosen to work through already established local NGOs, like Norwegian Church Aid (NCA), which partners with Turkey's IHH.¹¹⁰

Turkish leaders have vowed to never close the border, but in fact, they have put in place strict controls on refugee crossings. Each new influx of 100,000 refugees would cost Turkey about \$100 million to build the facilities and \$300 million to feed, power and run for one year (see Section II.A above). Many fear that hundreds of thousands of Syrians would quickly cross if permitted to, but others say it could just be tens of thousands.¹¹¹

Turkish organisations have strong basic capacities, a good understanding of needs, and the courage to deliver in dangerous circumstances.¹¹² Even they understand the need that donors have to ensure compliance in monitoring the use of funds. An official serving in the province explained current local concerns:

We didn't think it would last this long. We wanted to help in every way As the process has gone on, it's become a big burden. It's very difficult. It's got much bigger than us. The international community has left us in the lurch. We need foreign help. But if we open [UN or international] camps, one million people will come over. It's a big danger waiting for us.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Wissam Tarif, official of the Syrian opposition coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit, Turkey, 17 April 2013.

¹¹⁰ "Foreign NGOs operate with caution in Syria", *al-Arabiya*, 4 February 2013. "They don't have to open offices in Turkey themselves. We tell these organisations 'whatever your conditions are we will comply' ... [the] MFA [ministry of foreign affairs] told NCA initially you can only give aid through AFAD, you cannot work with IHH. We talked to the MFA, explained the situation, and they said OK Turkey has written rules but we can work with these". Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, January 2013.

¹¹¹ "People in northern Syria have the attitude that they would rather stay where they are. Going to Turkey does not appear attractive to many rural people. They are conservative, they want to protect their women, refugee camp life has a really bad reputation and [regional TVs] don't show the good Turkish camps. Going to Turkey is usually an option chosen by people with some money". Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian aid expert working in northern Syria, Istanbul, April 2013.

¹¹² "International groups should talk more with the Turkish Red Crescent. They know the situation, they know what they are doing, they are close to the Syrians. I don't understand the [international NGOs'] insistence on such total 'independence'". Crisis Group telephone interview, international humanitarian official working on the Turkey-Syria border, April 2013.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official, January 2013.

III. Tensions in Turkey's Syrian Microcosm of Hatay

The Syria crisis, and the sudden arrival of tens of thousands of Sunni Muslim refugees, quickly spread new intercommunal tensions into Turkey's most sensitive border province of Hatay. The local mosaic of religious, linguistic and ethnic communities is in many ways a microcosm of Syria, of which Hatay was once a part. The mix includes Arab Alevis (called Alawites in Syria), Arabic-speaking Sunnis, Turkish Sunnis, Kurds, Turkmen, Circassians (descended from 19th century refugees from the Caucasus), Orthodox Christians, a small Jewish presence and twenty Armenian families in Turkey's last surviving Armenian village.

Most in Hatay have relatives in Syria, and dramas can easily jump the border. In January 2013, four Damascus government agents crossed over to kidnap a Syrian opposition lawyer, apparently aided by several Turkish nationals, and were only stopped in a Turkish police fire-fight when they tried to smuggle him back over the border.¹¹⁴ When a car bomb hit the main Hatay crossing point at Cilvegözü on 11 February 2013, killing ten Syrians and four Turks, Turkey blamed Syrian government agents and apparently had help inside Syria to make arrests of both Syrian and Turkish suspects.¹¹⁵ A Hatay deputy described another incident that further illustrated this new intimacy:

Three Syrian soldiers fled to Reyhanlı, took refuge in somebody's home and were seen by neighbours The next morning eighteen Syrian opposition fighters came and took the three away to Syria. [As a matter of honour] the person who had hosted them took the neighbours' womenfolk hostage until the opposition fighters brought back the three soldiers.¹¹⁶

A. ARAB ALEVIS REDISCOVERED

The Syrian crisis revealed a long-concealed discrimination felt by Hatay's large Arab Alevi community. This group has lived for many centuries in the mountains of the north-eastern Mediterranean coast, speaks Arabic at home and has a heterodox Muslim faith that sets it apart from Turkey's Turkish-speaking, Sunni Muslim mainstream. With no official numbers, estimates of the Arab Alevi population range from 400,000 to 700,000 of the province's 1.5 million people. The total number of Arab Alevis in Turkey may range from 700,000 to 2.5 million.¹¹⁷ This is part of the much broader Alevi population in Turkey that may comprise more than 10 per cent of Turkey's 75 million people. Alevis also include ethnic Turks and Kurds, from whom Arab Alevis tend to distinguish themselves as they use different languages and religious traditions.

Arab Alevis' grievances begin with the main name now used in Turkish media to describe them, "Nusayri", which the community sees as pejorative.¹¹⁸ The old local name, "fellah", or Arabic for peasant, reflecting the community's modern origins in mountain villages, is hardly

¹¹⁴ "Turkish police foil Syrian attempt to abduct opposition figure", *Today's Zaman*, 30 January 2013.

¹¹⁵ "Five arrested over Syria border gate attack", *Anatolia News Agency*, 11 March 2013.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013.

¹¹⁷ Şefik Çirkin, MHP Hatay deputy, put the province's Arab Alevi population at 400,000. Ibid. Higher figures were given by Ali Yeral, an Arab Alevi leader and founding president of the Ehl-i Beyt Kültür ve Dayanışma Vakfı (EHDAV, Family of the House Culture and Solidarity Association). Crisis Group interview, Hatay, January 2013.

¹¹⁸ The *Nusayri* appellation is seen as belittling as it refers to a little-known early Muslim religious figure, and has overtones of heresy, whereas Alawite refers to the sect's main loyalty to Ali, the fourth Muslim caliph and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed.

better. While intermarriage is not common, community leaders stress that aside from their special, Shia-like reverence for the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law Ali, Turkish Arab Alevis' religious practice has converged with that of Sunnis, a reality that sets them apart from Syrian Alawites.¹¹⁹

Communal tensions in Hatay began rising in the summer of 2012 in parallel with escalating bloodshed inside Syria and the significant increase in refugees. So far, perceptions appear to have outpaced real conflict on both sides. Syrian Sunnis, for example, share urban myths about Alevi doctors in Antakya state hospitals seeking to poison, torture or kill them.¹²⁰ Alevis complain bitterly of hate-filled social media postings, but few were found by Crisis Group.¹²¹ Criminality rose sharply in the province in 2011 and 2012, but may not have involved many Syrians.¹²² New stress on local services, especially in hospitals, feed a sense of grievance.¹²³ Locals are uncomfortable with groups of young Syrian opposition fighters, even though they are unarmed and appear to be less numerous in Antakya than a year ago.¹²⁴ Shots fired at a bus heading to Hatay from the coastal resort of Antalya in August 2012 hurt nobody but were interpreted as part of a broader campaign, according to a local politician close to events:

Four bearded Syrians attacked two beer halls, kicked in the sign, people came out and stopped them. In Uzun Çarsı [the historic main shopping street] they walk around as if they own the place. Urban legends are widely believed about [Syrian opposition fighters] not paying restaurants, and saying that they are not doing so because Erdoğan invited them to Turkey. They rent a place as a person with two kids and soon there are twenty people there. The population changes at night, you can get here from some border crossing places in twenty minutes by car ... it made people very tense.¹²⁵

On 16 September 2012, an agitated crowd gathered at a large roundabout in the heart of Antakya's main Alevi quarter with pro-Assad placards and slogans. The demonstration was put down roughly by riot police.¹²⁶ Some claim that the protestors were bussed in, but the local

¹¹⁹ Despite differences in doctrine and tradition, Turkey's Arab Alevis use the same mosques as Sunnis, and like them fast during Ramadan and do not have men and women praying together. They do differ in their style of prayer, holding their hands by their sides, not together in front of the body. Crisis Group interview, Ali Yeral, Arab Alevi leader and founding president of EHDAAV, Hatay, January 2013.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian aid worker in northern Syria, April 2013.

¹²¹ For instance, little-watched videos posted on YouTube include titles like "May God damn the CHP [opposition Republican People's Party] Alevis who support Syria!" (<http://bit.ly/16qWz5Z>) and "Godless Alevis worship Atatürk - God send a plague on you, it was God that created you!" (<http://bit.ly/10yDzjK>).

¹²² Police reported 13,880 infractions in urban areas in 2010, 20,554 in 2011 and 24,935 in 2012. Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' response to a written motion for information dated 9 July 2012 by Şefik Çirkin, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) deputy for Hatay, made available to Crisis Group. 2012 figures can be found via Anatolian Agency, <http://bit.ly/Y51GUJ>, 17 January 2013. Still, Governor Celalettin Lekesiz said the number of crimes in Hatay in which Syrians were involved peaked in 2007. Crisis Group interview, March 2013.

¹²³ "There are unimaginable urban myths, I go to the barber's shop just to hear them. There's talk of truckloads of arms, Turkey selling Syrian women ... it's like Casablanca in World War II". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, SETA analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012.

¹²⁴ "For sure, we'll help the victims of war. But you can't have refugees with guns These are not refugee camps. The men take their guns and fight by day and come back at night". Crisis Group interview, Mevlüt Dudu, opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) deputy for Hatay, Ankara, November 2012. "In Yayladağ people from al-Qaeda are walking in the streets. Having people who are fighting against an Alawite regime, with lots of [Arab Alevis] in the province, made people unhappy ... very frightened. The Alawites think that when the Syrian war is finished [these al-Qaeda affiliates] will turn their guns on them. Sometimes impressions can outweigh facts". Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (MHP) Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Ata Kaşgöz, opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) provincial founding chairman, Antakya, January 2013.

¹²⁶ "It's the first time rubber bullets have been used in Hatay since the [1980] military coup". Crisis Group interview, Hürol Yaşar, opposition activist, Antakya, January 2013.

head of the tiny, far-left İşçi Partisi (Labour Party) said “99.5 per cent” of the activists were local.¹²⁷

There have been no public demonstrations since then, but many Hatay residents say that the civilian population is acquiring weapons. Hatay’s Governor Celalettin Lekesiz denies any evidence of increased gun sales.¹²⁸ But a Western diplomat believed that these tensions and attacks in Hatay with alleged Syrian government involvement are the harbinger of more disruptions to come.¹²⁹

I wouldn’t call it ‘arming’, but a lot of people have hunting guns. I’ve heard that some Sunnis are getting weapons ... I have been threatened [by Syrian opposition people], they say, we’ll punish you, after we’ve finished with Syria, you’ll be looking for a place to hide People say, ‘I’ll take that [Alevi] building, that restaurant’ We are worried that one or two provocative attacks will cause a civil war.¹³⁰

Arab Alevi alienation has fuelled marginal support for far-left splinter groups, like the İşçi Parti (Labour Party) involved in the September 2012 demonstrations. Alevis most often see their political home in the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP). Yet in large part because the local CHP branch is “90 per cent Alevi” a leader said, they feel they can’t “say anything against government policy. If they were more critical there would be a tendency for people to say, ‘you’re just supporting Assad because you’re Alevis’”.¹³¹ An Arab Alevi leader said this was a typical problem:

Because of our sect and our race, we Arab Alevis have been subjected to oppression and assimilation. Because Syria has claims on Hatay, because we’re Alevis and because we are on the border, we’re seen as potential traitors. Belittling of Alevis by some officials and in the military has led some Alevis to adopt a Turkish/Sunni culture. Sometimes we worry about our jobs, our dignity and our lives.¹³²

Protesting against newspapers that constantly write stories about Hatay’s symbolic leading role in Turkey’s self-image as a multi-religious mosaic of unity and brotherhood, a local Arab Alevi man said:

This is the cradle of civilisation and tolerance? Give me a break. Show me one Alevi minister, director general, governor, mayor, police chief in the whole country. They’re all Sunnis. This tolerance thing is like a drum, they beat it to make a noise, but its empty inside. We can’t even ask for Arabic lessons in school, because then we’d be tarred with the idea that we are separatists.¹³³

Arab Alevis complain that the unusually potholed roads leading to the mountainous, predominantly Arab Alevi south of Hatay is further evidence of neglect. They are angered by a new law due to reorganise internal provincial boundaries in 2014. The governor says it is not gerrymandering or discriminatory, but the provincial capital, Antakya, will be cut in half. A new name, Defne, will be applied to the old, run-down southern Arab Alevi quarters of town. A bigger, 30km-wide Sunni-majority area, including the newly developing parts of town, the industrial zones and the airport, will then become Antakya. A representative from the main opposition party said:

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Bülent Saraçoğlu, Hatay, 11 January 2013.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Antakya, January 2013.

¹²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Ali Yeral, founding president of EHDAV, Hatay, January 2013.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Ata Kaşgöz, CHP provincial founding chairman, Antakya, January 2013.

¹³² Crisis Group interview, Ali Yeral, founding president of EHDAV, Hatay, January 2013.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Arab Alevi political activist, Hatay, January 2013.

The Sunnis are taking Antakya, and dumping the three main old quarters on the Alevis. It's a political crime. You can't complain, because [a powerful Sunni Muslim Hatay politician] is both judge, prosecutor and court clerk!¹³⁴

Turkey's Alevi population also sees Ankara's anti-Assad stance in sectarian terms. This is both a reflection of centuries of failure to address Alevi grievances and of alienation as Turkey profiles itself as a Sunni power in growing alliance with the conservative monarchies of the Persian Gulf.¹³⁵ A one-off demonstration in Ankara in September 2012 rallied thousands of Alevis protesting against Erdoğan's Syria policy. Even a Hatay Sunni Muslim leader said Turkish leaders were adding to tensions by using the term "Nusayri", and with Erdoğan's characterisation of the Syrian government as "an Alawite-majority regime".¹³⁶ Alevis have resented the prime minister's and other ministers' disparaging comments about Alevi prayer houses and the non-Sunni origin of the CHP's national leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, one of Turkey's first national leaders to have made his (non-Arab) Alevi origin public.¹³⁷ Others in Turkey have objected when CHP delegations, led by Arab Alevi deputies from Hatay, have repeatedly visited President Assad to show solidarity or mediate the release of prisoners. A Turkish academic says AKP may be falling into a trap of its own rhetorical making:

[Foreign Minister] Davutoğlu convinced me that they didn't have an anti-Shia thing before. But with Syria the balances have changed. [People close to AKP say] the new Syrian government has to have a Sunni Muslim majority. Maybe AKP wants to balance Iran and [Shia-dominated] Iraq. Even if they are not sectarian, they're seen as that ... as things go on the risk [of sectarian polarisation] rises.¹³⁸

Worried by local tensions, Turkish administrators began in mid-September 2012 asking and handing written instructions to Syrians living in Antakya to move to Sunni-majority Turkish towns like Konya, Kayseri or Urfa. But few were forced to relocate.¹³⁹ At the same time, Syrian opposition fighters are not as visible on Antakya's streets anymore. At least one of the hospitals treating them was moved from Antakya to the Sunni Muslim border town of Reyhanlı. A local politician agreed that tensions abated, and that even if the governor did not order the jihadis to shave their beards off, it feels like he did.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Ata Kaşgöz, CHP provincial founding chairman, Antakya, January 2013.

¹³⁵ Not everyone agrees. "[Erdoğan can say] 'see, I had good relations with Assad, he was an Alawite. What changed is not me, but the way he is killing people in huge numbers. It's not sectarianism, it's ethical'". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, SETA analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012. "Turkey keeps saying, 'watch out for sectarianism'! The trouble is, the more you say it, the more it becomes true". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, November 2012.

¹³⁶ "Before this there was no link between [Arab Alevis] and Anatolian Alevis ... but the government made a mistake ... using the Alevi issue. This has made all Alevis feel a common cause. If someone wants to stir this up, they can. People will think that one day, this could happen to me". Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, MHP Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013.

¹³⁷ "Cemevis [Alevi prayer houses] are not places of worship, they are centres where cultural events take place". Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish Prime Minister, interview on ATV, 5 August 2012. "Is Mr. Kılıçdaroğlu backing Syria out of sectarian solidarity? This occurs to us. If this is what he is doing, it is unforgivable". Hüseyin Çelik, AKP deputy leader, press statement, 7 September 2011.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunışık, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, November 2012.

¹³⁹ "Some of us had to sign papers saying they would leave the city. They kicked about ten families out. They did it to calm down the Alawites. I went to Konya, but it's very religious so I came back. The authorities didn't care too much about it". Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Antakya, January 2013.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Ata Kaşgöz, CHP provincial founding chairman, Antakya, January 2013.

Communal tensions have also been lessened by the economic resilience of Hatay, which was a principal beneficiary of the past decade's Turkey-Syria trade boom.¹⁴¹ Whereas Syria's GDP per capita was greater than Turkey's three decades ago – a time when visitors from Syria routinely brought with them bread, coffee and cigarettes due to their unavailability in poorer Turkey – even before the war, Turkey's economic performance, wealth, stability and resilience had far overtaken that of Syria.¹⁴² Despite real damage in some sectors, local businesses have adapted remarkably. One reason is that the boom was too new to have put down deep roots. Hatay business people also found new opportunities in the Syrian crisis. Hatay Governor Celalettin Lekesiz said that in 2012, when the crisis really hit, overall exports and economic output in the province were both down only one per cent from a year earlier.¹⁴³

Most people in Hatay believe the province has put the worst behind it.¹⁴⁴ A wild card is the possibility that large numbers of Syrians from mainly Sunni Idlib or half-Alawite Latakia suddenly flee into Hatay, which could trigger new tensions. For now, though, a Turkish academic predicts that Syria's traumas “will not spread to Turkey. Turkish Alevis don't feel linked to Arab Alevis. Alevis have other problems, each community sees itself as unique, and all Alevi houses have a picture of [Turkey's republican founder Kemal] Atatürk as well as [Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law] Ali”.¹⁴⁵ An analyst believes a high degree of social harmony is due to Hatay's late adhesion to the Turkish Republic.¹⁴⁶

In Antakya, everybody knows everyone. You even know who the new university students are after six months. 50-60 people run things in Hatay. It's not the governor, the mayor. It's more people like me [and another community leader], I'm a Sunni, he's an Alevi, we walk together and we sort things out ... [and since September] it's got better. The fire has been moved away from the powder barrel.¹⁴⁷

B. KURDISH FEARS

Hatay has only a small Kurdish population, but proximity sparks fears about the rise in parts of northern Syria of the dominant *Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* (Democratic Union Party, PYD), seen by many Turks as indistinguishable from its sister party, Turkey's insurgent *Partiya Karkarêne Kurdistanê* (Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK).¹⁴⁸ In other regions along the Turkish-Syrian border, especially towards the east, there is more widespread settlement by Turkish Kurds, who are linked by family ties, geography and history to the next-door Syrian Kurds.

¹⁴¹ Turkey's full embrace of Syria was a new and brief phenomenon. A free-trade agreement between Turkey and Syria was signed in January 2007 and a free-visa regime only began in August 2009. In December 2009, Syria and Turkey signed 51 cooperation agreements and formed a “High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council”.

¹⁴² “Things have really changed – I still remember in 1975 when my dad went to Aleppo and brought back an eggplant, we'd never seen one before! But just think, if Hatay had stayed part of Syria, then it would have been us fleeing over the border”. Crisis Group interview, local official, January 2013.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group interview, Hatay, March 2013, and “Suriye Krizinin Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etkileri Analiz Raporu” [“Analysis of the Economic and Social Impacts of the Syrian Crisis”], Republic of Turkey Eastern Mediterranean Development Agency [DOĞAKA], 11 December 2012.

¹⁴⁴ “We do have a fear that the sectarian war will spread to us. There are people who want that ... the Sunnis are very worried But nothing happened yet, and I don't think that it will”. Crisis Group interview, Mevlut Dudu, Sunni Muslim CHP deputy for Hatay, Ankara, November 2012.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, November 2012.

¹⁴⁶ “They didn't go through the traumatic “revolutions” [the ban on headscarves in schools, suppression of non-Turkish languages, the change of script], so there's a more relaxed attitude. Hatay is fertile, has a huge middle class. The level of education is high, people invest in their children, people are hardworking. Hatay may be one of the happiest cities in Turkey”. Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, SETA analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Ata Kaşgöz, CHP provincial founding chairman, Antakya, January 2013.

¹⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds*, op. cit.

Ankara officials are concerned that the PKK is putting down roots in northern Syria and are now totally uncompromising towards the PYD. Some see the PYD as directly subordinate to the PKK, some see it as subordinate to the Damascus regime and some see it as both. They brush aside the group's own denials and reports that there have been clashes between PYD and pro-Assad forces;¹⁴⁹ and blame Damascus for returning to its 1984-1999 policy of supporting Kurdish insurgents to subvert Turkey.¹⁵⁰ In a January 2013 speech, Bashar al-Assad explicitly commended the PYD as "patriotic citizens" for fighting opposition "terrorists" in Ras al-Ain/Kobane, a clear attempt to reinforce perceptions linking the PYD and the Damascus regime. A Hatay deputy articulated Turkish fears on the ground:

The PKK flag is now flying within sight of my home on the Syrian border, and that's just 50km from the port of Iskenderun, which is on their maps [of a united Kurdistan]. The Kurds are slowly reaching their goal. The AKP may or may not have a plan to split the country. But in practice, their policies are leading to it.¹⁵¹

Turkey's policy towards Syrian Kurds is not publicly declared, but it adds up to a blockade of their areas. Turkish officials explain they keep the border gate to the main gateway to Iraqi Kurdish areas in Qamishli closed to humanitarian aid and crossings because "the PYD is on the other side". Turkey's (Sunni Muslim) faith-based NGO IHH says lack of security means it does not supply Kurdish areas. Western diplomats denounce discrimination at Turkish border posts, with Kurdish-speaking casualties not being allowed across, but Turkish officials deny any such policy.¹⁵² Persistent reports say that a number of Syrian opposition fighters crossed the Turkey-Syria border at Ceylanpinar to fight in sustained November 2012 battles against the PYD on the Ras al-Ain/Kobane front; Turkish officials deny this happened.¹⁵³ For part of January 2013, Turkey's allies in Iraqi Kurdistan also closed their border to Syrian Kurds, and at other times the Turkey-backed Syrian opposition has cut Syrian roads to Kurdish areas.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ "The Turkish state just can't accept that Kurds would fight for their rights of their own free will. They always think that we are somebody's servant Turkey was fine with the Assad regime from the 2000s [and] Assad handed over 200 PKK members to Turkey. They were tortured ... that's why it's impossible for us to support Assad Most recently, we lost 60 martyrs fighting the regime in Aleppo". Salih Muslim, PYD leader, interview with *Radikal*, 15 April 2013.

¹⁵⁰ "They [the PYD] are not just an offshoot of the PKK. They are taking instructions directly from the PKK. We know". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013. "PYD is used by the regime to keep the opposition under control. It's now armed by the regime, guided by the regime, and used by the regime ... it's an extension of the PKK, their personnel interact, it's gaining ground due to regime support, by threatening and abusing other Kurdish groups". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013. A Western diplomat took a more nuanced view of the PYD. "Turkey is painting itself into a corner on PYD, it's believing its own propaganda. This leaves them defenceless at international meetings". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, MHP Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013. There are public worries that Kurdish insurgents may take advantage of the open border and organise attacks like one claimed by the PKK near Hatay's Iskenderun port that killed seven Turkish navy sailors in May 2010.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Ankara and Hatay, February-March 2013.

¹⁵³ "All the inhabitants said the same: they saw jihadist battalions of Syrian fighters attacking the city from Turkish territories ... [and] the border is very flat and well kept by the Turkish army". Crisis Group email correspondence, Marie Kostrz, French journalist, January 2013. Prime Minister Erdoğan has been supportive, saying "the PYD has a serious problem particularly in Qamishli and Hassake. The opposition is continuing this process [of pressure] very well". Quoted in "Despite US opposition, oil trade with Iraq is legal, PM Erdoğan says", *Today's Zaman*, 8 February 2013. See also, "Islamists fighting Kurds in Syria admit to Turkish military support", *Rudaw* (Iraqi Kurdistan), 6 February 2013. "I am convinced, based on my conversations [on the border and in Ankara] that the Turkish side did facilitate jihadis crossing the border [notably near Ras al-Ain] several times. A Turkish official told me that one of these is worth 100 Free Syrian Army fighters". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Istanbul, January 2013.

¹⁵⁴ "Access is worse for Kurds. The Free Syrian Army is cutting them off. Things have to be opened up for the Kurds too". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, January 2013.

The problem can be one of perceptions. Almost all Syrian Kurdish refugees have headed to Kurdish-run northern Iraq simply because they fear Turkey. Similarly, Turkey's efforts to leverage its relationship with Kurdistan regional President Massoud Barzani against the PYD may have backfired among some Syrian Kurds.¹⁵⁵ In Hatay, however, a Syrian refugee said police subjected him to a special security check upon learning that he was Kurdish, but that he was treated correctly.¹⁵⁶ As evidence of Turkey's good faith towards Syria's Kurds, a Turkish official argued that it was Turkish pressure on President Assad to democratise in 2011 that caused him to grant citizenship to thousands of Syrian Kurds, and that Turkey has long advocated that the Syrian opposition include Kurdish representatives.

One reason that Ankara revitalised initiatives to put an end to the PKK insurgency in late 2012 was that it saw that its regional policy was hobbled by the continued fighting.¹⁵⁷ This is true, since the PYD remains the main Kurdish actor and strongest opposition player on several parts of the long Syrian-Turkish border. Since open fighting between the PYD and regime forces occurred in Qamishli and Aleppo in April 2013, Turkey seems to be reconsidering past assertions that the PYD takes its orders both from the PKK and the Damascus government.¹⁵⁸ In any event, Ankara is unlikely to be able to dictate Syrian Kurds' loyalties.

¹⁵⁵ "Barzani's Turkish connection has undermined his credibility in Syria ... he's delegitimised by his alliance with Turkey A Turkey that had solved its Kurdish problem might be different". Crisis Group interview, Western analyst, Washington DC, November 2012.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Hatay, January 2013.

¹⁵⁷ "Turkey needs to overcome this problem not just for its internal peace and security, but for its regional goals". Yalçın Akdoğan, "Amaç, nihai çözüm" ["The goal is a final settlement"], *Star*, 4 January 2013. A Western defence official said the PKK was still strong, the summer of 2013 could be violent if peace efforts break down, that the Turkish army was struggling, and that the problem significantly constrained Turkish policy in Syria. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, January 2013.

¹⁵⁸ "We feel they are considering their options – the conditions for contacting us are clear [to be against the Damascus regime, to commit to avoid pre-emptive actions on territory before a new parliament is elected, and not to support for terrorism in Turkey]". Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, cited in "PKK'ye Üç Şart" ["Three conditions for the PYD"], *Yeni Şafak*, 10 April 2013.

IV. The Neo-Ottoman Backstory

Turkey adopted its daring but aggressive strategy toward Syria and its generous but expensive hosting of refugees for several understandable reasons. These include: the wish to provide the best for those fleeing the fighting, the belief that many Syrians want to return home as soon as it is safe to do so, the unexpected large-scale emergency, and encouragement from international partners who have promised support. But a more controversial reason luring Turkish policy-makers deeper into Syria's problems is a sense of historical responsibility for the regional backyard.

The temptation to lean into Syria's internal affairs is, however, fraught with danger. Just as it proved a polarising factor between Turkish Alevis and Sunnis at home, Turkey's recent interventions have increased perceptions that it is a sectarian Sunni Muslim player. Turkey wants to avoid this, with Prime Minister Erdoğan's efforts to cooperate with Shia-ruled Iran, to visit Iraqi Shia shrines, clerics and politicians, and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's struggle to make the Syrian opposition a broad-based organisation.¹⁵⁹ But the Syria crisis has pushed it into firm alignment with mainly Sunni Muslim opposition fighters and conservative Sunni powers Saudi Arabia and Qatar.¹⁶⁰ Ankara on the other hand has turned critical of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom it depicts as a pro-Iran, Shia actor and supporter of the Assad regime.¹⁶¹

In short, although this is not often recognised in Ankara, the Syrian crisis has been a reality check for those who have hinted at an ambition to reprise the country's Ottoman-era Middle Eastern role.¹⁶² According to a leading Turkish analyst:

Ankara's capacity to be an impartial stabilising soft power in the region has been vastly reduced ... the same Turkey that once hoped to be a peace broker in its region is now increasingly seen as inflaming sectarian divisions and fuelling instability".¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Being a Sunni player is "against what we are as a country, what we represent. It is the Syrian regime that wants to portray Turkey as playing the Muslim Brotherhood as a tool". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁶⁰ Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu frequently argues that tumult in the Arab world is because a "century-long parenthesis" in the region is closing – that is, the period since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. "The ice is melting and the woolly mammoths [of the Ottoman era] are coming out". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁶¹ After Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan intervened in support of Iraq's Sunni leaders in April 2012, Maliki declared Turkey was turning into an "interfering" and "enemy" state. Erdoğan then said, "there's no need to let Maliki steal the show or gain prestige. Bad words implicate only those who use them". "Başbakan Erdoğan'dan Maliki ve Kılıçdaroğlu'na sert sözler" ["Tough words from Erdoğan on Maliki and Kılıçdaroğlu"], *Radikal*, 21 April 2012.

¹⁶² "The disconnect between rhetoric and reality has been widening. Turkey's ability to influence things went down. Syria is an impasse. How effective is this proactive policy? What is the capacity?" Crisis Group interview, Fuat Keyman, director, Istanbul Policy Center, Istanbul, November 2012. "AKP is dying to see a post-Assad Syria. In Syria, [the freedom agenda] became support for an armed wing. It's the right thing to do ... unfortunately it has had no impact. The government is frustrated. And the impact of the Syria war [for Turkey] is bombing, shells and [the downed] plane, and both the Syrian regime and Iran supporting the PKK". Crisis Group interview, Mustafa Akyol, Turkish commentator, Istanbul, November 2012. "Saying that we will break off from Europe and acting as the heir of the 'Sunnite Ottoman Empire' in the Middle East (and thus dominate everyone), this government has turned Turkey into a country that has no influence at all. In the Middle East, there is almost no country that has not slapped our face". Ahmet Altan, lead commentary, *Taraf*, 11 December 2012.

¹⁶³ Semih İdiz, "The Sunnification of Turkish foreign policy", *Al-Monitor*, 1 March 2013.

A. THE TURKISH GOVERNMENT'S LONELY PATH

Turkish leaders hoped that once re-elected in November 2012, President Obama would join them in a more openly interventionist approach to Syria, but while the U.S. seems to have increased engagement with the armed opposition, this has not materialised to the extent that Ankara hoped.¹⁶⁴

As a result, Turkey's rhetoric has become more modest and it has ceded the lead to others.¹⁶⁵ The U.S. and Qatar led the founding of a new Syrian opposition umbrella group, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, in Qatar in November 2012.¹⁶⁶ Muslim Brotherhood activists remained prominent, with Turkish support, even though the Brotherhood has a relatively small social base in Syria.¹⁶⁷ Turkey joined France, the UK and Qatar in the front ranks of those recognising the opposition as "the legitimate representative of the Syrian people".

Ankara privately puts much blame for the Syrian crisis on Iran and Russia's support for Damascus, but it also sees potential common ground with Tehran on the need for a peaceful transition.¹⁶⁸ It has avoided directly attacking Iranian interests in Syria and Iran has thanked it for help in influencing the release of Iranian hostages held by the Syrian opposition.¹⁶⁹ However, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bülent Arınç in April 2012 accused Iran of allowing the PKK to operate over their mutual border, reflecting worries that Turkey's rivalry with Iran could be spreading to other domains.¹⁷⁰ Turkey has also tried to reconcile these contradictions with a regional approach, meeting in September 2012 with Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, and with Egypt and Iran in February 2013.

¹⁶⁴ "Ankara had serious expectations that Obama would take concrete steps after the U.S. presidential elections to end Turkey's deadlock on Syria. But sources in Washington say that there is no such climate. Some liken Turkey's [implacable] stance on Syria to the Bush administration's attitude towards [Saddam Hussein's] Iraq". Abdülhamit Bilici, "Türkiye-ABD iletişiminin kalitesi?" ["How about the quality of Turkey-U.S. relations?"], *Zaman*, 5 February 2013. "I have not seen any debate in your Parliament indicating that there is a substantial body of Turkish opinion that wishes to get involved militarily I am not aware of any impetus among allies to take a military solution I do not anticipate American or other allied military intervention". U.S. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, news briefing, Ankara, 5 February 2013.

¹⁶⁵ "If they think they can do this with wannabe soft power and smart diplomats, it won't work. Turkey doesn't have the hard power". Crisis Group interview, former U.S. official, Washington DC, November 2012.

¹⁶⁶ Already in 2012 France brought together 80 countries as the Friends of Syria to back the opposition, though it recognised Turkey's role by holding the second meeting in Istanbul in April 2012.

¹⁶⁷ "Although some efforts were exerted to bypass Turkey regarding the Syria crisis, Turkey is still at the centre. The U.S., for example, attempted unsuccessfully to shift distribution of seats at the SNC to create an opposition body with far fewer Islamic-oriented groups. However, this is contrary to the social fabric of the Syrian society in general, and Syrian opposition in particular". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, SETA analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012. "The Turks see internal Syrian support for the SNC, [the U.S.] has a different opinion". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, November 2012. "We want Turkey to fully endorse the coalition". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Istanbul, January 2013.

¹⁶⁸ "Iran is financing this and they want to stop this Arab Spring phenomenon in Syria. [They want to show their own people that revolution] can be bloody and painful, to make them 'think twice before claiming your rights'. But the Iranians also understand that change is inevitable. They just don't want Assad to be humiliated. They want a conventional transition". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013. "Iran is doomed to be the biggest loser from Syria. Their soft power is gone and their anti-Zionism [is cancelled out] by backing an anti-Islamic democracy. It risks losing its links to Hezbollah. Its only soft power left is sectarianism". Crisis Group interview, Ufuk Ulutaş, SETA analyst and Hatay native, Ankara, November 2012.

¹⁶⁹ "Iran hails Turkey, Qatar, Syria for efforts to free pilgrims", PressTV (Iran), 10 January 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Iran denied the charge. A former U.S. official believed Iran may have resumed more active support for the PKK in 2012, as was the case in the 1990s, perhaps even arming some insurgents. Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, November 2012.

Turkey also feels frustrated by its inability to counter what an official called “shiploads of Russian weapons” sent to Damascus.¹⁷¹ It publicly forced down a Syrian Airlines plane flying from Moscow to Damascus in October 2012, but it is not clear what was on board.¹⁷² Talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in December 2012 seem to have focused on trade, while both sides voice mutual suspicion about Syria.¹⁷³ Ankara says it can go along with the Russian position of “constructive ambiguity” in opening talks on a political settlement with the Assad regime, but it underlines that it will accept no outcome from these talks other than Assad’s departure.¹⁷⁴ Russia would be pleased if Ankara supported this immediate start of talks and stopped helping arm the rebels, but worries that Turkey is excessively keen on promoting an “Islamic Revolution” led by the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷⁵

At home, the government enjoys only 33 per cent of support for its Syria policy, with 46 per cent of the population finding it a failure and 43.5 per cent saying Turkey should stay neutral in the Syrian civil war.¹⁷⁶ The main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP), which received one quarter of the vote in 2011, has criticised the government for aggravating the risk of spillover.¹⁷⁷ A parliamentarian accused the government of ignoring public support for Bashar al-Assad within Syria and simply doing U.S. bidding.¹⁷⁸ The right-wing opposition thinks Erdoğan reacted emotionally and erratically.¹⁷⁹ Marginal far-left groups have attempted to exploit the situation, staging an attack on off-duty Patriot battery personnel in Hatay’s port of Iskenderun, or citing opposition to Turkey’s supposedly U.S.-designed Syria policy as one of the reasons for a suicide bomb attack on the U.S. embassy in February 2013 that killed the perpetrator and a security guard in Ankara.¹⁸⁰

Still, despite some media commentators’ talk about Turkish tanks’ ability to reach Damascus within days, Turkish and Western officials agree that Ankara has no desire to intervene with direct military action.¹⁸¹

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁷² A Turkish official said that parts of a missile guidance system were found on board. However, another official spoke of angry differences over the government’s action and said that nothing illegal was found. Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul and Ankara, October 2012 and February 2013.

¹⁷³ The two leaders “have an amazing capacity to compartmentalise aspects of their relationship”. Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Istanbul, February 2013.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

¹⁷⁵ Russia believes the Damascus regime is bad but strong and available to make a deal, while it sees Turkey’s policy as illogical and maximalist. Crisis Group interview, Russian official, Moscow, April 2013.

¹⁷⁶ The countrywide Kadir Has University poll in January 2013 found that just 11.4 per cent of Turks believe that Turkey should be supporting the Syrian opposition, 9.4 per cent believe that Turkey should support foreign military intervention, and 3.4 per cent believe Turkey should intervene unilaterally. See <http://bit.ly/Zaffm1>, slides 67–69 (in Turkish).

¹⁷⁷ “Turkey is unfortunately the country that is creating problems in the region, not looking for solutions ... [through the] AKP government’s permission to use Turkish territory to Syrian armed opponents and radical elements”. Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of the CHP, cited in “Syrian clashes could spread here”, *Milliyet*, 13 August 2012.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, CHP deputy, Ankara, November 2012.

¹⁷⁹ “You can’t change [Middle Eastern governments] like a shirt. If the regime stays it’s a problem, if it goes it’s a problem. They should sit down and talk with them again People can’t understand it. They think it’s because of America. The street says we were friends of Syria and it should have stayed like that”. Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, MHP Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013.

¹⁸⁰ “Alman askerlerin başına çuval” [“Sacks on the heads of German soldiers”], *Doğan Haber Ajansı* (DHA), 22 January 2013. “Burası Anadolu, İsyanların, Halk Ayaklanmalarının Yurdu! Burası Anadolu Dünya Halklarının Baş Düşmanı Amerika Defol!” [“This is Anatolia, the homeland of revolts and popular uprisings! This is Anatolia, get out America, chief enemy of the peoples of the world!”], Revolutionary People’s Liberation Front (DHKP) statement, 2 February 2013, <http://bit.ly/XViMFN>.

¹⁸¹ “I don’t think they want to get dragged in [to Syria. Turkey is] insistent on being protected [by NATO and the U.S.] ... basically [their position is], ‘someone has to do something or we’ll be the ones [to suffer]’”. Crisis Group interview, Western official, Washington DC, November 2012. “We never advocated military interven-

B. THE PROBLEM WITH PROJECTING AID INTO NORTHERN SYRIA

Turkish policy, alongside generosity to those Syrians fleeing violence, increasingly aims to contain the humanitarian emergency inside Syria. This approach was adopted in earnest in fall 2012, when Ankara began strictly limiting how many refugees it allows in after the number in Turkish camps passed 100,000. The Syrian opposition is also firmly in favour of doing as much as possible inside Syria.¹⁸²

1. The humanitarian crisis

100,000 or more Syrians are thought to be waiting to cross into Turkey.¹⁸³ Some 18,000 alone are stuck in Atmeh camp up against the border's barbed wire, 10km from the main Hatay official border crossing of Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa.¹⁸⁴ With aid agencies close by in Hatay, and at least one hot meal a day, these are considered relatively well-provisioned.¹⁸⁵ But the camp has no official management and the ability to monitor how aid is distributed there is weak.¹⁸⁶ People displaced in other parts of northern Syria in towns, villages or impromptu camps are even worse off.¹⁸⁷ In February 2013, Turkish officials estimated that the Turkish Red Crescent and other government-organised supplies were providing for 45,000 in northern Syria.

The patchwork of Syrian territory held by multiple and overlapping insurgent militias has a population of about three million people, with front lines that are sometimes vague, often dangerous and occasionally crossed by daily commuters to work.¹⁸⁸ Its needs almost everything, including: medical services, ambulances and fire trucks, training for judges and police, funds and equipment to do basic tasks like rewiring electricity grids, repairing water supplies and fixing broken power generators.¹⁸⁹ At one border crossing, the end of a winterisation campaign brought a drop in aid available for northern Syria in April 2013, and supplies remain unpredictable.¹⁹⁰

tion. It would only make things worse. No Syrian is interested in any military intervention, any foreign boots on the ground in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2012.

¹⁸² Suheir Atassi, co-vice president of Syrian opposition coalition, public statement via Skype, Hatay, March 2013.

¹⁸³ "We believe they are being attracted by the possibility of safe haven in Turkey, not for the limited assistance available ... but we can't speculate, it's not documented". Crisis Group interview, European official, Hatay, March 2013. According to a Turkish official, in March 2013 26,000 Syrians were on the border of Hatay alone. Crisis Group interview, Hatay, March 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, international aid worker supplying Atmeh camp, March 2013.

¹⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Yakzan Shishakly, Maram Foundation, Hatay, March 2013.

¹⁸⁶ A Syrian doctor said the likes of Atmeh camp are unsustainable: "It's originally a Turkish idea The Turkish government gives [some of the] food, but the amount of aid they give could support three times the number of displaced. Things are getting stolen. It's a failed idea. I don't even know who is responsible for it. Distribution should be done by organisations, not individuals". Crisis Group interview, Dr Qusayr Sayyid Isa, director of the Orient hospital, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

¹⁸⁷ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA) said it was unable "to reach the vast majority who are in need in the opposition-held areas" saying that the situation in the north "is particularly urgent". "Humanitarians must have access to make sure that aid reaches Syrians in desperate need", OCHA operations director, press statement 29 January 2013.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group interview, international reporter recently in northern Syria, Istanbul, April 2013.

¹⁸⁹ See Stephanie Nebehay, "Syria needs grow, rebel-held north out of reach: U.N.", Reuters, 26 February 2013.

¹⁹⁰ "Aid flows across the Turkish border have significantly reduced in the past two months. The main crossing point at Kilis, through which 50 per cent of aid reportedly flows, has recorded a reduction to approximately 20 trucks per day, down from between 50 and 80 two months ago". Valerie Amos, under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Security Council Briefing on Syria, New York, 18 April 2013.

The Syrian government has not given its agreement for aid agencies to cross from Turkey into areas that are not under its operational control.¹⁹¹ The UN, some Turkish government agencies, including the Turkish Red Crescent, and major NGOs, including the ICRC, are hesitant to defy Syrian sovereignty in public.¹⁹² But others, including the head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid (OCHA), want to use the cross-border route arguing that Damascus has continued to place new bureaucratic obstacles on its work while needs reach alarming levels, especially in opposition-held areas.¹⁹³ Some major NGOs are carrying out cross-border aid work, but the system is largely ad hoc, monitoring is a work in progress, and uncertainty, lack of information and security are all problems.

2. The “zero point” border delivery system

To find one way around the problem, Turkey and other supporters have developed a “zero point” or “border assistance” system in which Turkish trucks bring goods to the border to be picked up by Syrian ones.¹⁹⁴ This method of transport pioneered in various forms by Turkish and a handful of international organisations with special permission from Turkey (see Section II.C above) has its own challenges. Turkish officials say that due to a lack of Syrian trucking capacity only 5,000 of the 35,000 tonnes of flour allocated for northern Syria in late December 2012 were delivered in the first six weeks.¹⁹⁵ An international NGO representative said lines of trucks at the Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa crossing point could extend for several kilometres.¹⁹⁶ Syrian truckers sometimes prefer to deliver aid to their hometowns.

There are only seven functioning crossing points – six of which are used for “zero point” deliveries – and some NGOs use unofficial routes. A convoy of trucks from the Syrian Business Council, a coalition of diaspora Syrian businessmen, in January 2013 drove through snow-bound mountain roads to give “zero point” transfers through the border fence near Yayladağ to supply remote areas of northern Syria with special bread-baking flour.¹⁹⁷ Some international NGOs complain that Turkey’s customs regulations also make getting convoys across difficult, even for supplies bought in Turkey, and that they cannot accompany the shipments over the border. A European aid worker complained:

We need to regularise this issue. We have to get convoys through. We have to be able to send people over with these convoys. We can’t be kind of slipping through unofficially by

¹⁹¹ In March 2013, UN food aid reached 1.5 million Syrians in government-controlled areas and 500,000 in rebel-controlled ones. “Syrian refugee crisis worsens with aid efforts grossly underfunded, UN warns”, UN News Service, 9 April 2013. Difficulties in reaching opposition areas, especially in northern Syria, can be daunting: a first shipment of UN aid via the Syrian port of Latakia to Syrians displaced to the Turkish border north of Aleppo took three days and found 45,000 people in desperate conditions. “UNHCR reaches rebel-held Azaz for first time”, *The Daily Star* (Lebanon), 2 February 2013.

¹⁹² “We do not believe that cross-border operations are the only answer to the needs of the population. Many of those suffering don’t live in border areas; they are located deep inside Syria, in urban environments that are very difficult to reach from opposition-held areas supplied across borders. Relief operations that go across frontlines, rather than across borders, are the crucial lifeline for populations most in need”. Pierre Krähenbühl, ICRC director of operations, “There are no ‘good’ or ‘bad’ civilians in Syria”, *The Guardian* (UK), 3 March 2013.

¹⁹³ “When I tell the Council that a convoy from Damascus to Aleppo goes through 50 checkpoints – half of them Government controlled – you will appreciate the impossibility of this request. We cannot do business this way”. Valerie Amos, Security Council Briefing on Syria, op. cit. “The supply of aid dwindles further inland from the border, such as in the Deir ez-Zor region, which is particularly neglected”. “Syria two years on”, MSF, op. cit.

¹⁹⁴ Turkey also allows Syrian merchants to drive their trucks into opposition-held areas, which in January 2013 accounted for most commercial traffic at the major Hatay provincial crossing.

¹⁹⁵ “It’s not bad. Most of it gets through. There are no well-off people in northern Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, February 2013.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Western NGO representative, Istanbul, March 2013.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Syrian Business Council representatives, Yayladağ, January 2013.

another route. At Atmeh we can cross the border but have to take on fake [Syrian] names; at another place we have to cross a river; at another place we go through a hole in the wire; at another place we have our passports stamped. Each truck has to be processed separately, not as a convoy. We can't do a serious aid effort like this.¹⁹⁸

Aid provision is also undermined by the multiplicity of armed groups and the high insecurity in northern Syria.¹⁹⁹ Syrian opposition fighters or criminal gangs have kidnapped several foreigners. Aid groups generally do not label their assistance, for fear of losing access to government-controlled areas, so northern Syrians assume that they have been abandoned by the world beyond Islamic or Gulf donors.²⁰⁰ Even Turkey's IHH now has to bake 200,000 loaves a day in Turkey due to lack of security inside Syria. Damascus regime air power and artillery also attacks civilian targets like bakeries, and it has also launched surface-to-surface missiles against insurgent-held urban centres.²⁰¹ Syrian government forces in November 2012 bombed the area of Atmeh camp inside Syria.

Even so, cross-border humanitarian assistance has had some success. IHH, among others, has done impressive work for Syrians inside, attracting support from international Muslim charities, Persian Gulf states and some European NGOs.²⁰² Already in January 2013, IHH's Hatay-based Syria coordinator, fluent in Arabic and Turkish, and juggling a stream of visitors, telephone calls and emails, said he was able to send truckloads of IHH material as far as Damascus's outskirts:

My preference is to do things inside Syria. I can reach 80 per cent of the country. On one day this week we sent in 33 trucks. Inside Syria there is a big crisis. There may be fifteen million needy people, millions of displaced people. Hundreds of big trucks a day won't be enough.²⁰³

3. TOWARD CROSS-BORDER HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS?

Turkey-based action over the border looks set to grow. Pro-opposition Friends of Syria countries have agreed to try to organise early economic reconstruction efforts from Turkey.²⁰⁴ At

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2013.

¹⁹⁹ See Justin Vela, "Give me shelter", *Foreign Policy*, 26 February 2013. "Even if you get the approval of both parties [Syrian government and opposition], it is not enough. Security is the main hurdle. There is no respect for any [neutral] flag. And that won't change in the near future". Crisis Group telephone interview, international organisation working informally on both sides of the Turkey-Syria border, April 2013.

²⁰⁰ See Liz Sly, "U.S. feeds Syrians, but secretly", *The Washington Post*, 15 April 2013. Turkish officials suggest that aid agencies simply label their aid with the name of the country.

²⁰¹ "In so-called liberated areas, in the north and elsewhere, the opposition doesn't control the ground entirely. All they can do is exclude Syrian government soldiers. Artillery and air strikes makes them insecure to stay in long term What makes the north more dangerous is increasing indiscriminate use of heavy weapons on one side and the un-coordination of groups on the other. They can fight each other for humanitarian aid ... and the sporadic [international] presence does not allow for a humanitarian response that would be adequate". Crisis Group telephone interview, employee of international humanitarian organisation active in Syria, April 2013. See also "Syria: Government attacking bread lines", Human Rights Watch, 30 August 2012

²⁰² IHH says about 50 local and international NGOs have worked with it, and that half of the 25 million Turkish lira it has spent on its Syrian relief efforts so far came from international donors". "The UN says 'there is no access, that's why we can't help'. We can't accept [the excuse] that there is no counterparty on the other side. We have to create mechanisms that will side with the people, outside of the military and political dimensions We decided not to wait [for the UN and international community]". Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, January 2013.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Mohammed Yorgancıoğlu, IHH Syria coordinator, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

²⁰⁴ "Basket One [of the action plan] is strengthening the situation in the north, immediate impact measures, training workshops. Working in Syria means getting an overall plan, it's a Soviet-style country, and Turkey facilitates this. There will be trust funds hosted by the Turkish MFA which will have a base in Gaziantep. Ideally they would be connected to a transitional government". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Istanbul, January 2013.

least one Western power says it conducts non-lethal activities over the Turkey-Syria border in support of the opposition.²⁰⁵ The U.S. has also spoken of channelling aid to NGOs operating in areas where the Damascus regime blocks access.²⁰⁶ In March 2013, delegates from opposition-held areas of the city of Aleppo even gathered in the nearby Turkish city of Gaziantep to elect their new local administration council.²⁰⁷

The Syrian opposition's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU), backed with funds from European and Gulf countries, is struggling to gain real traction from an office in Hatay's Reyhanlı and in Gaziantep province further east.²⁰⁸ With only a few dozen staff and little direct funding, the new unit needs more support to quickly build up the networks and capacities it needs to be truly effective.²⁰⁹ Several other Syrian NGOs, mostly based in Reyhanlı, are also reaching out to more than 80 local coordination councils that have sprung up in northern Syria and are succeeding in delivering aid.²¹⁰

Until now the absence of Syrian or UN Security Council permission for cross-border aid has meant that large-scale funding for "zero point" or full cross-border supplies from the EU or the UN was unlikely. Major donors have also been wary to take the security risk and do not necessarily trust the opposition to deliver.²¹¹ Politically at least, however, the situation shifted on 18 April. Under-Secretary-General Valerie Amos, briefing the UN Security Council, described the conflict as a "humanitarian catastrophe ... our descriptions cannot begin to give you the real picture of the horrors being meted out every day". She said that bureaucratic obstacles to the UN have increased, that the approved list of NGOs working in Syria has been shortened from 110 to 29, and that aid convoys are also regularly attacked. "The Council", she said, "needs to consider alternative forms of aid delivery, including cross-border operations".²¹²

The UN Security Council then issued a statement that "called on all parties in Syria, and in particular the Syrian authorities, to cooperate fully with the UN and relevant humanitarian organisations" and "underlined the need to facilitate the provision of humanitarian assistance through the most effective ways, including where appropriate across borders in accordance with international humanitarian principles". The statement, read out by the president of the Council

²⁰⁵ "We don't advertise it, but we are assisting in things over the border ... community training ventures [where we teach] media savvy, graffiti, web publications, caricatures. The Assad regime successfully atomised Syrians, we're trying to reverse the atomisation ... we want things resolved within a unitary Syria, with the state ... we're trying to do no harm, get to know people, talk about democracy". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Istanbul, February 2013.

²⁰⁶ See Josh Rogin, "State Dept. working with Syrian opposition to channel aid", *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2013.

²⁰⁷ See Tom A. Peter, "Aleppo takes first step towards post-Assad governance in Syria", *Christian Science Monitor*, 4 March 2013.

²⁰⁸ "We want the ACU to be more of a coordination body than a delivery one, but one role that the ACU has advertised, but not realised, is negotiating access and security for staff and goods. Supporting them with these skills would be useful, but they also need the credibility and presence on the ground, which in the end will have to be earned". Crisis Group communication, international humanitarian agency worker, April 2013.

²⁰⁹ The ACU says it has 100 people working for it, 84 of them working inside Syria, and has helped coordinate \$217 million of aid distributed in northern Syria and has itself distributed another \$32 million of aid. Crisis Group interview, Wissam Tarif, Hatay, March 2013. On 18 April, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos reported that the ACU "has limited capacity and reach". Security Council Briefing on Syria, op. cit.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkey-based Syrian NGOs, Hatay, March 2013.

²¹¹ "You cannot set up camps [in northern Syria], it's crazy. How do you expect UNHCR to work there without Syrian government approval? We will not work through the Syrian opposition. We have heard accounts of some local coordination councils imposing Sharia. We will not work through them". Crisis Group interview, European official, Brussels, December 2012.

²¹² For a full summary of the UN Security Council briefing, see Security Council Document SC/10981, accessed at <http://bit.ly/11IWA4Y>.

after lengthy negotiations with Council members on the text, also urged all parties to “assure safe and unimpeded access”.

While this Council mechanism known as “press elements” was a rare moment of agreement on Syria by all Council members, such a statement is non-binding.²¹³ Still, it indicates the direction of the Council’s thinking. According to a P5 diplomat in New York, the humanitarian agencies “could at least try to use the statement as some leverage with the Syrian authorities. They could say to them, ‘look, the Security Council has spoken and believes that cross-border assistance should be provided’”.²¹⁴

Establishing any UN cross-border humanitarian aid operation will be tremendously challenging politically, logistically and due to security threats. But the statement paves the way for a discussion with the Syrian government and with the authorities in neighbouring countries, especially with Turkey, on the establishment of a UN humanitarian operation that would work across borders, to complement international aid efforts approved by or channelled through Damascus. Turkey is pushing for this too.²¹⁵

Addressing the Security Council, the language of the UN’s humanitarian aid chief reflected a new sense of urgency to open all routes into northern Syria that has become hard to ignore:

The data available to us shows that the people in opposition-held areas are in the most urgent need. We have a duty and responsibility to try to reach them. I was horrified to hear accounts, during my recent visit to Turkey of children dying from hunger in these areas It is difficult to do cross-line because of bureaucratic constraints. The Council needs to consider alternative forms of aid delivery, including cross-border operations.²¹⁶

After two years of limbo, the local coordination councils, new domestic NGOs and independent activists have honed their skills in detailing names and identities of aid recipients, doing video reporting and starting to effectively account for work done and money spent.²¹⁷ It is these local actors with whom organisations like the Turkish Red Crescent and IHH have had success

C. THE ENEMY OF AN ENEMY MAY BE A DANGEROUS FRIEND

Turkey has opened its doors wide to the Syrian opposition. Off-duty Syrian fighters can be met in towns and villages all along the border, which they say they can easily cross. In December 2012, at least 260 rebel commanders met in Antalya to elect a Supreme Military

²¹³ It is not an officially disseminated text, is only provided orally by the standing Council president and, in order of importance for the Security Council, ranks below a Council Press Release, Presidential Statement and, of course, a Resolution.

²¹⁴ Crisis Group interview, diplomat from a Permanent Five (P5) member of the Security Council, New York, 23 April 2013. Another P5 diplomat told Crisis Group that this was an important political signal that should be enough for OCHA to start a dialogue with the Syrian government on cross-border aid. Crisis Group interview, New York, 23 April 2013.

²¹⁵ Turkish ambassador Halit Çevik called on the UN Security Council “to consider alternative forms of aid delivery, including cross-border options, as existing methods were not working to realise the principle of full and unimpeded humanitarian access. Also, in line with the principle of burden-sharing, the international community must take concerted action by discussing unexplored ways to address internally displaced persons in Syria”. United Nations, 18 April 2013.

²¹⁶ Valerie Amos, Security Council Briefing on Syria, *op. cit.*

²¹⁷ “There has been a massive effort to set up their own structures, from the start”. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian expert working in northern Syria, Istanbul, April 2013.

Council and a nominal new chief, although Turkey was only one of several powerful foreign powers involved, including the U.S., Qatar, the UK, France and Saudi Arabia.²¹⁸

A visit to Hatay shows how prominent and disparate the armed Syrian opposition is. A special camp in Apaydın houses officers and their families who have fled the regime, fronting onto a public road and appearing to consist of nothing more than tight ranks of white tents like the other collective centres. One day in January 2013, the main street of Yayladağ was full of unarmed Syrian insurgents shopping.²¹⁹ Most said they were on monthly leave to see their families.²²⁰ Others were shopping for supplies including foodstuffs and clothing for their units. One of the hospitals for and run by Syrians in Reyhanlı treats mainly convalescent fighters who rest in small wards or limp through a one-story collection of prefabricated units by the main road.²²¹

The population of the camps is 70 per cent women and children, who mostly say their menfolk are with the insurgents.²²² At two camps in Hatay province visited by Crisis Group, groups of men could regularly be seen coming and going, most of whom when approached said that they were attached to combat units. Wounded fighters could be seen convalescing with bandages. Some young men can find themselves under pressure to join the war.²²³

Some Turkish voices, especially representatives of the Alevi population of Hatay, consider this intimate engagement with disorganised foreign armed opposition forces to be increasingly risky, especially as the Syrian conflict drags on.²²⁴ But in Sunni Muslim towns like Reyhanlı, where several Syrian activists and groups maintain offices, the local population voices little discomfort with and some moral support for the armed opposition.²²⁵

There is no obvious sign of broad, active Turkish military support and Turkey has repeatedly said it has not given weapons to opposition fighters.²²⁶ All of several Syrian off-duty insurgents interviewed by Crisis Group in Hatay complained about this, and appealed especially for missiles able to down high-flying aircraft. They said far more standard infantry weapons are available to those with money in Syria.²²⁷

²¹⁸ Neil MacFarquhar and Hwaida Saad, "Rebel groups in Syria make framework for military", *The New York Times*, 7 December 2012.

²¹⁹ "We didn't use to have thefts or crime, we didn't need the police, now we do! The Free Syrian Army is walking around town now, everyone sees this, except for the prime minister!" Crisis Group interview, Mustafa Kemal Dağıstanlı, mayor of Yayladağ, January 2013.

²²⁰ Opposition fighters from one major battalion have four days of leave a month, and usually visit their families taking refuge in Turkey. Crisis Group interview, Yayladağ, January 2013.

²²¹ "We only treat war injuries. We get no help from the Turkish government. They are just letting us treat Syrian patients". Crisis Group interview, Dr Qusayr Sayyid Isa, director of the Orient hospital, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

²²² Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Syrian refugees, Hatay, January 2013.

²²³ Crisis Group interview, European official, Hatay, March 2013.

²²⁴ Asking the Syrian opposition in Turkey to keep a low profile "will only delay the problem. There is no guarantee that this snake won't bite us later. We have had a lot of trouble with terrorism. And whatever the PKK is to us, [Turkey's support of the opposition fighters] is to them in Damascus. We are very worried that Turkey's Sunni identity is being dragged towards a Wahhabi/Salafi understanding and if this continues, there will be an Alevi massacre". Crisis Group interview, Ali Yeral, Arab Alevi and president of the EHDAV, Hatay, January 2013.

²²⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

²²⁶ "We have been providing the Syrian people with food, clothing, and medicine, and we will continue to do so. Other types of aid [arms] do not originate from Turkey". Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, news conference, 31 January 2012.

²²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Syrian off-duty insurgents, Yayladağ and Boynuyoğun, January and March 2013.

Nevertheless, Turkey supports the principle of arming the Syrian opposition.²²⁸ Some weapons, or money to buy them in Syria, reach the insurgents through Turkey.²²⁹ According to a report, arms flowing to Syrian opposition fighters increased at the end of 2012 – often purchased by Arab governments in collusion with the U.S. – and by late March 2013 had included 160 cargo flights to Turkey’s Esenboga Airport.²³⁰ A Turkish analyst reflected concern in Turkey’s policy elites that Ankara’s forward Syria policy is leaving it increasingly dangerously exposed:

Ankara has not officially declared war or sent its own troops to Syrian soil. But Turkey is currently pursuing a proxy war in Syria on two fronts [against the Syrian Kurd PYD and the Damascus regime]. Turkey could be left face to face with these wars of its own.²³¹

Certainly, bearded young Arabic-speaking men partially clothed in battle fatigues and with large backpacks are a common sight at Hatay airport. Turkey is apparently doing little to stop the inflow of foreign insurgents.²³²

But on the ground, Turkey’s assistance to Syrian fighters seems limited and local.²³³ In the office of the district prefect of Reyhanlı one cold January 2013 evening, a mud-spattered Syrian with thick layers of civilian clothes and hands leathery from outdoor living arrived with garbled news. He was, he told the prefect, part of a group of 150 Syrians who had been patrolling a section of the Syria-Turkey border, but they wanted help: the cold, lack of food and armaments had reduced their numbers to just seven, and drug smugglers and Turkish Kurd insurgents were increasingly free to act as they wanted. The district prefect asked an official to take their statement and dismissed them. He had heard many such appeals before. “They’re all like this. No representatives. You never know who you’re talking to”.²³⁴

Another official recognised that the longer the crisis continues, the harder it will be to reverse the radicalisation of the opposition that Turkey supports.²³⁵ For the time being, however, a senior Turkish official insisted that radicals like Jabhat al-Nusra are containable.²³⁶ What is needed, he said, is a far more convincing Western commitment to opposition victory.

²²⁸ “Better armament for the opposition will make a critical difference I don’t think the regime will last more than a few months as it is now”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013.

²²⁹ “Supply meets demand”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, July 2012. A Western defence official said some arms from Saudi Arabia and Qatar do transit through Turkey as well, and that Turkey may also in the past have given some military aid. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, January 2013.

²³⁰ C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Arms airlift to Syria rebels expands, with aid from C.I.A.”, *The New York Times*, 24 March 2013. Turkey’s foreign ministry denied this. “Turkey denies claim arms shipped to Syrian opposition via Turkey”, *Today’s Zaman*, 25 March 2013.

²³¹ Kadri Gürsel, “İslami monşerlere büyük ihtiyaç var” [“There is a great need for [AKP to get some properly trained] ‘Islamic’ foreign policymakers]”, *Milliyet*, 18 February 2013.

²³² “We can’t stop them boarding the plane just because they are bearded, and they have been screened [for any weapons]”. Crisis Group interview, Celalettin Leksiz, Hatay governor, March 2013. “[European governments] tell us that they could come back to the streets of Europe. But I say, what about the PKK there? We’re not asking Europe for help [against terrorism]. We’re asking them to help themselves!” Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

²³³ “Turkey does arm and train some opposition battalions in Syria, but only with basic weapons and to operate near the border”. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian expert working in northern Syria, April 2013.

²³⁴ Crisis Group interview, Yusuf Güler, district prefect, Reyhanlı, January 2013.

²³⁵ “The situation provides fertile grounds for extremists. As time goes on it will become harder to uproot them ... that’s why we want to finish this quickly”. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

²³⁶ Turkish officials estimate the group has between 700 to 1,500 combatants among 50,000-60,000 Syrian opposition fighters. Said one: “Jabhat al-Nusra does have links to al-Qaeda, we know that. But they have no political future, except perhaps as destabilising spoilers. We don’t say [the U.S. has to] ‘cooperate with them. We just say, don’t exaggerate, don’t make them into [an official anti-Western force], it gives them an oversized

When [international] democratic forces are not on the side of democratic forces, people have no choice. People wanted dignity and freedom back. No one can rule in Syria without the explicit consent of the people. If you do not want a new Somalia on the Mediterranean, you have to help the democratic forces. They need a better command and control structure. The question is an explicit support from the world, from democracies ... logistical and humanitarian support.²³⁷

Some have argued that Turkey's multifaceted policy is making the best of the inevitable.²³⁸ Others say unusually aggressive rhetoric, engagement with armed cross-border insurgents and interference in a neighbour's internal affairs have been damaging.²³⁹ Even a staunch supporter of the government like IHH says a more neutral outreach would help – and has proved how it can by being a leading part of negotiations that freed journalists caught by the Syrian government and in organising a remarkable exchange across active front lines of 48 Iranians held by the Syrian opposition for more than 2,000 rebels detained by the Syrian government.²⁴⁰

Turkey dialled up the dose [of its rhetoric], it exaggerated. It severed all ties [with Syria] to the point of an undeclared war. The Westerners all said, 'we're right behind you'. [But they weren't]. Turkey should not have come to the point of becoming direct enemies, it should have maintained channels for dialogue. [In Damascus] the regime is cut off from the rest of the world.²⁴¹

D. RESISTING NEO-OTTOMANISM AS A POLICY

Most controversially, the Syria crisis has triggered new dynamics that are blurring the 900km Turkey-Syria border.²⁴² Even before the crisis, Turkey's growing influence in Syria was evident in shops and investments in the north.²⁴³ Turmoil in the country today, the weakening reach of central power in Damascus and forward-leaning Turkish policies are entrenching this new and unplanned process of integration. A two-way osmosis across the frontier is forging new connections that are controlled and reversible at present, but have potentially major consequences for the region's political geography in the likely case of a protracted crisis.

ego". Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February 2013. For more on the radical opposition, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

²³⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2013.

²³⁸ "Turkey has assumed a number of roles – from attempting mediation to hosting refugees to sheltering armed opposition groups. This multi-faceted engagement is part of Turkey's overall effort to position itself as a major player on both the regional and global stage". Ash Ilgit and Rochelle Davis, op. cit.

²³⁹ Turkish leaders "acted prematurely [calling for Assad's ouster]. They didn't think it through, they were trying to follow the Libyan example, expecting a swift outcome". Crisis Group interview, Western official, Washington DC, November 2012. "Turkey totally misread the dynamics of Syria, thought that the regime would fall and a new regime would be pro-Turkish, and they are insisting on this misreading. Turkey is exposed, and has no exit plan". Crisis Group interview, Fehim Taştekin, Istanbul, November 2012. "Syria succeeded in making Turkish threats look empty". Crisis Group interview, Meliha Altunisik, Ankara, November 2012. "They should have kept quiet. All they've managed to do is make the problem worse. They are so naïve. How can they think that Muslims don't fight other Muslims [in the Syrian civil war]? How do they think the Ottomans conquered the Middle East?" Crisis Group interview, former Turkish foreign minister, Istanbul, January 2013.

²⁴⁰ "The Syrian regime is not against IHH delivering aid in Syria ... we give aid to both sides. We say, 'there is a fight going on here, we are not commenting on it. But our responsibility is to help the people who are harmed'". Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, January 2013.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² "The borders have become meaningless ... we face a security threat. But if necessary we can harden the border again". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013. "Turkey deliberately vaporised the border, to help the Free Syrian Army". Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, February 2013.

²⁴³ See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°93, *Reshuffling the Cards (II): Syria's New Hand*, 16 December 2009, pp. 5-7.

Rhetoric from Turkish leaders in Ankara underlines a sense of deep, open-ended involvement in Syria. Even in Hatay, officials habitually talk of historical bonds with “our former province”. Memories of how the UK and France seized Syria from Turkey remain fresh: as a Turkish commentator put it, “the false borders of World War I are melting on the Reyhanlı-Syria axis”.²⁴⁴ Underlining this sentiment, Erdoğan has said that for Turkey, Syria’s current conflict constitutes “an internal affair”.²⁴⁵ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu mocked Syria’s leaders for not attacking Israeli planes that bombed a Syrian target in January 2013, saying Turkey would not have stayed “unresponsive to an Israeli attack against any Muslim country”.²⁴⁶

Turkish leaders have at times called for a no-fly zone in northern Syria, and at others regretted that it seemed politically impossible.²⁴⁷ The idea of an internationally imposed safe zone or haven was raised by Foreign Minister Davutoğlu at the UN General Assembly in August 2012, but met silence or even disapproval from the UN refugee chief and major powers.²⁴⁸ Indeed, a diplomat said that a Turkish-backed, rebel-controlled territory may eventually emerge in northern Syria that will become a “de facto no-fly zone”.²⁴⁹

Publicly, Turkey remains committed to Syria’s territorial integrity.²⁵⁰ Privately, however, Turkish officials readily draw comparisons between the Syrian crisis and Turkey’s increasingly close-bound relationship with northern Iraq’s Kurdistan Regional Government.²⁵¹ Even anti-AKP voices do not regret the fading of borders imposed on the young Turkish republic in the 1920s by the imperial UK.²⁵² Officials speak of a new approach to the extension of Turkey’s

²⁴⁴ Hasan Kanbolat, “Syrian Circassians have begun to arrive in Turkey”, *Today’s Zaman*, 19 November 2012.

²⁴⁵ Drawing a historical parallel, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad said Erdoğan “personally thinks that he is the new Ottoman sultan and can control the region as during the Ottoman Empire”. Television interview, *Russia Today*, 9 November 2011.

²⁴⁶ “Why didn’t [Bashar] al-Assad even throw a pebble at Israel: Turkish FM”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, 2 February 2013.

²⁴⁷ See, for instance, “Turkey calls for no-fly zone in Syria”, *Today’s Zaman*, 28 February 2013; “Erdoğan: No Syria no-fly zone without UN approval”, *Today’s Zaman*, 31 October 2012.

²⁴⁸ “It was unexpected, not raised with us beforehand. The chamber was half empty”. Crisis Group interview, Western official, Washington DC, November 2012. “Davutoğlu still thinks he can get a buffer zone, and is doing everything to create a buffer zone. The question is, do they want a buffer zone or just a buffer?” Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, December 2012. For UN refugee chief Antonio Guterres’s warning against safe zones as jeopardising refugees’ right to asylum, see “Turkey appeals to UN council for Syria safe zone”, *Associated Press*, 30 August 2012.

²⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Istanbul, January 2013.

²⁵⁰ Prime Minister Erdoğan said: “We will not allow – God willing – such a situation [a joint Arab-Kurdish administration of northern Syria] to emerge”. However, at the same time, he said that Turkey believed that the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul, just south of the Iraqi Kurdish region, would “sooner or later” enjoy “autonomous status” – despite Baghdad’s objections. Quoted in “Turkey says won’t allow separate entity in northern Syria”, *Today’s Zaman*, 25 February 2013.

²⁵¹ “We warned the U.S. for 10 years, ‘you’re going to break up Iraq’. For this whole time we paid the price [of trying to hold Iraq together]. Finally we saw the situation now that America is leaving, and said, ‘well, let’s turn this to our advantage’. [Another factor is that] Baghdad has opened up its airspace and truck routes for materiel coming from Iran to Syria”. Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013.

²⁵² “The government is really neo-Ottoman, and that policy is based on a fantasy. But Aleppo is a Turkish town!” Crisis Group interview, retired Turkish colonel, Ankara, February 2013. “Those borders [with Syria and Iraq] are all false”. Crisis Group interview, retired Turkish senior official, Istanbul, February 2013. Late Ottoman and early Turkish republican officials saw themselves as preserving what was called a National Pact (*Misak-ı Milli*), which still has strong legitimacy in Turkish public opinion. According to such a pact, Turkish-speaking areas of the former Ottoman Empire would become part of the Turkish nation, and Arab-majority areas would have the option to join by referendum. Kurds were not mentioned. This pact never had official borders, but “National Pact” maps published by Turkish nationalists typically include northern Iraq and northern Syria, based on the presence of significant Turkish-speaking populations there. See, for instance, <http://bit.ly/YWZuAR>.

soft power and sphere of influence over its southern border, a policy whose goals are similar to Turkey's previous promotion of "no problems with neighbours" to achieve security and commercial growth in the region.²⁵³ In northern Syria, some even hope for power supplies, gas pipelines and deep integration with Turkey.²⁵⁴ "TOKI [the Turkish government housing development administration] is waiting and ready to just roll in [to start reconstruction]".²⁵⁵ As analyst Soner Çağaptay put it:

[There is] a yet-undeclared Turkish policy in the Middle East: Anticipating the decentralisation of post-Assad Syria, and hoping to take advantage of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish north, Turkey is carving out a cordon sanitaire across the northern Fertile Crescent, building influence in the Kurdish population as well as in large commercial centers such as Aleppo and Mosul.²⁵⁶

Domestic critics of Ankara's policy fear this deepening involvement in northern Syria and Iraq.²⁵⁷ Some believe that blurring borders with the two neighbours could create a critical mass of Kurds who might then later break a large chunk of Turkey off to create an independent Kurdistan.²⁵⁸ Iran's reaction remains a wild card, too.²⁵⁹ The domestic opposition also fears that Erdoğan's bid for a Turkish role inside Syria could mean losing control of Hatay's delicate communal balances – the 1939 annexation of which, ironically, was itself a success of a previous forward-leaning Turkish policy.²⁶⁰

Most of Turkey's Western partners are comfortable with Ankara's special role in the region, but if a perception arises that it is changing borders, or contradicting its customs union with the EU, problems could arise. Political opponents accuse Erdoğan of gambling the country's reputation for domestic political gain.²⁶¹ Arab commentators are increasingly suspicious.²⁶²

²⁵³ "It would be a kind of 'lira zone' [a Turkey-centred idea informally floated as an alternative to the Eurozone by Prime Minister Erdoğan in an October 2012 speech]. Turkey wants to be surrounded by a zone of stability, to integrate with its neighbours. This might be applicable to northern Iraq today, but it would be southern Iraq coming next. The same thing would work in Syria". Crisis Group interview, Turkish security official, Ankara, February 2013.

²⁵⁴ "Like Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government, northern Syria could well become a vassal of Turkey. And that might not be a bad thing!" Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian expert working in northern Syria, Istanbul, April 2013.

²⁵⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turkish conflict resolution expert, Istanbul, 12 April 2013

²⁵⁶ Soner Çağaptay, "Turkey's Foray into the Fertile Crescent", *The New York Times*, 27 February 2013.

²⁵⁷ "Turkey should not have got involved, should have stayed neutral". Crisis Group interview, retired Turkish former foreign minister, Istanbul, January 2013.

²⁵⁸ "Turkey's current daydreaming leadership, given their fantasies of neo-Ottomanism, may be baited with promises of extended territories But in our opinion ultimately [a resulting] Kurdish Federal State would unilaterally break away". Cem Toker, chairman, Liberal Democratic Party Turkey, press statement, 25 March 2013.

²⁵⁹ "Iran is already backing Kurds against Turkey again". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Istanbul, March 2013. "That entire border area Iran-Iraq-Syria could make for a nightmare scenario [for Turkey], if all three kick off in different ways". Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Ankara, February 2013.

²⁶⁰ "You got a plane shot down, you got rockets fired at you, people died, everywhere is full of agents. And today an explosion in Hatay. While you're saying you'll do anything for Syria, watch out that you don't lose Hatay". Tweet by Oktay Vural, @oktayvural, deputy parliamentary group leader of the MHP, 9:49pm, 11 February 2013.

²⁶¹ "Arab anti-Turkishness will surface again Erdoğan wanted a victory [over Assad] for internal purposes. He lost Europe, failed in Armenia, Cyprus is stuck, the trials [of military officers suspected of plotting coups are going nowhere]. He's looking at the presidential elections in 2014". Crisis Group interview, retired Turkish colonel, Ankara, February 2013.

²⁶² "Turkey has never hidden its designs on Syrian territory. The Turks have already seized the Syrian province of [Hatay/Alexandretta] – and have already appointed a governor for [refugees from] northern Syria Turkey is a major regional power seeking to take advantage of Arab weakness". Ashraf Ajami, commentary in the Palestinian daily *al-Ayyam*, 4 April 2013.

This intertwining across the border will likely increase as large numbers of Syrians transit through Hatay airport and are visible on the streets of the province's main towns – like others further east, notably Gaziantep. As more aid goes across the border it will also become more porous.

Turkey has already paid a price for blurring the border. Security is being undermined by stray bullets, occasional mortar shells, attempted kidnappings, and a car bomb that exploded at the Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa crossing on 11 February 2013, killing fourteen people. The province's new mix of jihadi fighters, refugees, Syrian regime agents and ethno-sectarian fault lines will not get easier to keep under control the longer the Syria conflict continues.²⁶³ As a Turkish member of parliament from Hatay put it:

I see Syria like a hand grenade, it hurts everyone when it goes off. The most damage will be in Turkey If Syria splits, it'll be into Alevi [Alawite], Sunni and Kurdish autonomous zones. This symmetry will be reflected in Hatay. Each community has relatives over the border. And if Turkey attacks Syria, it will be killing our citizens' own relatives. How will we keep the peace? Two of these zones [Alawite and Kurdish in Syria] will be hostile to Turkey; one [Sunni] we don't know. Sunni [jihadis] could turn out to be a plague on our heads. Then there are Sunni tribes that are [simply] thieves, and Sunni tribes that also support Bashar al-Assad [against jihadis] If people want to stir things up in Hatay, they can.²⁶⁴

²⁶³ "It's more dangerous in Hatay [than other border areas]. There's more Syrian regime capability there. Jabhat Al-Nusra people go through there. It's Indian country [dangerous for us]". Crisis Group interview, Western diplomat, Ankara, February 2013.

²⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Şefik Çirkin, MHP Hatay deputy, Ankara, November 2013.

V. Conclusion

Turkey has managed the influx of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees humanely. The camps it has set up are a model for what can be done if money is generously spent. But Turkey can neither sensibly afford, and nor should it have to pay for, the large number of Syrians who are still likely to arrive.

With funds and preparation, the expected doubling or tripling of the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey should be manageable. Doing this inside Turkey is the best way to establish a secure environment for humanitarian efforts, the first and absolute need of refugees and aid workers. In Hatay, careful placing of refugees lowered tensions. A flexible policy towards the newer arrivals has both lessened difficulties for them and opened up new economic avenues for locals. It is clear that most Syrians still want to go back to their homes, even if it is less evident when it will be safe to do so. With camps inside Syria on the Turkish border subject to attacks by either regime forces or kidnappers, neither Turkey nor any other outside force is likely to be able to create truly secure zones inside northern Syria any time soon. Ultimately, a refugee haven well inside Turkey will make caring for those fleeing the war cheaper, safer and more sustainable.

On its own, any Turkish policy has little chance of substituting for a full international response. It does not have the military capacity, the Arabic-speaking personnel, the resources or the experience to act either on its own or as the leader of an expeditionary force to stabilise any part of Syria. Also, its increasing association with Sunni Muslim sectarian Syrian forces and alignment against the main Syrian Kurdish armed force make any such proposition fraught with risks.

Finally, Turkey understandably wishes to build a sphere of influence, stability and prosperity in the Muslim countries to its south. Its generous welcome for Syrian refugees has so far generated gratitude and respect, even if Turkey should be more careful to be seen as truly non-discriminatory. In the future, too, it is a well-planned new policy to care for the large refugee population inside Turkey that will allow Ankara to lay the best foundation for friendly bonds with whatever Syria emerges from its current maelstrom of deadly conflict.
