

TURKEY'S SYRIA ISSUES

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The Rising Costs of Turkey's Syrian Quagmire^{1*}

I. Introduction

Three years after the Syrian unrest started, Turkey has significantly adjusted its expectations and adapted to changing circumstances.² On a humanitarian level, it has continued to show hospitality and generosity toward refugees, but its open-arms approach has experienced limitations. While its position against President Bashar al-Assad and in favour of the non-jihadi opposition in Syria remains firm, it has recently shown signs of recalibrating its regional policy to reflect a course correction toward sectarian neutrality.

In April 2013, Crisis Group examined Turkey's initial refugee response, its successful handling of domestic tensions and its support to the Syrian opposition, seen through the prism of events in the border province of Hatay.³ A year later, the humanitarian challenge has grown immensely, while new issues have gained particular urgency, including the rapidly rising number of urban refugees and the security threats posed by jihadi militants in northern Syria. Turkish officials who thought a year ago that the Syrian war would be over by now have accepted that the timeline is much longer and the process toward a solution much less certain.

Since June 2012, when Syria shot down a Turkish reconnaissance plane that strayed into its airspace, more than 75 Turks have been killed in spillover from the conflict.⁴ Ankara blamed the Damascus regime for modern Turkey's bloodiest terrorist attack, in May 2013, when 53 people were killed in a double car-bombing in Reyhanlı, in Hatay. Deadly frictions also arose with Syria-based jihadi groups, including a shoot-out in central Anatolia that killed four Turks on 20 March 2014. Turkey shot down a Syrian helicopter that entered its airspace on 16 September 2013 and a warplane that did the same over Hatay on 23 March 2014 (see Section IV.B below).

This report examines Turkey's humanitarian efforts, the tension between its public's sympathy for, and unease toward, Syrians, and the government's changing role with regard to Syria's political and military opposition. It is mainly based on interviews with Syrian activists, refugees, local residents and authorities in Ankara and Istanbul, as well as in two provinces on the Syrian border – Gaziantep and Kilis – that provide a microcosm of the overall crisis in Turkey and Ankara's response to it.

II. Turkey Adapts its Humanitarian Response

Turkey has received well-deserved accolades for its generous humanitarian response since April 2011 to the Syrian conflict. It hosts what already by mid-2013 was the world's sixth largest refugee population,

¹ * Plusec-Pluralism, Human Security and Sustainability Centre/Plusec-Centre de pluralism 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.

² For previous reporting on Turkey and Syria, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°225, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, 25 April 2013. For reporting on the Syrian crisis, see Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°146, *Anything But Politics: The State of Syria's Political Opposition*, 17 October 2013; N°143, *Syria's Metastasizing Conflicts*, 27 June 2013; 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.

³ Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit.

⁴ According to an informal tally of casualties reported in open sources and maintained by Crisis Group. The figure does not include many Syrians killed inside Turkey or just over the border.

with Syrians making up the largest asylum seeker group in the country.⁵ Upwards of 720,000 (a third of all Syrian refugees in the region) are known to be in refugee camps or private accommodations. Official Turkish estimates are that this figure is likely to reach 1.5 million by the end of 2014. No resolution of the conflict is in sight, and even if the violence stops, many Syrians will remain in Turkey for years more. The growing numbers have already overwhelmed national structures and diminished the capacity to deal with the needs of both local people and refugees.

A. *Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Safety without Status*

While Turkish officials say their open border policy continues, entries have become more difficult in practice. Syrians with valid passports can still enter visa-free at open border crossings, but the rest are accepted generally only in cases of humanitarian or medical emergencies. This leads many to try to enter illegally. A group of refugees Crisis Group interviewed in south-eastern Kilis province said they paid Turkish smugglers 1,000 Turkish Lira (nearly \$500) each to cross.⁶ Turkey has built two short stretches of wall on parts of the mostly very porous 911-km border.⁷

Syrians arrive daily, while some go the other way, often temporarily to check on family or land. Incomers settle mainly in Turkey's border provinces, because they want to stay close to their homeland. The choice of city also depends on the presence of relatives or acquaintances. Though daily entries of 2,000 or more seen in 2012 have subsided, clashes in northern Syria still give rise to large influxes.⁸ Turkish officials fear that if the situation deteriorates further, for instance with a bigger regime offensive in northern towns, up to 200,000 Syrians could be displaced in one day to neighbouring countries, a large portion to Turkey.⁹

Women and children make up 75 per cent of Syrian refugees in Turkey; those under eighteen alone account for 50 per cent.¹⁰ Most are Sunni Arabs, but there are significant numbers of Syrian Turkmen as well.¹¹ Almost all say Turks have been welcoming. Though often considered part of the Syrian opposition by host communities, not all readily declare a side. Some voice disillusionment with the uprising and frustration with all parties.¹² An international refugee official worried that even among refugees of the same ethnicity and religion, political divisions were growing based on who they supported in Syria.¹³

⁵ "Mid-Year Trends", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), June 2013.

⁶ Crisis Group interview, November 2013.

⁷ In October 2013, pictures were published of a wall being built in Mardin's Nusaybin town, across from Qamishli in Syria. A Turkish official said it was repair work on damaged barbed wire. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013. A few months later, Turkish media reported construction of a four-metre-high wall had started at the Karkamış crossing in Gaziantep to prevent illegal entries. "Karkamış gümrük kapısına duvar örüldü" [Wall built on Karkamış customs gate], *Hürriyet*, 1 January 2014.

⁸ For instance on 8 January 2014, when the militant jihadi group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) clashed with other Islamic opposition groups near Tel Abyad/Raqqa in northern Syria, more than 1,000 crossed in a day to Turkey through Akçakale in Şanlıurfa.

⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, 27 January 2014.

¹⁰ "Regional Response Plan", UNHCR, December 2013.

¹¹ Over 20,000 Sunni Turkmen were already in camps before jihadi groups attacked Turkmen villages in northern Syria in January-February 2014, sending at least 4,000 more into Turkey. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013; "Turkey says ISIL convoy hit necessary as 'threat comes near us'", *Today's Zaman*, 2 February 2014. An estimated 10,000-15,000 Alevi Turkmen and an unknown number of Syrian Kurds have also come to Turkey. Alawites, Alevis and Kurds are mostly outside refugee camps, while there are a few Circassians in the Nizip camp. Crisis Group interviews, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013, and Vedat Kara, board member, Hacı Bektash Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation and spokesman for Istanbul Alevi Coordination, Istanbul, January 2014.

¹² "We ran away from Aleppo, both from the regime and the opposition. We don't support any group in Syria; we want to have bread", said a refugee. Another said, "I curse them [regime and rebels] both! We did not like Assad either, but at least

A Law on Foreigners and International Protection – Turkey's first asylum legislation – was passed in April 2013. After the necessary institutional foundations were laid, it came into effect a year later, on 11 April 2014. Its focus is on individual cases rather than mass influxes. It does not, however, lift the geographic limitation that Turkey maintains on the 1951 Geneva refugee convention and 1967 protocol. This means non-European foreigners cannot get “refugee” status. Syrians continue to be “guests”, though officially under “temporary protection” – a term vaguely emanating from the European Council’s 2001 directive dealing with the aftermath of the mass influx into EU member states from the former Yugoslavia.¹⁴

The new law provides for the first time a domestic legal basis for the concept of temporary protection Turkey started using in October 2011.¹⁵ In its original form it did not spell out the Syrians’ rights, including to legal employment and education, or allow their transfer to third countries as UN-recognised refugees. Ad-hoc government initiatives have addressed some of these issues in practice (see Section II.A.2 below), but additional regulations and bylaws would be needed to clarify areas not covered by its short article on temporary protection and to improve the inconsistent manner of implementing central government policies at local levels. New initiatives might bring Turkey’s legislation further in line with EU directives, namely granting beneficiaries permits for residence, jobs, training, and starting businesses, as well as providing for basic needs and care for those with special needs.¹⁶ The law established a central Directorate-General of Migration Management (DGMM) under the interior ministry that became operational in April 2014, as the sole authority above the governorates on issues of foreigners’ legal stay.

1. As the world’s best shelters reach their limit

International praise continues for Turkey’s generous accommodation facilities: “I can clearly say the camps in Turkey are magnificent [in] the level of resources, infrastructure, services, space and security provided They are on a different level than those elsewhere”.¹⁷ Around 220,000 Syrians are in 22 camps (one a temporary reception centre in Kilis).¹⁸ Some 24 shelters in ten provinces are completed, but two are kept idle for contingencies in case of large influxes.¹⁹ Of the 22 active ones, sixteen are tent camps, and six are container cities (See map).

The government’s primary role in the camps’ establishment and management consists of the provision of services and security but at times poses problems of international transparency and access to outside assistance. The prime minister’s Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) is the main government body for coordinating domestic and international humanitarian responses, while the Turkish

everything was cheap. Our women were safe. We thought the opposition could finish the job in a month or two, but they turned out to be crooks, too”. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep and Kilis, November 2013.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, February 2014. A Turkish think tank survey in a Kilis refugee camp found anti-opposition sentiment rising among Syrians. Crisis Group interview, Özdem Sanberk, director, International Strategic Research Organisation (USAK), Ankara, February 2014.

¹⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p. 5. For the European Council’s temporary protection directive, see [http:// bit.ly/10ByuWT](http://bit.ly/10ByuWT).

¹⁵ Article 91 reads: “(1) Temporary protection can be provided to foreigners who have been forced to flee their countries, cannot go back to that country, have come in mass influx to or crossed our borders to receive emergency and temporary protection. (2) Acceptance of these persons into Turkey, their stay, rights and obligations, the procedures to be followed upon their departure from Turkey, precautions in cases of mass movement, coordination among national and international institutions and organisations, specifying duties and powers of institutions and organisations that will serve in the headquarters and rural areas will be regulated by cabinet directives”.

¹⁶ “The Struggle for Life Between Borders: Syrian Refugees”, USAK, May 2013.

¹⁷ Crisis Group communication, Elisabeth Ferris, co-director, Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement, 25 March 2014. An international official called the centres “exemplary”, adding that they “set standards of best practices globally We congratulate Turkey on its overall response”. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, January 2014.

¹⁸ AFAD press statement, 20 December 2013.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish aid coordinator, Ankara, December 2013.

Red Crescent (Kızılay) is the lead actor inside the camps. Both operate under the authority of provincial governors. A coordinating governor based in Gaziantep was assigned for the Syrians in November 2012. The new DGMM will take over from AFAD and the foreigners' police²⁰ after a transition period.

UN involvement with Syrians in Turkey has increased during the past year, though more international oversight is still needed. More UN agencies are now active on the ground, mainly in the south east and along the Syrian border.²¹ The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is not engaged directly in operational activities but has a presence in all camps, consults regularly with the government, assists where needed and monitors returns and technical support, including training of AFAD personnel.²² The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) provides educational materials and spaces for camps, trains teachers, creates "child friendly spaces" with the Turkish Red Crescent and organises social activities for the youth, among other contributions. The World Food Programme (WFP) is still the main sponsor of a food card scheme, about 30 per cent funded by the U.S., that allows refugees to buy their own food and is used in fifteen accommodation centres.²³ In addition to several UN agencies, a few NGOs have supporting roles in some camps.

Turkey initially miscalculated the duration and scale of the crisis and now faces a serious challenge in sustaining and expanding its high-standard facilities. Several refugees interviewed at the Öncüpinar border crossing and the main bus terminal in Kilis said they were turned away from the camps because they were full.²⁴ AFAD representatives said they are doing their best to build new shelters, but these are expensive and take time given the high standards.²⁵ As a way of dealing with non-camp Syrians in Kilis, Turkey asked NGOs in 2013 to help build and supply a temporary reception centre for 5,000, as a holding ground until space opens in other shelters.

Syrian refugees in the 14,000-person Öncüpinar container city in Kilis said they were, overall, satisfied with conditions.²⁶ Turkmen and Arabs stay in the same facility without major problems. Schools in the camps teach both Arabic and Turkish, and parents are happy with them in general (though some complain they use old Syrian books revering Hafez and Bashar al-Assad). Refugees can leave the camp daily from 9 am to 7 pm. They can also go back to Syria temporarily after notifying the authorities; in most cases, they must return within 45 days to keep their spot.²⁷

A few refugees complained that mattresses had not been changed in three years, that heaters were inadequate for the cold weather, and, in the case of at least one woman, that she had to pay for clothes.²⁸ A survey among refugees from four camps in May 2013 found that healthcare services were the main prob-

²⁰ The branch within the police department that deals with all issues regarding foreigners' stay.

²¹ Including UNHCR; UN Development Programme (UNDP); WFP; World Health Organisation (WHO); UNICEF; UN Population Fund (UNFPA); Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO); Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA); and the affiliated International Organisation for Migration (IOM).

²² Crisis Group interviews, Metin Çorabatır, founding member, Research Center on Asylum and Migration (IGAM), Ankara, December 2013, international refugee official, Istanbul, February 2014.

²³ The goal is to spread it to all shelters. A food card or voucher is given to each family, providing 80 Turkish Lira (around \$40) per member monthly. It cannot be used to buy junk or luxury food, tobacco or alcohol. The arrangement helps the local economy as funds are used in local retail shops.

²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Kilis, November 2013, February 2014.

²⁵ "It is like building a town We have limited resources". Crisis Group interview, AFAD official, Ankara, October 2013. "Some Turkish camps have higher standards than people had in Syria. If they are coming here just for better conditions, we shouldn't have to carry that burden. We have our own poor". Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²⁶ A May 2013 shelter survey in Akçakale, Nizip, Kilis and Ceylanpınar found 88 per cent of camp residents "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with services. "The Struggle for Life", op. cit. For observations and interviews about Hatay's Yayladağ and Boynuyolu camps, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., pp 9-10.

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Kilis; Turkish official, Gaziantep, both November 2013.

²⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Kilis, November 2013.

lem (37 per cent of complaints), followed by the attitude of camp officials (17 per cent). Another frustration is that many residents lack daily activities or responsibilities, so feel “completely redundant”.²⁹ More extensive employment opportunities within these centres might partly solve the problem, while also taking pressure off Turkish personnel.

Turkey says it does not send Syrians back, even if they entered illegally, thus adhering to the non-refoulement principle of the 1951 Geneva convention.³⁰ Those who enter irregularly can regularize their stay by registering once inside the country. But occasional cases of unrest in several camps have led to accusations of forced returns.³¹ A European official said that in March 2013, after a fire caused a riot in a shelter in Akçakale, hundreds were deported in one day: “Authorities say returns were voluntary, but the alternative was to go to prison in Turkey”.³² UNHCR criticised Turkey over the incident, saying it was “not invited by authorities during the return process to monitor the procedures”, and “return to the country of origin, even voluntarily, is subject to standards and procedures where individuals may be placed at risk on return”.³³

In recent months, steps have been taken to synchronise camp registrations nationally through fingerprinting, although this is still not uniformly applied in all camps. Access for outsiders remains mostly restricted.³⁴ Several challenges include psychological support for state personnel working at the camps; more attention to psycho-social needs of refugees; early identification and care of vulnerable groups; and child protection, including preventing their enrolment in armed groups.³⁵

Overall, sustainability of high standards is the biggest issue: “AFAD is a disaster relief agency. They are not in the business of setting up towns. However lavish the camps are, people are still living in a tent for three years. It’s not a [long-term] solution, it’s an emergency response”.³⁶ The government would benefit from more outsourcing to meet the needs of existing camps or build new ones to host immediate arrivals. The new, relatively small Kilis transit centre is an example where NGOs cover food and health services. To make it easier to meet needs, AFAD introduced an online aid distribution system in 2013. It collects Syrians’ demands through questionnaires and shares them with donors (NGOs, individuals or countries) that can monitor which items are needed in which camps and can organise their response, with AFAD coordinating.

2. Syrians spread through Turkey’s urban spaces

Urban, or non-camp, refugees are the main problem facing Turkey as a consequence of the Syrian conflict. At least two thirds and possibly four fifths of refugees are in private accommodations, mostly rented and

²⁹ Some 72 per cent said they felt no opportunity for self-realisation; 66 per cent said they have no daily activities. “The Struggle for Life”, op. cit.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Gaziantep, Ankara, November-December 2013. “Maybe in a moment of anger, camp authorities may have threatened them. But they can’t send them back”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013.

³¹ For instance, protests broke out in the Öncüpınar container city in Kilis province in July 2012 due to water shortages; in October 2012 in Kahramanmaraş due to food and supply distribution problems; in March 2013 in Süleymanşah in Akçakale due to a tent fire that killed a Syrian girl. “In some of the camps, there have been Syrians who caused unrest or argued with officials because they were unsatisfied with the services This dissatisfaction is not the rule but an exception [but] both the refugees and the officials are having problems and steps should be taken to prevent further disturbances”. “The Struggle For Life”, op. cit.

³² Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

³³ “UNHCR rebukes Turkey over return of Syrian refugees”, Reuters, 29 March 2013.

³⁴ Turkey has compelling reasons for limiting free access; see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p. 17

³⁵ A refugee expert also said the practice of frequently changing camp managers, who can arbitrarily stop and start services provided by outside organisations, can cause problems. Crisis Group interview, Metin Çorabatır, founding member, IGAM, Ankara, 11 December 2013.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, international refugee official, Istanbul, February 2014.

crowded. The official number of such refugees is 500,000 and rising, but unofficial estimates go up to a million.³⁷ In some border provinces like Kilis, Syrians outnumber the local population, putting a huge burden on local administrations.

Some Syrians do not want to go to government shelters, because they need to earn money, particularly if they have family inside Syria to support. Others compare living in camps to “being in a cage”.³⁸ A Turkish aid official said attempts to move Syrians off the streets in western Istanbul province to a nearby Turkish Red Crescent youth camp were only partially successful because many thought being registered in a shelter meant they could be sent to others in the south east.³⁹ Many others who tried to enter government facilities were turned away because there was no space.⁴⁰

Most Syrians remain in the south east, in cities along the border like Hatay, Gaziantep, Urfa, Mardin and Kilis.⁴¹ They are also increasingly spreading to western Turkey; an official estimated 120,000 and 100,000 living in Istanbul and Izmir respectively.⁴² Not all Syrians are desolate – some can afford to live on their own in cities; a select few work for international and Turkish organisations, sometimes related to the crisis at home. But many cannot afford or immediately find housing; refugees are increasingly visible in cities across the country begging in parks or on the streets.⁴³ At least a quarter of non-camp Syrians in Turkey are estimated to live in open or inadequate conditions.⁴⁴

While Syrians with passports can enter freely, stay three months and get residence permits from police stations for up to a year, the situation is less clear for those without papers. There are uncoordinated local efforts to register them and provide identification so they can at least benefit from health services and schooling. In general, the state tolerates their presence without documentation. A Syrian Turkmen refugee in Gaziantep said he would not fear the police even if he did not have papers on him: “They stop us but let us go once they realise we are Syrians”.⁴⁵

A countrywide uniform registration system is an urgent priority for the newly established DGMM.⁴⁶ UNHCR has given over twenty mobile registration vehicles to the Turkish authorities, mainly to be used in the south east, but progress has been limited. Gaziantep had the first coordination centre for registering non-camp Syrians in January 2013, and others were set up in Urfa and Kilis. As of late 2013, however, half the Syrians registered in Gaziantep were not processed electronically, and the information could not be shared with national systems. Locally-issued ID cards are valid only within a province, do not officially serve as residence or work permits, and do not indicate citizenship of newborns. Aid provision is also difficult without proper registration. Another benefit of more extensive and detailed registration mecha-

³⁷ A Turkish NGO representative estimated over 600,000 Syrians lived in south-east Turkey alone in November 2013. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Kilis, November 2013, January 2014.

⁴¹ Urban Syrians in Gaziantep are estimated at over 160,000. Crisis Group interview, Asım Güzelbey, metropolitan mayor, Gaziantep, February 2014. Estimates from local NGOs go up to 200,000. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013. Local authorities estimated 50,000 lived in Kilis outside the camps in November 2013, of which 35,000 were registered. A municipal official said 200 arrived daily in Kilis, while some leave for elsewhere in Turkey or Syria. Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Ankara, October 2013.

⁴³ Their predicament became public when an abandoned three-story building in Istanbul’s Fatih neighbourhood collapsed, revealing that a Syrian family of twenty was sheltering there. Similar damaged buildings in an urban transformation project were occupied by other Syrian families. Locals said they donated food and clothes. “Yaşam her an çökebilir” [Life may collapse any moment], *Taraf*, 17 January 2014.

⁴⁴ “Regional Response Plan”, UNHCR, December 2013.

⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁴⁶ “We regret that so little data is available. Half of Syrians [in Turkey] are not registered. Before moving onto conclusions about how to help them, we need more information on their profiles”. Crisis Group telephone interview, multinational development aid expert, March 2014.

nisms would be to regulate the increasing number of cars with Syrian licence plates – over 6,000 in Gaziantep alone⁴⁷ – that need temporary Turkish plates and insurance.

Efforts to provide basic sustenance are uncoordinated and reach a small proportion of urban refugees. AFAD, working under the provincial governorates, is the main coordination body for non-camp Syrians' daily needs and health services. Local initiatives by institutions and NGOs to help urban Syrians through soup kitchens or cash and other non-food aid reach only a few thousand. In Gaziantep, the governorate has a soup kitchen that serves around 600 Syrian families two meals a day. Turkish NGOs have food distribution facilities, free supermarkets or mobile kitchens, that can in total feed several thousand daily. The Turkish Red Crescent can step in with its own soup kitchens when asked by the governorates.

Strain on aid organisations is building: a local Gaziantep NGO said requests for assistance doubled between November 2013 and February 2014 as the situation in northern Syria deteriorated.⁴⁸ Organisations keep lists of Syrians in need, based on which they deliver aid regularly, but urban Syrians say it is haphazard, and they survive mainly through assistance from relatives and neighbours.⁴⁹ Syrians also find Turkey's prices high compared to their homeland and believe they pay up to double what Turks do for some basic necessities like coal.⁵⁰ There were plans to extend a more comprehensive version of the WFP's food voucher project to urban Syrians, but no timeline has been announced.⁵¹

A truly open-door Turkish policy would require a funding commitment by the donor community and a new arrangement between Turkey, the UN, EU and/or other international organisations to provide for the refugees in the long-term. Even though many Syrians say they want eventually to go home, integration is already happening in a haphazard manner. Turkey needs, with international support, to make sure Syrians' needs and vulnerabilities inside the country are adequately addressed. The new DGMM should primarily focus on Syrians in the cities. There is a need for longer-term assistance programs beyond life-saving help, such as providing legal aid and dealing with vulnerabilities, including violence against women.

Information needs to be better disseminated, through Arabic fliers in aid distribution centres, regularly updated Arabic notice boards where Syrians congregate such as in parks and at bus stations, structured engagement with Syrian community leaders and, where possible, creative use of Arabic SMS text messages. A steady flow of reliable information would have the additional benefit of increasing trust if, for instance, the Turkish authorities need to persuade Syrians to move to other provinces. A significant number of Syrians Crisis Group interviewed in Gaziantep and Kilis did not even know they could register to receive municipal aid, or that their children could go to Syrian or Turkish schools already set up in these provinces.⁵²

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nursal Çakıroğlu, deputy governor, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁴⁸ Crisis Group interview, February 2014.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013, February 2014. Reportedly, only a small portion of the most vulnerable families were receiving ad hoc help through existing social security structures and NGOs. Regional Response Plan, UNHCR, December 2013.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁵¹ "The needs on the outside are different. Some people need food, but most need accommodation. We are talking about something broader than just sustenance that will involve the Turkish government, WFP and other organisations and will include registration and protection". Crisis Group interview, international refugee official, Istanbul, February 2014.

⁵² For instance, the father of a destitute Syrian family sleeping in Kilis's bus terminal in November 2013 said he went from one neighbourhood official to another trying to register to receive aid and finally gave up. Turned away from the camps, they slept on the street with a newborn, trying to find money to return to Syria. Many more Syrian refugees without passports were camping outside the bus terminal in February 2014; all had difficulties getting local ID cards, accessing regular aid or entering the camps. Crisis Group interviews, November 2013, February 2014.

3. Syrian children miss out on schooling

Schooling is a pressing issue. A multinational expert blamed policy ambiguities among donors, international and Syrian NGOs and the government for losing precious time in providing education.⁵³ The situation is better inside the shelters, where nearly 45,700 children, 60 per cent of the total school-age camp population, receive education in around 700 classrooms.⁵⁴ On the other hand, only 14 per cent of Syrian children outside the camps go to school.⁵⁵ Syrians with residence permits can register at Turkish schools, but language is a major barrier. A Turkish teacher in a Gaziantep public elementary school said there are one or two Syrians in every classroom, but they do not speak Turkish or mingle with other students.⁵⁶ Syrian National Coalition schools in Turkey teach the Syrian curriculum in Arabic.⁵⁷

Gaziantep alone, a local official said, had 25,000 school-age Syrian children in November 2013. Metropolitan and district municipalities opened three schools for some 3,000 of them that follow the Syrian curriculum and give an “equivalency” diploma at the end.⁵⁸ But future recognition of certification given in Turkey, whether in camps or outside, is uncertain.⁵⁹ A further 5,000 Syrian children are registered at Turkish schools in Gaziantep, which still leaves out roughly two thirds of the province’s school-age Syrians. In neighbouring Kilis province, the municipality and NGOs set up several schools that employ Syrian teachers.⁶⁰ Aid organisations try to fill the void with reading rooms or study halls that prepare Syrian children for exams to receive equivalency diplomas or provide training including Turkish courses.⁶¹

Another problem is that many Syrians need their children to earn money for the family. A Syrian refugee in Gaziantep said his two sons, aged eleven and twelve, had to work as a tailor’s apprentices all day, sometimes late into the night, for five to ten Turkish Lira (\$2.30-\$4.50) a day. Another said none of their six children go to school even though they have been in Gaziantep for a year.⁶²

All provinces with large Syrian populations need more prefabricated schools, catch-up classes, intensive Turkish language training, more teachers and vocational training opportunities for Syrians.⁶³ Given the likely long-term residence of the Syrian refugee community and the need for internationally valid diplomas, it is vital to provide as many places as possible for young children in the Turkish school system and Turkish classes in, and education ministry supervision of, the informal, Syrian-run Arabic-language schools.

4. Turkey’s many Aleppos

Syrian refugee neighbourhoods are often dubbed a “local Aleppo” or the “Syrian street” in many border towns. As the situation in northern Syria worsens due to the regime’s use of barrel bombs and the pres-

⁵³ “They could not decide if education would be in Arabic or Turkish, what curriculum to use and so on”. Crisis Group telephone interview, March 2014.

⁵⁴ AFAD press release, 30 December 2013.

⁵⁵ “Regional Response Plan”, UNHCR, December 2013.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, November 2013. Some public schools in Gaziantep teach Turkish after the regular school day is over.

⁵⁷ “Genişleyen ve derinleşen kriz: Suriyeli mülteciler” [A widening and deepening crisis: Syrian refugees], Analiz, December 2013.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, Nursal Çakıroğlu, deputy governor, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁵⁹ An international official said the Syrian National Coalition’s offer to certify diplomas may not ensure international accreditation. Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, February 2014.

⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, municipal officials, Kilis, November 2013. One school set up by the International Blue Crescent in Kilis can take 1,350 Syrian children. There are also several psycho-social education centres for children with a capacity of 1,200. Crisis Group interview, Muzaffer Baca, vice president, International Blue Crescent, Istanbul, January 2014.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interviews, Kimse Yok Mu? (Is Anybody There?) and Bülbülzade aid organisations, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁶² Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁶³ “Regional Response Plan”, UNHCR, December 2013.

ence of extremist jihadi groups, border Turkish provinces like Gaziantep and Kilis have experienced larger influxes.⁶⁴

Amplifying problems in the housing market, the rise in demand from Syrians has tripled or quadrupled rents in some cities.⁶⁵ A Turkish resident in Gaziantep's İbrahimli neighbourhood said his monthly rent went from 700 TL (\$300) to 1,600 TL (\$700) in two years. The hike is more dramatic in neighbouring Kilis province, from 200 TL (\$90) to 700 TL (\$300) in some cases, even for houses in extremely poor condition. Locals say there are no apartments, or even basements, left to rent. It is possible to find fifteen to twenty Syrians in a small one-bedroom apartment with no furniture other than carpets and blankets. In addition to overcrowding the places they rent, many Syrian families are increasingly having difficulties paying, which adds to landlords' reluctance to accept Syrian tenants.⁶⁶

Some Turkish NGOs provide rent assistance to Syrian families, but not enough to meet increasing demands. Local officials ask help from the prime ministry's Housing Development Administration (TOKİ).⁶⁷ International development experts say multinational donors are unlikely to directly fund TOKİ projects due to concerns about a lack of transparency in the government's housing programs.⁶⁸

Building new camps to accommodate destitute non-camp refugees would be a short-term solution and mean at least doubling Turkey's costs. An arrangement between Ankara on one side and the EU, World Bank and donors on the other should explore ways to fund a refugee housing scheme. This could be done through a combination of conditional cash or housing voucher programs to provide rent subsidies for Syrians, paid for by outside parties, and a simultaneous government project of expanding housing supply, particularly in areas receiving large influxes.

5. A new Syrian working class

Many Syrians have been in Turkey for almost three years and have run out of funds. Current legislation on foreigners' employment allows those with at least a six-month residence permit to apply for a work permit, if they meet the overall employment conditions. This process is complicated, expensive, can take months and leaves out Syrians who do not have official papers. The labour and social security ministry said in April 2013 that Syrians with residence permits can get work permits for the same duration if employers apply on their behalf.⁶⁹ It is a telling sign of bureaucratic difficulties, however, that even the 90 Syrian teachers employed by the municipality's Syrian schools in Gaziantep did not have work permits as of February 2014.⁷⁰

Urban Syrians interviewed by Crisis Group in Gaziantep and Kilis said their biggest concern was finding work and earning money. More and more work in Turkey illegally with no social security and often for less pay than Turks. A Syrian activist complained that his compatriots were exploited by Turkish employers, working fourteen-hour days in restaurants, textile, shoe or plastic factories, or as seasonal workers.⁷¹ A Syrian refugee said his bosses at a shoe factory in Gaziantep where he worked illegally used to hide him when insurance inspectors came. He lost two fingers in a work accident and was summarily dismissed

⁶⁴ Urban refugees in Gaziantep and Kilis said entire neighbourhoods and villages from Aleppo have relocated to Gaziantep in the past few months. Crisis Group interviews, February 2014.

⁶⁵ Turkey has a nine-year lag in housing supply, creating price increases independent of Syria. Crisis Group telephone interview, lead urban economist with a multinational agency, March 2014.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Kilis, November 2013, February 2014.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Nursal Çakıroğlu, deputy governor, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group telephone interviews, March 2014.

⁶⁹ Announcement [in Turkish] on <http://bit.ly/1gT6vjn>.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Asım Güzelbey, metropolitan mayor, Gaziantep, February 2014.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

without compensation.⁷² In a more public incident, two Syrians were among the seven workers who died in a metal-working factory explosion in Gaziantep in October 2013. Locals say that employers are not openly sanctioned for illegally employing Syrians.⁷³ When Crisis Group visited in November 2013 and February 2014, the bus terminal in Kilis was packed with Syrians heading to other provinces, including Istanbul and Izmir in western Turkey, to stay with relatives and look for work.

Syrians are also becoming employers. In many Gaziantep and Kilis neighbourhoods, restaurants with Arabic signs are more common than Turkish ones. Many coffeehouses, fast food stands and cell phone repair shops are on paper owned by Turks but operated by Syrians.⁷⁴ Nonetheless, it remains difficult for qualified, educated Syrians to find appropriate jobs.

Businessmen and local government in Gaziantep both want central Turkish authorities to give temporary work permits and even identity cards to regulate the employment and monitoring of Syrians in the cities.⁷⁵ Gaziantep's member of parliament from the main opposition party also supported regulating Syrians outside of camps through temporary identity papers, permits and social benefits.⁷⁶ An additional step could be to set up government agencies specifically to help Syrians find jobs in line with their training and professions and provide career counselling, certification of their skills and protections against abuse by employers.

B. *Turkey's Lifeline to Northern Syria*

Turkey has been pushing for a UN mandate on cross-border humanitarian operations. Officials have long demanded a strongly-worded Security Council resolution to allow humanitarian aid in a systematic, continuous manner.⁷⁷ Turkish and international officials both lament that the World Health Organisation (WHO), despite having a large stockpile, could not send polio shots when there was an outbreak in northern Syria and had to ask Turkey's health ministry for its supplies.⁷⁸

Their wishes were partially answered in a unanimous resolution (2139) on 22 February 2014 that included several articles on humanitarian assistance and called on the Syrian government to allow humanitarian relief operations. It has had very limited impact, but international pressure got Damascus to agree in March to open the Qamishli crossing on the Turkish border to UN and other international humanitarian assistance. While international officials point out that access from there is quite limited (to around

⁷² A middle-aged Syrian employed illegally at a lathe operator said he earned 250 TL (\$115) a week and that saying Turks on the job got 500 TL (\$230). Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, local newspaper editors, Gaziantep, November 2013. Several Syrian workers were injured in a fire in Gaziantep's Büyükbese commercial building in November 2013.

⁷⁴ "Among the Syrians who came to Turkey are ... factory owners who operated on both sides of the border before the crisis. They brought capital and know-how with them. Everybody looks at the negative side of it, but this is an opportunity for Turkey". Crisis Group telephone interview, multinational development aid expert, March 2014.

⁷⁵ A report by the Gaziantep Chamber of Trade and fourteen universities and civil society organisations recommended setting quotas for Syrians in a workplace. "Suriyeli sığınmacılarla ilgili yaşanan sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri" [Problems with Syrian asylum-seekers and recommendations for solutions], February 2014. "Unemployment [for Turks] is not a big problem for us here in Gaziantep. I think we can provide work opportunities for Syrians, as long as it is done in a controlled manner". Crisis Group interview, leading businessman, Gaziantep, November 2013. Pointing out that Turkish industrialists want an easier, expedited process for employing Syrians, the deputy governor said Syrian professionals should obtain work permits from the labour ministry "in a controlled manner". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, Mehmet Şeker, Gaziantep deputy of the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party (CHP), Ankara, 24 October 2013.

⁷⁷ They have complained that an 18 April 2013 Security Council statement urging Syria to allow aid in the most effective ways, including cross border, was not strong enough.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013. The health ministry did a campaign in November 2013 in the south east for one million people, but officials say its stockpiles are kept for domestic outbreaks. Polio is only one potential spillover; internationals warn of Hepatitis A and others.

300,000 people) compared to opposition-held crossings like Bab al-Hawa and Bab al-Salameh (which could give access to millions), they will take what they can.⁷⁹

For Turkey, the problem is that Qamishli accesses areas controlled by the Syrian Kurds' Democratic Union Party (PYD), linked to Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). Nonetheless, Ankara allowed a first convoy of 79 UN trucks to cross into Syria there between 20 and 25 March.⁸⁰ Turkey and the international community should continue to press Syria to open up additional crossings.

Elsewhere along the frontier, Turkey has been transferring aid to the no-man's land or "zero point" between the two countries' border gates for onward shipment into Syria. It helps maintain dozens of camps in a kind of humanitarian haven just inside Syria through the Turkish Red Crescent as well as Turkish and international NGOs. This is backed up by an international humanitarian effort, mostly organised in Gaziantep and mainly working in coordination with the Syrian opposition coalition's Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). International actors also train Syrian NGOs and local councils in Gaziantep and elsewhere in the south east.

1. "Zero point" deliveries

Turkey has done a tremendous job in facilitating aid to Syrians across its border. Food deliveries began in June 2011, and a unique, more organised structure, "zero point" assistance, was put in place in August 2012. The procedure of handing over aid at the border theoretically respects Syria's refusal to compromise on its sovereignty but in practice allows willing international organisations to work inside the country. The total of aid sent by the Turkish Red Crescent in this manner to the informal humanitarian haven just over the border has passed \$240 million.⁸¹ Ankara hopes, thereby, to stop – or at least drastically reduce – the internally displaced inside Syria from coming into Turkey.

Various Turkish and international aid organisations deliver shelter, food, health, hygiene, clothing, energy and transportation materials, among other items. The Turkish Red Crescent takes donated goods to the buffer zone between the two countries' border gates but does not monitor the aid once it has been handed over to Syrian local council leaders or other counterparts.⁸² A Turkish official said the aid is given to known, trusted people in the buffer zone, as determined by the provincial governorates, and if it does not reach intended recipients, that person or group does not get assistance next time.⁸³ A handful of other organisations -- for instance Turkey's aid organisations IHH, Kimse Yok Mu? (Is Anybody There?) and Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) -- are also allowed by Turkish authorities to take their own trucks and drivers across. Commercial trade continues in large amounts as well, with long lines at the border crossings for trucks.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian official based in Syria, Istanbul, March 2014.

⁸⁰ "There is an urgent need for aid deliveries through other crossings, not just Qamishli/Nusaybin We respond positively to any UN demand for cross-border humanitarian access in the context of UNSC Resolution 2139 Limiting humanitarian access to one crossing point or one region contradicts ... the spirit of the resolution". Crisis Group communication, Turkish official, March 2014.

⁸¹ Crisis Group communication, Turkish official, March 2014.

⁸² A faith-based Gaziantep NGO said it works with around fifteen civil society organisations inside Syria and delivers aid to areas and contacts they determine. Their counterparts include Syrian doctors, aid workers and representatives of rebel fighting units. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013, February 2014.

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013. A Turkey-based head said his NGO works with relief committees in Syria: "We make sure it gets where it is supposed to. We trust our Syrian contacts; most have relatives in shelters in Turkey. They would not do [us] wrong". Crisis Group interview, Muzaffer Baca, vice president, International Blue Crescent, Istanbul, 6 January 2014.

⁸⁴ The Turkish driver of a truck carrying diapers, hired and prepaid by Syrian traders, had been waiting in the four-km line at Öncüpınar for three days to hand over his cargo to Syrian counterparts at the buffer zone. Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

"Zero point" assistance is carried out mainly through eight crossing points, though not all are used by everyone, and some are shut temporarily due to fighting on the Syrian side or if radical groups gain control.⁸⁵ The situation deteriorated in early 2014, as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) gained control of two thirds of the border towns and gates.⁸⁶ Aid organisations may suspend humanitarian deliveries for weeks, even if crossings remain open, lest they fall into the wrong hands. The volatility in northern Syria also complicates matters for donors, as it becomes harder to discern who will receive the aid they paid for.

Coordinating and monitoring cross-border assistance remain problematic.⁸⁷ UN supervision is possible but unlikely, given Damascus' objections. Referring to several aid trucks stopped by Turkish security forces on suspicion of carrying arms (see Section IV.A below), the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, Valerie Amos, said the UN wants trucks to go through normal clearance procedures.⁸⁸ Aid organisations say trucks already have to go through x-rays and inspections at customs points, while some donors complain that administrative and customs procedures at the Turkish border are already too time-consuming.⁸⁹

Turkey's application of value added tax (VAT) is another, minor problem. If an NGO brings goods from outside the country and donates them to the Turkish Red Crescent, including for "zero point" assistance, it has to pay customs tax on them. But if the goods are purchased in Turkey and given to the Turkish Red Crescent for "zero point" delivery, the organisation still has to pay VAT, which it cannot recover.⁹⁰ This discourages some donors.⁹¹ Some NGOs can find legal loopholes, for instance by using commercial trucks for shipments, but removing VAT all together from aid related to Syria would make the process more cost-effective for the aid community.

2. A de facto humanitarian haven

An international humanitarian official estimated more than 40 camps were operational for internally displaced persons (IDPs) on the Syrian side of the border, housing around 100,000, though numbers change as new camps are built and others closed.⁹² Many IDPs are outside camps, mostly wedged between the

⁸⁵ Several Turkish NGOs said that when Öncüpınar crossing was closed due to fighting in Azaz in late 2013, for instance, the aid they were to send to Bab al-Salameh had to wait days, as they cannot use other crossings to access those parts of northern Syria. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Istanbul, November-January 2014.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2014.

⁸⁷ A European official complained there was no list of what constitutes humanitarian aid, but according to a Turkish aid coordinator, "it's common sense. For instance, generators can be considered humanitarian aid, but construction materials like iron and steel cannot". Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Ankara, November-December 2013.

⁸⁸ "UN's Amos: UN wants aid trucks to go through normal, clearance procedures", Cihan News Agency, 3 January 2014.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, January 2014; European official, Gaziantep, November 2013.

⁹⁰ Depending on the type of material purchased, VAT could be 1, 8 or 18 per cent. Turkish NGOs, and even the Turkish Red Crescent, have to pay VAT. Only companies with export licences can get it back. Crisis Group communication, Turkish aid coordinator, March 2014.

⁹¹ According to a Turkish aid worker, Qatar wanted to allocate \$10 million for 1 million blankets procured inside Turkey, but did not want to spend almost \$1 million on VAT, so the project was shelved. Crisis Group interview, head of a Turkish aid organisation operating in northern Syria, Istanbul, January 2014.

⁹² The Turkish aid organisation Kimse Yok Mu? (Is Anybody There?) that supplies camps across from Öncüpınar/Bab al-Salameh, Yayladağ/Kesab and Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa crossings said it can take generators, showers, garbage containers, children's playgrounds and heating equipment. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013. Another faith-based organisation supports more than a dozen camps in northern Syria via its coordination centres in Reyhanlı and Kilis. Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, deputy president, Human Rights and Freedoms Humanitarian Aid Foundation (IHH), Istanbul, 18 January 2014. The International Blue Crescent is active in Aleppo, Raqqah, Hasake and Homs in northern Syria, working with Syrian relief committees, distributing supplies including hygiene and startup kits. Crisis Group interview, Muzafer Baca, vice president, Istanbul, 6 January 2014.

Syrian regime and ISIL. Between 100,000 and 200,000 have gathered near the border, many of whom would enter Turkey if given the chance.⁹³

As the conflict drags on, the needs change from basic daily sustenance to infrastructure, education and better accommodation. There are efforts to improve conditions in northern Syria, for instance by building container cities more suitable for longer stays. A Turkish NGO said it was working on rehabilitating a camp in Bab al-Salameh that houses around 16,000, mostly women and children, with support from Turkey's Kilis governorate, which wants to keep Syrians on the other side.⁹⁴ Health issues are beginning to be addressed as well; a Turkish NGO said it has several hospitals and ambulances in northern Syria and plans to move in three mobile hospitals from Turkey.⁹⁵ Aid organisations said there is an enormous need for medicine, as categorisation of drugs and finding Syrian equivalents is very problematic.⁹⁶

Most camps are in Syria within five to ten km of the border, not in the area between the official border posts where "zero point" deliveries are made. There is mostly no regime military presence, apart from occasional air strikes. Based on new rules of engagement since 2012, Turkish F16s take off immediately to intercept Syrian aircraft that approach the border (see Section IV.B below). Many Turkish officials and NGOs consider camps in this zone the most viable solution for now. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to ensure safety and stability inside Syria.⁹⁷ As a reminder of the risks, a car bomb exploded on 20 February 2014 in a Bab al-Salameh camp across from the Öncüpınar crossing, killing five Syrians and wounding dozens. Turkish and INGO workers can cross back and forth with trucks and convoys, but many do not due to security concerns, including kidnapping by extremist groups.⁹⁸ ISIL has attacked Turkish NGO workers inside Syria and killed their Syrian employees.⁹⁹ Securing supplies can also be difficult. Several NGOs admit they must negotiate with hostile groups to distribute aid.¹⁰⁰

C. *Limited International Solidarity Disappoints Turkey*

National pride, a desire to maintain full control and expectations of a short conflict kept Turkey from accepting outside help for the first year of the crisis, but since April 2012, it has welcomed it to deal with the

⁹³ Turkish officials estimate close to 100,000; estimates of aid organisation and Western officials can reach 200,000. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep and Ankara, November-December 2013.

⁹⁴ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, 18 January 2014.

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Muzaffer Baca, vice president, International Blue Crescent, Istanbul, 6 January 2014.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, January 2014. More than half of non-camp refugees and one third of the camp population have difficulties obtaining required medicines. "Regional Response Plan", UNHCR, December 2013.

⁹⁷ "Bringing aid inside Syria is very difficult. We are doing it, but people there will still try to leave [for Turkey] if they can". Crisis Group interview, international refugee official, Istanbul, February 2014.

⁹⁸ Kidnappings – some believe dozens – of foreign reporters and aid workers have not been publicised for security reasons. The ISIL held Turkish daily *Milliyet*'s photo reporter, Bünyamin Aygün, in northern Syria for 41 days before a negotiated 6 January 2014 handover to Turkish intelligence.

⁹⁹ For example, an organisation lost a Syrian bus driver and another several Syrian employees. Crisis Group interviews, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, 18 January 2014 and local faith-based NGO, Gaziantep, February 2014.

¹⁰⁰ A major international aid organisation official said, "the security situation is terrible. We have two warehouses in northern Syria, and just negotiating with local groups not to attack them is tough". Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, November 2013. "You have to be in communication with everyone inside. It doesn't mean you will do what they say, but you need to make sure they will fulfill their responsibility to allow the aid to pass through [When our team was kidnapped,] we handled it through our own connections and contacts inside Syria We need security protection there". Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, 18 January 2014. "Mostly we can negotiate our way across using our Syrian negotiators, but you can't always do that. Sometimes you don't want to give what the other side is asking for". Crisis Group interview, Muzaffer Baca, vice president, International Blue Crescent, Istanbul, 6 January 2014.

increasing humanitarian burden.¹⁰¹ In the past year, it has also registered more INGOs working on Syria, which many traditional donors consider partner organisations.

1. Learning to live with INGOs

All foreign organisations must register with the interior ministry. To facilitate this, the process for applications relating to Syria has been reduced from up to a year to a few months. Some permits are granted specifically for the duration of the crisis. Diplomatic endorsements help in getting approval, and organisations whose applications are rejected can reapply.¹⁰² The ministry also openly encourages INGOs to work on non-camp Syrians inside Turkey.¹⁰³ Many INGOs buy goods from Turkey; for instance, one bought six million blankets and shoes in 2013; another said it was planning to spend €25 million on Syria in 2014, partly on purchases in Turkey.¹⁰⁴

Some twenty humanitarian INGOs are registered, up from three in April 2013, with seven waiting. Over 30 international and 100 Syrian NGOs are believed to be on the ground in south-east Turkey, mainly in Gaziantep and Hatay.¹⁰⁵ Foreigners still complain that the registration process is not transparent and is complicated by involvement of multiple ministries and departments.¹⁰⁶ However, Turkey complains that groups whose staff operate for months or years on tourist visas make official cooperation hard to impossible, whether for bank accounts, aid shipments or border emergencies. Turkey should continue to facilitate registration of INGOs in good standing and fast track residence and work permits for humanitarian staff. It should also give Syrian staff who must repeatedly cross the border special documentation to avoid passport stamps that could endanger them in regime-controlled parts of Syria.¹⁰⁷

International organisations are usually happy to cooperate with local authorities, saying they are mostly helpful, but add they would like a clearer understanding of responsibilities. There is a coordinating governor for the Syrian refugees, which is "a good idea ... in theory", a European aid official said, "but we are not sure how much authority he has. It seems like the other [local government] authorities don't always want to be coordinated by him".¹⁰⁸ Coordination, guidance and logistical support would be eased by having one office as a central contact point, with English-speaking representatives in local offices in border provinces like Gaziantep and Hatay.

Cooperation, including for humanitarian coordination, is limited among INGOs, except for small forums in Hatay and Gaziantep. The UN's Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) is creating an information sharing mechanism focusing on "zero point" assistance, but there are not many efforts to coordinate the limited work inside Turkey. There is still lack of trust between different actors, including international organisations, donors and Turkish or Syrian NGOs. In response to a local faith-based organisation's complaint that Westerners would not work with it, a European official explained that some Turk-

¹⁰¹ Turkey sent a note to all embassies and agencies in Ankara in April 2012, not directly asking for assistance but giving bank account information for those that wanted to contribute. "We had to tell Turkey you can't ask for money this way. These countries cannot simply put their taxpayers' money in your bank account". Crisis Group interview, international refugee official, February 2014.

¹⁰² Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, December 2013.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, international NGO representative, Istanbul, October 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, October 2013.

¹⁰⁵ A Turkish official put the number at 75 NGOs in the south east. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁰⁶ An international aid official said, "the registration procedures must be communicated to the NGOs in a more transparent manner For different issues, we have to talk to different ministries; it would be better to have one focal [government contact]". Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013. "Donors understand Turkey wants to control the situation. But procedures could be more transparent, faster and easier". Crisis Group interview, European aid official, Gaziantep, November 2013

¹⁰⁷ Perhaps like the blank paper stamped at the border when Cyprus passport-holders visit Turkey.

¹⁰⁸ A Turkish official said the coordinating governor's office was understaffed. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

ish aid organisations did not fit their humanitarian NGO criteria and shared sensitive information about the political or sectarian affiliation of beneficiaries inside Syria with Turkish authorities.¹⁰⁹

2. Why Turkey needs more help

Turkish officials and aid agencies complain of global humanitarian fatigue and that UNHCR's appeals produce limited returns, especially for Turkey. Cash and in-kind aid to Turkey – \$183 million so far, bilaterally and multilaterally – cover only a fraction of the \$2.5-\$3 billion Ankara says it has spent on Syrians.¹¹⁰ A \$260 million UNHCR appeal for Turkey in 2013 was only 37 per cent funded. (By comparison, \$2 billion asked for Lebanon was 70 per cent funded).¹¹¹ An international refugee official involved in the appeal said more assistance was vital:

We need Turkey to feel supported We're not asking donors to pay for TVs or washing machines in refugee camps. The funds go to life-saving aid [determined by the UN]. We have to give assistance to activities and undertakings that help the refugees survive and allows them to look forward to empower both the host state and the refugees so they can live side by side.¹¹²

On the donors' side, there are concerns about the way Turkey asks for money. "They say 'give us money to continue doing the things the way we have done', but most humanitarian donors work through NGOs Turkey needs to find a new narrative to ask for money [that mentions] rebuilding Syria's future".¹¹³ It still suffers from both its initial rejection of assistance, instances in which international agencies say it is still too proud to accept readily available aid, and, ironically, its competence in managing the crisis so well on its own.¹¹⁴ Most international aid continues to be allocated inside Syria and to Lebanon and Jordan, where needs are much greater. A Turkish official complained: "The world has the impression that Turkey is managing this just fine. And, yes, we have handled it well economically and in terms of containing tensions, but we cannot do this indefinitely".¹¹⁵

Ankara wants the EU to share more of the refugee burden. A Turkish official said his country "accepts the Syrians on behalf of the international community", but others should help take them off its should-

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹¹⁰ This consists mostly of money traditional donors give to UN agencies or other NGOs and comes mainly from Western countries. It also includes direct bilateral aid. Crisis Group communication, Turkish official, March 2014. Some countries engage municipalities; for instance, Japan has a project with the Kilis municipality to provide equipment to hospitals. Crisis Group interview, municipal official, Kilis, November 2013.

¹¹¹ UN agencies including UNCHR issued a new international appeal to donors on 16 December for \$6.5 billion, the bulk of which is to go toward UNHCR's sixth Regional Response Plan. A Turkish aid coordinator said a 2012 appeal by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies achieved 50 per cent funding, adding that implementation of UN plans was also "very, very slow". Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

¹¹² Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, February 2014.

¹¹³ Elizabeth Ferris, co-director, Brookings-LSE Project on Internal Displacement, speech at conference, Ankara, October 2013. "We don't do blank check assistance". Crisis Group interview, Western official, Ankara, December 2013.

¹¹⁴ "Turkey's misfortune is that it is bigger, stronger, more able to cope It wants cash. But success has worked against it. People don't see the need to give money. They see five-star camps. As for Jordan or Lebanon, the problem is existential". Crisis Group interview, international official, Istanbul, January 2014. "Turkey acted with the same 'state reflex' it had shown in the 1988 and 1991 Iraqi refugee crises and the 1980s' and 1990s' Bulgaria, Bosnia and Kosovo crises. It used concepts like 'guests' for the refugees that had no place in law and kept international organisations outside the humanitarian operations. These practices have slowed down outside assistance". Metin Çorabatır, "Suriye'de iç savaş ve insani güvenlik" [War and humanitarian security in Syria], *Milliyet*, 18 September 2013. "We found the money [to do] quick impact projects [in south-east Turkey] The local officials said they needed it. But there's the problem of Turkish pride. When it reached the office of the prime minister, there was a feeling of 'why do we need [outsiders'] help to deal with our own citizens?'" Crisis Group interview, international official, Istanbul, January 2014.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, December 2013.

ders, and Europeans in particular should “take bolder steps”.¹¹⁶ Aside from member states’ direct bilateral aid,¹¹⁷ the EU has allocated to Turkey just €40 million (about 4 per cent coming from member states) of the some €2.2 billion it has spent so far on the Syrian crisis (half of the €2.2 billion came from member states, half from EU institutions).¹¹⁸ EU officials admit their funding structure for Turkey is rigid, but if they can coordinate with the Turkish authorities, Brussels can channel some money into relatively quick projects and is willing to support initiatives for urban refugees.¹¹⁹

Accepting more Syrian refugees and not returning them to Syria or neighbouring countries was described as something that should be an international priority.¹²⁰ A refugee official said, “all countries in the world must open their doors and let Syrians save their lives You can’t tell Turkey ‘you have one million but I am not letting a single one in!’”¹²¹ UN officials say there are plans for 30,000 to resettle in Europe in 2014. Over 58,000 had already applied for asylum in the EU by August 2013, including many who have entered illegally.¹²² EU officials argue taking more is a hard sell, as extreme-right parties are gaining ground in some member states.¹²³

Most Syrians interviewed in Gaziantep and Kilis said they either want to stay in Turkey, preferably in border provinces close to Syria, or go home; fewer were positive about relocating to the EU or the U.S, though many risk their lives to get to Europe.¹²⁴ In an illustrative case, five illegal Syrian immigrants, including a two-month-old baby, drowned in November 2013 when their boat sank off Turkey’s Aegean coast as they tried to reach a Greek island. Thousands try to enter Bulgaria, which has built a 33km, three-metre high fence along part of its border with Turkey.¹²⁵

As the conflict drags on, forcing more Syrians to relocate, host countries need more help with macro-economic policies and infrastructure, particularly healthcare and education facilities, water, sanitation and solid-waste management.¹²⁶ In Turkey’s Kilis province, where the population doubled after the Syrians’

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

¹¹⁷ For the first three months of 2014, this amounted to around €13 million. Crisis Group email communication, EU official, 22 April 2014.

¹¹⁸ Part of the funding comes from the pre-accession budget. Some €18 million of the €40 million is committed directly through international organisations. Most is already disbursed. Crisis Group telephone interview, EU official, January 2014.

¹¹⁹ EU officials, speech in conference, Ankara, October 2013. €10 million of the €40 million was earmarked for projects on urban refugees.

¹²⁰ For instance, the EU as a whole has not yet invoked a Temporary Protection Directive to allow access to accommodation, employment and medical services.

¹²¹ Crisis Group interview, international refugee official, Istanbul, February 2014.

¹²² “EU Responses to the Syrian Refugee Crisis”, European University Institute Migration Policy Center, accessed 13 March 2014. The largest population is in Germany and Sweden, which have also respectively pledged to take in 11,000 and 1,200 Syrians in 2014. Some other European countries are taking small steps. According to UNHCR figures, Norway pledged to take 1,000, France, Austria and Finland 500 each and several others a few hundred more all together. The UK has separately pledged to take several hundred vulnerable Syrians. “UK to act with ‘urgency’ over Syrian refugees says PM”, BBC, 29 January 2014. For background on EU policies and previous numbers, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p. 7.

¹²³ EU officials, speech in conference, Ankara, October 2013.

¹²⁴ Crisis Group interviews, November 2013, February 2014. A survey among residents of four refugee camps in Turkey found that 84 per cent wanted to go home. “The struggle for life”, op. cit. Crisis Group open-source research has counted some 150 refugees drowned trying to cross the Aegean Sea to Greece since September 2012, the majority of whom were Syrians and Afghans. See also “An International Failure: The Syrian Refugee Crisis”, Amnesty International, 13 December 2013.

¹²⁵ See, for instance, “Bulgaria: A nightmare for all”, *The Economist*, 30 November 2013. Two thirds of the 2,000 asylum applications in Bulgaria in the third quarter of 2013 were Syrian refugees. Frontex, FRAN Quarterly, July-September 2013.

¹²⁶ “It’s a long-term issue, a development crisis, with short-term interventions. There should be programs of cash for work, reducing the pressure on municipal services like solid waste management, sewage disposal, reducing pressure on host communities”. Crisis Group interview, international official, Istanbul, January 2014. “Syria has been a slow crisis, but the EU’s response in terms of providing infrastructure support to host communities has been even slower. Humanitarian resources can and should be used for development purposes”. Crisis Group telephone interview, multinational development aid expert, March 2014.

arrival, the municipality complains of difficulties collecting trash and utility payments: “We don’t receive any additional funding for our increased services. Sometimes, we even pay for things out of our own pockets”.¹²⁷

III. Strains Build inside Turkey

Although tensions along the border continue to rise, deadly spillover into Turkey has been relatively limited compared to some of Syria’s other neighbours. Ankara has also contained intercommunal tensions well so far, and the risk of major sectarian contagion remains low. Nonetheless, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government’s Syria policy is unpopular. According to a December 2013 poll, 65 per cent consider the Syrian crisis Turkey’s most intractable problem; those who consider AKP’s Middle East policies “successful” fell from 38 per cent in 2011 to 27 per cent.¹²⁸ A January 2014 poll found that only 11 per cent supported accepting Syrian refugees without a limit; 31 per cent wanted an absolute limit; 65 per cent thought Turkey should immediately stop taking Syrian refugees, and 30 per cent of this last group wanted to send back those already in the country.¹²⁹

A. Hospitality Turns to Hostility

Many Gaziantep or Kilis residents still underline their “kinship” with Syrians, referring to them as “brothers and sisters”. On the other hand, they, as well as Turks throughout the country, are increasingly uncomfortable with the growing Syrian population. Urban myths mix with a handful of real negative experiences to create an uneasy environment. Locals realise that many Syrians will not go back, even if the war ends soon. There is a need to increase awareness in Turkish society of the Syrian refugees’ plight, dispel rumours and create an environment more conducive to cohabitation.

Cultural and lifestyle clashes are most visible in border provinces, where locals complain their cities’ fabric has been destroyed. A young, secular Turkish woman in Gaziantep said she felt like a foreigner; another worried about future implications: “Mercy has its limits. I wonder if we should not tolerate these people any more. Many Syrians say ‘Turkey will take care of us’.... Many of them have bad intentions We see men walking around in long grey or white robes and long beards. They bring their own culture instead of trying to fit in”.¹³⁰ Some Turks are simply angry: “I don’t approve of the government allowing so many Syrians to come here. Even if I can try to understand why women and children come, why are so many able men here? If there is a war in their country, they should stay behind and defend it!”¹³¹

Some Gaziantep residents were concerned too many Syrians were sleeping rough in the parks and mosques, creating a security problem.¹³² Many thought crime rose because of Syrians, particularly as there

¹²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013. Municipalities often work with charities or donors to provide assistance to Syrians.

¹²⁸ Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algılar Araştırması [Research on Public Perceptions of Turkish Foreign Policy], Istanbul Kadir Has University, 4 December 2013.

¹²⁹ “Reaction mounting against Syrian refugees in Turkey”. Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies (EDAM), 2014/1.

¹³⁰ A female resident of Kilis province complained she could no longer wear short dresses in the summer for fear Syrian men would harass her. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Kilis, November 2013, February 2014.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

¹³² A Gaziantep newspaper editor told Crisis Group that 20,000 refugees were sleeping in mosques; this was denied by local authorities and local aid organisations and seemed an inflammatory exaggeration. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

is no way to determine their history or prior convictions.¹³³ According to a refugee official, an initial double-standard towards the Syrians is partly to blame: “Turkey went so far in treating them like guests that it did not always hold them accountable to law and order. Locals were afraid to even confront them You have to apply the country’s laws to all Syrians, not just in cases of [petty crime], but also in child marriages”. A Gaziantep local said men in his neighbourhood were “sleeping with guns under their pillows” out of worry Syrians would break into their houses.¹³⁴ There is an observable rise in street beggars, especially children. Turkish men taking young Syrian wives through non-official, religious marriages cause discomfort, as do alleged child-marriages among Syrians.¹³⁵

Unfounded rumours fuel the flames, such as alleged plans to give blanket citizenship and the right to vote to Sunni Syrians, which local, central and international officials deny.¹³⁶ Another misperception is that Syrians receive salaries or rent aid directly from the state.¹³⁷

Some locals resent that these newcomers take jobs that could have gone to Turks, but they also fear the wrath of unemployed Syrians: “If you don’t give them jobs, they are hungry. When they can’t find bread, who knows what they will do? A hungry man is capable of anything”. Even education may be a source of Turkish resentment. A bitter Gaziantep local complained: “If you are a Syrian, it is enough for you to say ‘I was a medical student in Syria’, and you get into a state university. Turks, however, have to study for years to pass university entrance exams and still may not get in”. Another criticised the Gaziantep municipality for “opening new schools for Syrian kids when local public school classes are overcrowded with 50 students”.¹³⁸

But despite a few cases of open tensions between locals and refugees, there have not been many reports of serious violence.¹³⁹ This is partly because there is still widespread empathy toward Syrian civilians. A

¹³³ Many Syrians lack documentation when they arrive and are registered solely on the basis of their own statements. Gaziantep’s deputy governor said there has been no significant rise in security-related incidents but added that it may yet spike. Crisis Group interview, Nursal Çakıroğlu, Gaziantep, 27 November 2013. The police chief said that for around 100,000 non-camp Syrians in Gaziantep, there were only 937 recorded security incidents in the first eleven months of 2013. “Suriyelileri abartıyoruz” [We exaggerate about the Syrians], *Telgraf* (Gaziantep), 25 November 2013. There are occasional violent crimes involving Syrians. One big incident in Gaziantep involved a Syrian worker hired by a textile shop owner who nearly killed his Turkish employer on 4 November 2013 by hitting him on the head with an iron rod before robbing him. The elected head of Gaziantep’s Esentepe neighbourhood said public order incidents increased after the Syrians came, including fights among themselves. Crisis Group interview, November 2013. An expert at the Ankara police academy said that, Turkey-wide, more than 5,200 Syrian offenders were recorded in 2013 as of October, up 360 per cent from the entire 2012. Syrian criminal gangs, especially in Van and Diyarbakır, were presenting public order problems. Speech at conference, Ankara, October 2013.

¹³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Istanbul, Gaziantep, February 2014.

¹³⁵ Turkish-Syrian marriages are relatively rare but increasing, locals say. There were six in Gaziantep’s Esentepe neighbourhood where many Syrians lived; several Syrian brides were taken as second wives. Crisis Group interview, elected neighbourhood head, November 2013. Quoting a health official in the south east, a Turkish daily wrote “The women from Syria get married very young and become mothers at ages 14-15 The fact that Turkish men can marry Syrian women with minimum trouble and cost brings to mind sexual abuse Syrians don’t demand a dowry or jewellery. Locals [prefer] marrying Syrians, either as first or as second or third wives through [unofficial, religious] marriages”. “Suriyeli kuma ticareti: Kira veremiyorsan kızını ver!” [Trading Syrians as second wives: ‘If you can’t pay rent, give me your daughter!’], *Radikal*, 27 January 2014.

¹³⁶ “There is no such thing as Syrians voting in Turkey’s elections. Most don’t even have residence permits. I wish they could [vote], though! We incur immense additional costs to take care of them; at least we would get their votes in return”. Crisis Group interview, Kilis municipal official, November 2013.

¹³⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Ankara and Kilis, November 2013-February 2014.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013. Syrians must have residence permits in order to enroll at Turkish schools.

¹³⁹ There are occasional fights between groups of young Syrian and Turkish men. See “Suriyelilerin park kavgası” [Syrians’ park fight], *Gaziantep Güneş*, 5 November 2013 and “Gaziantep’lilerle Suriyeliler kavga etti” [Gaziantep locals and Syrians brawled], *Gaziantephaberler.com*, 8 January 2014. In May 2013, residents of a Gaziantep neighbourhood said Syrians stay-

young Turkish storeowner in Kilis said that even though “there are many beggars and thieves among them ... may God never separate anyone from his home. They have suffered. Not all [the Syrians] are bad We do what we can to help”. A low-income resident of Ankara explained:

There is hostility towards Syrians. My wife even said Turkish soldiers should not let them in. I told her: “They can’t do that! That is the same as killing them. These people are running for their lives”. Many poor Turks I know donate what they can to charities taking care of Syrians. We, too, gave our old oven. It is a humanitarian issue.¹⁴⁰

B. *A Healthcare System Under Siege*

Syrian refugees in camps have access to healthcare in mobile health units or hospitals. According to a January 2013 cabinet decree, all Syrians can be treated for free at state hospitals. Officials admit there have been implementation problems at local levels, as hospitals, due to budget difficulties, demand identification or put up other obstacles. Provincial ID cards, such as given in Gaziantep and Kilis, allow Syrians healthcare at many state facilities and cover a portion of medicine costs.¹⁴¹ Many NGOs, in partnership with pharmacies, distribute free medicine to Syrians with prescriptions. Syrian doctors work in Syrian-only hospitals or health centres set up by Turkish and international charities in the south east.

Syrians’ health requirements have seriously strained existing structures, creating a need to expand hospital capacities, find mechanisms to allow them to get free treatment in some private facilities and counter growing public frustration.¹⁴² A local study blamed Syrians for resurgence of once-extinct diseases in Gaziantep like polio, measles and leishmania (a boils-causing illness seen mainly in south-east Turkey).¹⁴³

When I go to Kilis state hospital, I see twenty Syrians for every Turk. Many Turkish doctors resigned in the past year because they can’t handle hundreds of patients in one day Even though the hospital is only a few years old, almost every machine is broken; there are two people sleeping on each bed We pitied the Syrians, but now we are pathetic ourselves.¹⁴⁴

C. *The Resilience of Gaziantep*

Historically a district of Aleppo province under the Ottoman Empire, the large industrial province of Gaziantep is the main hub of Syria-related activity, the biggest of the “Turkish Aleppos”. Some Gaziantep authorities consider Aleppo a “sister city”, with many joint projects in the past; the metropolitan mayor calls his Aleppo counterpart a “close friend”.¹⁴⁵ A majority Sunni Muslim border province of 1.8 million, it provides a microcosm of Turks’ approach to the crisis at large.

According to many NGOs and international actors, including Syrian civil society, Gaziantep offers a secure, open environment. According to a Western official, Turkey’s government encourages internationals to base aid operations there rather than in Hatay because it is – at least for now – safe from “disruptive

ing in a mosque threw rocks at cars and houses. Locals kept a night watch with bats and sticks. “Tehlikeli iddia mahalleyi ayağa kaldırdı” [Neighbourhood up in arms over dangerous claims], *Milliyet*, 3 May 2013.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Kilis, November 2013; Ankara, October 2013.

¹⁴¹ Small Syrian-only hospitals or health centres in Kilis set up and run by Turkish and international NGOs also provide drugs and treatment for free.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interview, Turkish resident of Kilis province, February 2014.

¹⁴³ Gaziantep had the most measles cases in 2013. “Suriyeli sığınmacılarla ilgili yaşanan sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri” [Problems with Syrian asylum seekers and proposals for solutions], Gaziantep Chamber of Trade, February 2014.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, February 2014.

elements".¹⁴⁶ Syrian opposition activists also said they feel safer in Gaziantep, because, in ethnic, sectarian, historic and geographic terms, Hatay is more deeply entwined with Syria.¹⁴⁷

Most of the nearly 200,000 Syrian refugees in the province come from Aleppo and surrounding villages, but it is also possible to meet a few Damascenes. There are four tent and container camps housing around 40,000. Neighbouring Kilis province, a district of Gaziantep until 1995, houses an additional 37,000 in two container cities, plus 3,500 in a newly-built transit centre.

In April 2013, Crisis Group found economic flexibility and resilience in Hatay province, despite damage from the Syria crisis in some sectors.¹⁴⁸ After decades of enmity between the two countries, the opening up between Turkey and Syria was in fact a recent phenomenon: a free trade agreement was signed only in 2007, and mutual visas were removed in 2009.¹⁴⁹ The larger picture is not much different in Gaziantep, despite individual cases of hardship and complaints from shop owners in the touristic bazaars that "the Syrian crisis is the end" of their city.¹⁵⁰ The province exports to over 100 countries, with about 40 per cent going to Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government alone. Gaziantep's exports rose from \$3.6 billion in 2010 (before the Syrian war) to \$6.5 billion in 2013, including from \$120 million to \$278 million to Syria, mainly due to humanitarian materials.¹⁵¹

Some sectors, such as transport that handles cargo for the Middle East, suffer from delayed deliveries, as trucks that used to drive through Syria now must take roll on/roll off ferries from the Mediterranean provinces. A businessman said deliveries that used to take four or five days now can take twenty to 25 days.¹⁵² An estimated \$50-70 million invested in Syria by Gaziantep businessmen since 2009 is mostly unrecoverable.¹⁵³ According to a business leader, Gaziantep used to make \$1.6 billion from the 700,000-800,000 Syrian tourists that visited annually before the crisis.¹⁵⁴ As in Hatay, some small businesses, like hotels or shops that catered directly to Syrians, suffered initially but adapted. Farmers close to the border were also affected negatively: UNHCR reported that small families farming within five km of the border in Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis and Şanlıurfa provinces have lost more than half their annual income as a result of the conflict.¹⁵⁵

On the other hand, in addition to higher income from rents and house prices in areas that received many Syrians (see Section II.A.5 above), the local economy benefited from the considerable cash Syrians brought with them. Bank accounts show foreign currency deposits in cities like Hatay and Gaziantep grew at twice the rate of Turkey as a whole between year-end 2010 and 2012.¹⁵⁶ A native of Hatay's Reyhanlı said that after the May 2013 bombings, locals angrily drove away Syrians, but economic needs soon made

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2014.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013; Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit.

¹⁴⁸ Didem Collinsworth, "Hatay: The Syrian crisis and a case of Turkish economic resilience", *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, spring 2013.

¹⁴⁹ For background on Turkey-Syria hostilities, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p.1. Syria re-instituted the visa regime with Turkey and many Arab countries in March 2014.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, February 2014.

¹⁵¹ Turkey's overall exports to Syria were \$1.8bn in 2010, just 1.6 per cent of total exports, and \$912 million in 2013 (0.6 per cent of the total). Turkey Exporters Assembly (TIM), www.tim.org.tr.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁵³ Isa Afacan, "Crisis next door in Syria: Implications for Gaziantep and Southeastern Turkey", Sunder Business Association, June 2012.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁵⁵ "Regional Response Plan", UNHCR, December 2013

¹⁵⁶ Gaziantep saw a 50 per cent and Hatay a 69 per cent increase in foreign currency deposits, while Turkey's overall growth was 28 per cent. In the south east as a whole, where most Syrians initially went, these deposits grew 40 per cent. "Statistical Reports", Turkey Banks Association (TBB).

them welcome new waves.¹⁵⁷ Gaziantep also seems to have made up – at least partly – initial tourism losses. Foreign officials, journalists and businessmen from the region still frequent the city, while domestic culture and gourmet tours continue unabated.¹⁵⁸

At the same time, the province testifies to how easily Turks have absorbed security risks from the war. Even though clashes on the Syrian side of the border have intensified this spring, there is a sense of normalcy in daily life and little indication of the violent conflict nearby, other than the rising number of refugees on the streets.¹⁵⁹ Beginning in January 2014, ISIL jihadi militants and less radical rebel factions have been fighting inside Syria along the border north west of Aleppo. ISIL has gained ground to the east, including through attacks on the Syrian Turkmen town of Çobanbeyli, just across from Kilis province's Elbeyli district. Explosions in the Syrian town of Azaz across from the Öncüpınar crossing can rattle windows in Kilis. Turkish Alevis in villages close to the border feel particularly vulnerable, but like other locals, inhabitants of these villages still think extremist groups would not attack inside Turkey.¹⁶⁰ Further to the west, Turkish authorities on 22 March 2014 evacuated a small village in Hatay's border Yayladağ district due to intense fighting between the regime and its Islamist opposition in Kesab town in Syria's Latakia province.

Occasionally, however, Gaziantep residents are reminded how entangled in the crisis their city truly is. On 23 January 2013, a rural house blew up in Kızılhisar neighbourhood, several km from the city centre, wounding three Syrians who were reportedly making bombs. Turkish mainstream media paid little attention. There is creeping concern that the Syrian opposition's efforts to establish a government in exile in Gaziantep is turning the province into a target for the regime and other hostile elements.¹⁶¹ A local said people were now more concerned about the Syrian networks operating in their city than about any other threat.¹⁶²

D. *Unresolved Alevi Grievances*

Turkey's support for the Syrian opposition and hostility to the Alawite-led regime are part of growing discord with its own Alevi population that may be more than 10 per cent of the 75 million population.¹⁶³ Alevis, by their own definition not a homogenous entity, have long-term concerns they want the government to address.¹⁶⁴ These include: removing obligatory religion classes in schools; transferring religious activities of the religious affairs ministry to civilian congregations; ending automatic inclusion of "Islam" under

¹⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Hasan Kanbolat, former president, Centre for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Ankara, 24 October 2013.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁵⁹ This is also evident in the lax security measures at major Gaziantep hotels hosting regular meetings between Syrian civil society and international representatives.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁶¹ "Suriyeli sığınmacılarla ilgili yaşanan sorunlar ve çözüm önerileri" [Problems with Syrian asylum seekers and proposals for solutions], Gaziantep Chamber of Trade, February 2014.

¹⁶² "People here used to worry about PKK terror attacks. Now that's gone, but instead they worry about the Syrians". Crisis Group interview, newspaper editor, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁶³ Some Alevi opinion leaders put the number as high as 15 to 20 million. Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, Istanbul, October and November 2013. The Alevi community in Turkey, mainly Turkmen and Kurdish Alevis, includes as well a small group of Arab Alevis who are directly related to Syria's Alawites and are largely concentrated in and around Hatay province. Both the Alevi and Alawite sects express loyalty to the fourth Muslim caliph, Ali, who was also the Prophet Mohammed's son-in-law. While their Shi'a like reverence for Ali continues, Turkey's Arab Alevi community leaders say that their religious practice has converged with that of Sunnis, setting them apart from Syrian Alawites.

¹⁶⁴ Alevis played a central role in large anti-government protests that swept the country in May-June 2013; all five protestors and one bystander who died were Alevi. For more on the incidents, see Crisis Group blog "Turkey's protests: The politics of an unexpected movement", 4 June 2013.

religion in Turkish ID cards; and official recognition of their houses of worship (*cemevis*).¹⁶⁵ Some have lost hope the government will follow through with its “Alevi opening” that started in 2007 to address these issues.

Some Alevis complain that even the humanitarian issues in the Syrian crisis have been handled with a sectarian approach and that the government has discriminated against Syrian Alevi refugees. A Turkish Alevi leader said there were 10,000 Syrian Turkmen Alevis in Turkey (some 3,000 in Istanbul), who refused to stay in refugee camps for safety reasons. Alevi organisations try to help them on an ad hoc basis but complain of lack of state support and even hindrance.¹⁶⁶ Alevis lament that the Turkish public perceives them as siding with the Assad regime for sectarian reasons, when their main concern is to stay out of Syria’s internal affairs.¹⁶⁷ Occasional Turkish leadership statements implicitly linking violent events like the May 2013 Reyhanlı car bombs to Turkey’s Alevis add to the sense of anger and alienation.¹⁶⁸

Unlike Hatay province, home to a large Arab Alevi community whose members are close cousins of Syrian Alawites, sectarian tensions are not apparent in Gaziantep, though Alevis there say their population in the province is more than 100,000.¹⁶⁹ A Turkish Alevi from Gaziantep dismissed claims the Syrian regime could turn his community against the government: “It simply cannot happen. Most Alevis in Turkey are Turkmen; they have or want nothing to do with Syria We don’t have a specific enmity towards the [opposition] Syrians [but are] simply fed up with refugees”.¹⁷⁰ An Alevi opinion leader agreed the Syrian regime and extreme left-wing groups in Turkey may try to use Alevi beliefs and grievances to mobilise or provoke them, but said the majority would never support this, and violence was unlikely.¹⁷¹ Memories of anti-Alevi incidents may have led some to acquire weapons for protection, but community leaders say there is no widespread, organised arming.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Turan Eser, ex-head, Alevi Bektashi Federation, Ankara, December 2013.

¹⁶⁶ “One day we read in the newspaper that there were Syrian Alevis sleeping in a park in Istanbul’s Kumkapı neighbourhood. We went there and found 300 of them. They were scared and didn’t trust anyone. They first arrived in Gaziantep and were put in the same camps as [Sunni Arabs]. They ran away. Many had ... tattoos [indicating Alawite allegiance]. Between September and December 2013, we helped them with their initial integration We relocated around 700 Turkmen Alevis from Syria in Istanbul ... through our own efforts”. Crisis Group interview, Vedat Kara, Hacı Bektash Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation board member and Istanbul Alevi Coordination spokesman, Istanbul, 21 January 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013. “The ties [Turkish and Kurdish] Alevis feel to the developments in Syria are very different than those of Hatay’s Arab Alevis, who feel much closer to the conflict. The former simply wonder what is happening in our neighbour and oppose Turkey’s Sunni foreign policy. They feel obliged to show [support] to Syrian Alawites as well as to other war victims. They are uncomfortable with the jihadi gangs and their massacres in Syria”. Crisis Group interview, Turan Eser, ex-head, Alevi Bektashi Federation, Ankara, 24 October 2013.

¹⁶⁸ In an election rally speech in Hatay province at the time of the Reyhanlı bombings, Prime Minister Erdoğan said Turkey was “betrayed by internal elements”, whom he linked to the main opposition People’s Republican Party, CHP (whose leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu is an Alevi), which he accused of refusing to “sever ties with Assad”. “Başbakan Hatay’da konuştu”, [The prime minister spoke in Hatay], *Sabah*, 22 March 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013. Estimates of Hatay’s Arab Alevi population are 400,000–700,000 of the province’s 1.5 million population. In Turkey, their total is 700,000–2.5 million. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., pp. 19–24. A Sunni Turkmen refugee from Syria said when he first fled from Aleppo to the southern Turkish town of Iskenderun almost two years ago, he felt hostility from the Arab Alevi community there, especially when he spoke negatively of Assad. He was so uncomfortable that he moved his family temporarily back to Aleppo. Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁷¹ “There are no armed Alevi organisations or gangs [in Turkey]. The Alevis base their approach on their ideology and philosophy; it is a democratic struggle for rights that is free of violence Alevis are against war. They did not take violent revenge in [previous] incidents against them”. Crisis Group interview, Turan Eser, ex-head, Alevi Bektashi Federation, Ankara, 24 October 2013.

¹⁷² Crisis Group interviews, *ibid* and Vedat Kara, board member, Hacı Bektash Veli Anatolian Culture Foundation and spokesman for Istanbul Alevi Coordination, Istanbul, 21 January 2014. Historic incidents of anti-Alevi backlash that Turkey’s Alevis often cite are attacks in 1978 against Alevi Kurds by nationalists in Kahramanmaraş and against Turkish Alevis in

E. *A Domestic Kurdish Complication*

The AKP government is involved since late 2012 in a new peace process with Turkey's armed and outlawed Kurdish insurgency, the PKK.¹⁷³ Part of the motivation for revitalising initiatives to resolve the Kurdish issue at home was the rise of the PKK's sister party, the Syrian Kurds' Democratic Union Party (PYD), in northern Syria.¹⁷⁴ As the fragile settlement process stumbles on domestically, and relations with the PYD remain hostile (see Section IV.C below), Turkey's Kurds, particularly those sympathetic to the Kurdish national movement, continue to complain about what they see as the government's discrimination against Syrian Kurds:

The Karkamış border crossing [in Gaziantep] is open for Syrian Arabs. They carry weapons and gangs back and forth in ambulances. But when it comes to bringing in wounded Kurds, [Turks] turn them down, saying they are YPG [Yekîneyên Parastina Gel, the armed wing of PYD] They built Syrians nice camps on river banks. I wish I were an Arab so I could stay there. Instead, when the Kurds came [as refugees in 1988 from Iraq], they were fed poisoned bread.¹⁷⁵

At times, Kurdish demonstrations against what they believe to be Turkey's attempts to isolate Syrian Kurdish areas turn violent.¹⁷⁶ Pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (BDP) officials complained that the "zero point" humanitarian aid deliveries excluded Kurdish areas in Syria and that Kurdish casualties were not being allowed across.¹⁷⁷ But Turkish officials and several aid organisations say some aid is being sent to Kurdish-controlled areas in northern Syria mainly through the Şenyurt crossing in Mardin (across from Darbassiyeh on the Syrian side) and Mürşitpınar in Şanlıurfa (across from Ayn al-Arab/Kobane).¹⁷⁸ A first-ever UN aid convoy also crossed from Nusaybin in Mardin to the Syrian Kurdish areas through Qamishli on 20 March 2014 (see above).

IV. Turkey's Limited Course Correction

Faced with the Syrian regime's unexpected resilience, frequently shifting balance of forces on the ground and repeated evidence of Western, particularly U.S., reluctance to intervene, Turkey has been obliged to recalibrate its Syria policy. While a future without President al-Assad remains the goal, the focus is now also on protecting itself from the war's increasingly destructive fall out.

Turkey laments that particularly the UN Security Council is not doing enough to end the conflict. In the past, it called for a more direct involvement in support of the Syrian opposition, appealed for a humanitarian corridor, advocated arming the rebels (which it argues would have avoided the rise of jihadi groups)

Çorum in 1980 by Islamist and nationalist groups, and the burning of a hotel housing mostly Alevi intellectuals in Sivas in 1993.

¹⁷³ For Crisis Group reporting on the Kurdish issue, see Europe Reports N°227, *Crying 'Wolf': Why Turkish Fears Need Not Block Kurdish Reform*, 7 October 2013; N°222, *Turkey's Kurdish Impasse: The View from Diyarbakır*, 30 November 2013; N°219 *Turkey: The PKK and a Kurdish Settlement*, 11 September 2012; and N°213 *Turkey: Ending the PKK Insurgency*, 20 September 2011.

¹⁷⁴ For more, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., pp. 24-26.

¹⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, pro-Kurdish BDP official, Gaziantep, November 2013. This refers to a case of food poisoning among Kurdish refugees near Diyarbakır province that Kurds argue was intentional on the part of Turkish authorities, though this has never been proven.

¹⁷⁶ BDP-organised protests were held in Nusaybin district of Mardin in November 2013 and February 2014. Demonstrations also took place in Ankara and Istanbul. When on 20 October 2013 some 1,000 Kurds gathered in Qamishli in Syria across the boarder from Nusaybin and attempted to walk across, Turkish police used tear gas and water cannons to dispel them.

¹⁷⁷ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Ankara and Istanbul, November 2013-January 2014.

and called for a no-fly zone in northern Syria. It blamed the West for not following through with threats of at least a limited military intervention after regime use of chemical weapons in August 2013, and saw the U.S.- and Russia-brokered deal the next month for the regime to hand over its chemical arsenal as helping Assad win time.¹⁷⁹ Showing Turkey's dissatisfaction with the agreement, President Abdullah Gül said:

Assad made good use of an opportunity with the chemical weapons deal with the Russians. But the question comes back to the international community again Frankly speaking, our expectation was different, we expected more. I think it is very disappointing to see the whole discussion reduced to a discussion solely on chemical weapons.¹⁸⁰

Ankara has no open primary channel of communication with the Syrian regime, but it is trying to influence Russia and Iran.¹⁸¹ Its official contacts with Iraq and Iran sped up in late 2013, and it has begun to step back from its image as a Sunni Muslim hegemon to that of a more balanced actor bridging sectarian issues.¹⁸² If this continues, Turkey could become a credible interlocutor with Tehran, with which it says it wants "in-depth discussions" about Syria in order to "make them a part of the solution"; it sought, unsuccessfully, agreement for Iran to participate in the Geneva II talks.¹⁸³ Turkey and Iran have long cooperated to prevent emergence of any independent Kurdish state, though at times of bilateral rivalry, Iran has turned a blind eye to PKK activities on its territory.

Ankara has moved away from efforts to replace the Assad regime with an opposition government led by Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, but its room for manoeuvre on Syria is limited by the proxy involvement of regional rivals and the way the porous border leaves it vulnerable to jihadi and regime retaliation. Turkey has been highly vocal on developments in Egypt, blaming the EU and Western countries for not speaking out loudly against the July 2013 ouster of President Mohamed Morsi by the military.¹⁸⁴ The feud with Israel since 2008 and plans to buy missiles from a Chinese company under U.S. sanctions caused fur-

¹⁷⁹ After chemical weapons were used in Ghouta on 21 August 2013, Turkey was one of the most vocal proponents of military intervention. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said evidence of regime chemical weapons use would require an international intervention similar to after the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia. "Davutoğlu on BBC: Turkey is not like Egypt", BBC Turkish, 23 August 2013.

¹⁸⁰ "Turkish president: Syria becoming Afghanistan in the Med", *The Guardian*, 4 November 2013. "We warned [our international interlocutors] about the regime's exploitation of the [chemical] framework agreement brokered by Russia and the U.S., and we are indeed seeing problems with that agreement now". Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, 27 January 2014. "[Syria] became a non-proliferation issue. [U.S. President] Obama's policy gave a blank, undated check [to the regime]. It is not serious". Crisis Group interview, Taha Özhan, director, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETAV), Ankara, 17 February 2014.

¹⁸¹ While ambassadors have been withdrawn, the Syrian consulate-general in Istanbul is theoretically open. "Both [Russia and Iran] are very important to us. We have extensive and expanding relationships with both, and we discuss the Syria issue at length". Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, 27 January 2014.

¹⁸² "[Foreign Minister] Davutoğlu went to Karbala in Muharrem to show that sectarianism is artificial and has no place in today's world. We are trying to engage with other groups in Iraq, like al-Hakim. We are for a united Iraq". Crisis Group interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2014. Iraqi head of parliament Osama al-Nujaifi visited Ankara on 10 September 2013 and 5 February 2014; the head of Turkey's parliamentary foreign affairs commission, Volkan Bozkır, reciprocated on 22-23 October 2013. Iraqi Foreign Minister Hosyar Zabari came to Turkey on 24-25 October, and Turkish Foreign Minister Davutoğlu went to Baghdad on 10-11 November. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif came to Turkey on 1 November, and Davutoğlu went to Iran on 25-26 November. Prime Minister Erdoğan went to Iran on 28-29 January 2014 for his first meeting with new President Hassan Rouhani. Despite public differences over Syria, he maintained a friendly tone, calling Iran a "second home".

¹⁸³ "We have our disagreements but we agree to disagree. We speak to them bluntly and openly. We draw attention to the negative consequences of supporting the regime. Iran is different [than Russia] because it is physically on the field. It has forces there". Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, 27 January 2014.

¹⁸⁴ Pro-Muslim Brotherhood Rabia TV launched broadcasting from Istanbul in December 2013.

ther rifts with the West.¹⁸⁵ If the government can convince regional counterparts it is able to rally the mainstream Syrian opposition and speak from a position of sectarian and ethnic neutrality, it could play a more important role between actors involved in Syria's conflict. It appears that recommitment to a full modernisation agenda by revitalising its EU membership process would do most to strengthen Turkey's soft power, regional standing, democratic culture and Western alliances like NATO that are the bedrock of its national security.¹⁸⁶

A. *Support for the Syrian Opposition Continues*

Turkey received the bulk of the blame for supporting "terrorism" from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem during the Geneva II conference in January 2014 and again from Syrian military officials after it downed a Syrian warplane in March (see Section IV.B below).¹⁸⁷ Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan still voices strong sentiments against President al-Assad and has even said Syria was "at war with Turkey".¹⁸⁸ At Geneva II, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu harshly warned the regime:

We all know who the [real] terrorists in Syria are. I wonder how the representatives of the regime think that they can deceive the entire international community with their lies? History will judge them very badly Just as the perpetrators of the crimes committed in Srebrenica, those responsible for the crimes and atrocities in Syria will face justice How long will the international community hold back while so many Syrians lose their lives each day at the hands of the regime in Damascus?¹⁸⁹

Turkey says it wants a political solution in Syria through an Assad-free transitional body. It has taken part in all "Friends of Syria" group meetings and publicly supported international initiatives, including the Geneva conferences.¹⁹⁰ In 2013, Davutoğlu said it would join any international coalition against Syria, even without a Security Council consensus.¹⁹¹ An official outlined:

We don't want open-ended negotiations [with the Syrian regime]. These are susceptible to regime exploitation [The goal should be] to form a mutually-agreed transitional body [without] Assad and his close circle, whose hands are drenched in blood. Secondly, this body needs powers to be effective and efficient, namely in terms of security, military and intelligence.¹⁹²

¹⁸⁵ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said Turkey was close to normalising relations with Israel in February 2014, as they neared agreement on compensation for the families of eleven Turks aboard the Gaza-bound vessel *Mavi Marmara* killed by Israeli forces in May 2011. But Prime Minister Erdoğan later said normalisation would not happen until Israel lifted its Gaza blockade. "Davutoğlu says Turkish-Israeli relationship nears normalisation", *Al Monitor*, 10 February 2014; "Erdoğan says no rapprochement with Israel until end of Gaza embargo", *Today's Zaman*, 12 February 2014.

¹⁸⁶ "2014 will be a year when our full membership negotiations to the EU and new democratisation reforms will gain momentum", Prime Minister Erdoğan's year-end address to the public, 31 December 2013. He declared 2014 the year of the EU, paid his first visit to Brussels in five years on 20-21 January 2014 and overall displayed a mild disposition.

¹⁸⁷ He attacked Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan for backing the opposition: "All of this would not have happened if it had not been for Erdoğan – they did not know that magic would turn against the magician one day – terrorism has no religion". "Turkish FM Davutoğlu hits back to Syria's accusations of backing 'terrorism'", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 January 2014.

¹⁸⁸ "Erdoğan: Suriye bizimle savaş halinde" [Erdoğan: Syria is at war with us], *Hürriyet*, 31 March 2014. On 7 January 2014, he said Geneva II should take steps for "an era without Bashar", calling him a "murderer of 130,000 people" and saying the regime's attacks amounted to genocide "Erdoğan: Geneva II should pave way for Syria without Assad", *Today's Zaman*, 7 January 2014.

¹⁸⁹ Remarks at the Geneva II Conference, Montreux, 22 January 2014, at www.mfa.gov.tr.

¹⁹⁰ Friends of Syria is a diplomatic group of countries and bodies. Its first meeting was in February 2012.

¹⁹¹ "Turkey would join coalition against Syria, says foreign minister", *Reuters*, 26 August 2013.

¹⁹² Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2014.

In practice, Turkey has less influence with the Syrian opposition since the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, established in Qatar in November 2012, replaced the Syrian National Council set up in Turkey in 2011. But AKP still openly supports the political opposition, primarily by allowing it to operate freely on its soil. The National Coalition has offices in Istanbul, and its Aid Coordination Unit (ACU) based in Gaziantep remains the main channel for aid from Western and some Gulf donors. Several Western countries also support the opposition inside Turkey with non-lethal training. Conferences organised in the south east by Turkish NGOs, with at least the government's knowledge, bring together opposition representatives, Syrian academics and rebel military commanders.¹⁹³

Turkey is commended internationally for encouraging the National Coalition to accept new members, including Kurdish representation in the form of the Kurdish National Council (see Section IV.C below), and for working with Western allies to convince the Coalition to attend Geneva II.¹⁹⁴ Overall, access to the opposition keeps it a player.¹⁹⁵ Western diplomats thus credit it for helping convince leading Islamist rebel factions to mute criticism of Geneva II as the talks commenced.¹⁹⁶

While politically the AKP government publicly backs the National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people, it is less clear who exactly it favours on the ground in Syria. Often, Turkey is seen as the middleman between the militant opposition and its international backers. While it is not a main financier, providing crucial transit routes for arms, ammunition, money and fighters gives Turkey leverage over these groups. A former fighter from Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham said they received "everything they needed" in northern Syria through Turkey.¹⁹⁷

Turkey recognises the reality on the ground of the military opposition alliance, the "Islamic Front", established in November 2013 with participation of several Islamist groups that were previously under other umbrellas. An official said it represents "50 per cent of the field":

Like it or not, the Islamic Front is a big presence. We are against [making] blanket [negative] categorisations about them; we encourage [our counterparts] to refrain from doing it The groupings have increased. We don't use the FSA [Free Syrian Army, the loose grouping of Syrian opposition fighters] terminology any more Everybody has contacts with these different groups, except the [al-Qaeda-linked] ones. You have to take them into consideration. If there is an agreement in Geneva II, you need [the field's] blessing to implement it. We have pushed the [National] Coalition to cooperate with the groups on the ground.¹⁹⁸

But there are sometimes disagreements with Western partners about policies toward different groups. A European aid official said, "Turkish authorities are distancing themselves from [Jabhat] al-Nusra and

¹⁹³ One of these has facilitated establishment of a "Free Syria Academics Union" in Gaziantep in October 2013. The locally-based Bülbülzade foundation hosted the meeting with over 80 academics on 27-28 October 2013, during which plans for a "Free Syria University" there were also announced. The Anadolu Platform, an umbrella group including Bülbülzade, organises many similar conferences. On 2 January 2013, it brought together Turkish officials, including the local AKP head, with representatives from Syrian militant groups and NGOs. It also hosted over 70 Syrian opinion leaders, opposition group representatives, academics and military commanders in Gaziantep on 23 February 2013 in a "Syria humanitarian aid platform" meeting.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Western diplomats, New York, January 2014.

¹⁹⁵ "Turkey is instrumental when we have a message to pass to the [National] Coalition". Crisis Group interview, European official, Ankara, December 2013.

¹⁹⁶ According to Western diplomats and Syrian opposition figures, Turkish and Qatari officials met in Ankara with Islamic Front representatives (see below) shortly before Geneva II, seeking to convince them to be more positive about it. Though the Front did not participate in or support Geneva II, Western diplomats credited the Turks and Qataris with getting the rebel alliance to limit criticism. Crisis Group interviews, New York, Beirut, Istanbul, Gaziantep, January-February 2014.

¹⁹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Kilis, February 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, 27 January 2014,

ISIL. They are backing Ahrar [Al-Sham] and [Liwa al-]Towhid brigades [of the Islamic Front] who have declared independence from supreme military command. But how do you define radicalism?"¹⁹⁹ When the Islamic Front took control of the Supreme Military Council weapons depots in Bab al-Hawa in December 2013, the U.S. and UK suspended non-lethal aid to Syrian rebels.²⁰⁰ Echoing the Turkish government's calls to engage more local actors on the field, a Turkish faith-based NGO protested Western ambivalence:

[The West] is worried about aid going into the hands of marginal groups. If you add them all up, you are talking about [several] thousand people. Why should millions suffer because of them? It is because [the West] is not in Syria that these groups are gaining strength From far away, they think everyone is al-Qaeda! We also complain about ISIL; they harm people rather than help them. But you have to take real Syrians as a counterparty, such as the Islamic Front. You can't just dismiss them without knowing them.²⁰¹

Unarmed fighters transit through Turkey or use its territory to regroup. Turkey provides rest and recreation opportunities for some rebels and their families in refugee shelters or other facilities.²⁰² A female refugee staying in the Öncüpınar container city said her husband fights for the opposition, is registered in the camp and comes and goes regularly without problems.²⁰³ A local official in Kilis said Turkish ambulances carry wounded Syrians from the border to Kilis hospitals.²⁰⁴ A Turkish official explained: "From a humanitarian perspective, we have to take in [wounded fighters]. I cannot say in good conscience that we should not allow them entry".²⁰⁵

There are also numerous field hospitals and "care houses" in the border provinces where wounded Syrian rebels, and sometimes their families, are cared for.²⁰⁶ Crisis Group visited in November 2013 a care house established over a year ago in Kilis that is run by a Syrian militant group. It houses over 30 patients in makeshift wards in an unmarked building with a security guard. The bearded Syrian in charge of the compound said it receives support mainly from wealthy Syrian businessmen and forums, but also from some Turkish aid organisations. The majority of patients were young men, all with war injuries including gun wounds, missing or paralysed limbs and broken bones. If they recover, they go back to Syria to fight.²⁰⁷

Turkey does not advocate, at least publicly, arming the military opposition, but weapons and ammunition make their way to Syria through it.²⁰⁸ A Turkish newspaper reported that 47 tons of weapons and

¹⁹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²⁰⁰ At the time Turkey also closed its Cilvegözü border crossing, across from Bab al-Hawa where the Islamic Front had gained control.

²⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Hüseyin Oruç, IHH deputy president, Istanbul, 18 January 2014.

²⁰² Fighters from the Islamic Front or other groups, including jihadi ones, can often be found heading for Syria on shuttle buses between central Gaziantep and border districts. Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, Istanbul, February 2014. For background, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p. 36.

²⁰³ Crisis Group interview, November 2013. A May 2013 survey among refugees in four camps found that 91 per cent did not keep an active link with Syria by travelling back and forth. It also found, however, that nearly 41 per cent had been directly involved in clashes in Syria. "The Struggle for Life", op. cit.

²⁰⁴ The Turkish side gets a phone call when there is need, Syrian ambulances bring the wounded to the buffer zone, from where Turkish ambulances take them to Kilis hospitals. Crisis Group interview, municipal official, Kilis, November 2013.

²⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²⁰⁶ A Kilis municipal official said there are four care houses in the province, one named for Abdulkadir Saleh, slain Liwa al-Towhid brigade commander. Crisis Group interview, November 2013.

²⁰⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Kilis, November 2013.

²⁰⁸ A Turkish official said the radical group Jabhat al-Nusra gained many early supporters by giving much-needed military supplies to fighters who could not get them from the Western-backed Supreme Military Council of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). "Different actors in Turkey have different agendas. The foreign ministry denies any military assistance to Syria, but

ammunition worth \$1.6 million was sent from Turkey to Syria between June and October 2013. Defence Minister Ismet Yılmaz said in December that these were non-military arms, such as hunting rifles for sport and blank-firing guns.²⁰⁹ Even so, a Turkish official said it was unlikely Turkey would allow such shipments in the future.²¹⁰ In a leaked recording of high-level Turkish officials in a 13 March 2014 meeting, participants referred to 2,000 trucks-worth of material support sent to rebels, as well as a general dispatched to train them, but a Turkish official said the illegal recording was “clearly doctored” before release.²¹¹ Humanitarian agencies complain that any mixing of aid and weapons would endanger their staff and mission to help needy Syrians.²¹²

Other worrying incidents raise questions about inconsistencies between Turkish rhetoric and policy toward Syrian militant groups. Police arrested one Syrian and five Turks in Adana on 28 May 2013 with materials used in the production of chemical weapons.²¹³ On 7 November, the governor in the southern province of Adana announced that a raid on a truck heading to Syria had found almost 1,000 mortar shells and ten launching pads; ten people were detained.²¹⁴ On 1 January 2014, security forces stopped a Syria-bound aid truck in Hatay; reportedly it was loaded with weapons and ammunition, though after the governor’s last-minute intervention it was not searched.²¹⁵ On 19 January, gendarmerie forces purportedly found weapons and ammunition on several Syria-bound trucks in the southern province of Adana.²¹⁶ Overall, it remains unclear what really was in any of these trucks or to whom they were headed.

Opposition parties loudly criticise the government’s Syria policy,²¹⁷ but in addition to domestic troubles, Turkey pays a political price regionally for its involvement in Syria. Apart from casualties and attacks on its territory (see Section IV.B below), repercussions have included a Lebanese Hizbollah-linked group’s

the picture is not as clear when it comes to intelligence actors”. Crisis Group interview, European official, December 2013. Crisis Group telephone interview, 27 January 2014.

²⁰⁹ “Suriye’ye silahın belgesi” [Documents of weapons transfer to Syria], *Hürriyet*, 15 December 2013. “Turkey admits export of rifles to Syria for ‘sports’ activity”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 17 December 2013. UN documents described these as “other firearms, sporting, etc. signal pistols”. <http://comtrade.un.org/monthly/Main/Data.aspx#>.

²¹⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2014. The head of an influential Ankara think tank urged adjustments in perspective: “For every gun that crosses the Turkey-Syria border, there is a container going from Russia”. Taha Özhan, director, SETAV, Ankara, 17 February 2014.

²¹¹ “Başçalanın Seçim Güdümlü Savaş Planı 1-1 & 1-2” [The election-oriented war plans of the prime thief], videos, Youtube, 26 March 2014, <http://bit.ly/1p4w7S>, <http://bit.ly/1eVhJB5>. Crisis Group communication, Turkish official, April 2014. Prime Minister Erdoğan did not deny the substance of the discussion, saying at a campaign rally: “They even leaked a national security meeting Who are you serving by doing audio surveillance of such an important meeting?” Cited in “Turkey calls Syria security leak ‘villainous,’ blocks YouTube”, Reuters, 27 March 2014.

²¹² “It makes us all targets”. Crisis Group interview, international humanitarian aid worker, Istanbul, March 2014.

²¹³ “Kimyasal silah elde edeceklerdi” [They were going to acquire chemical weapons], *Akşam*, 11 September 2013.

²¹⁴ “Adana’da bir TIR dolusu füze ve bomba yakalandı” [Truck full of rockets and bombs confiscated in Adana], *Sabah*, 7 November 2013.

²¹⁵ The incident was first linked to the faith-based Turkish aid organisation IHH. But it denied links, calling the accusations a plot to stop aid deliveries to Syria. Interior Minister Efkân Ala said on 2 January 2014 that the truck was carrying aid for Syrian Turkmen. Foreign Minister Davutoğlu reiterated this on 19 January, saying ISIL had increased its oppression of Turkmen in Syria after Turkish trucks carrying aid to Turkmen groups were blocked inside Turkey, causing the Turkmen to withdraw. “Turkey-Israel relations ‘close’ to normalisation: FM Davutoğlu”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 9 February 2014.

²¹⁶ The local governorate issued a statement the same day saying three trucks were stopped but released, as they carried National Intelligence Agency (MIT) personnel on “routine duty”. A 2012 law requires the prime minister’s approval for legal proceedings involving MIT.

²¹⁷ “[The West] is concerned with getting al-Qaeda out of Syria. I don’t think we have that concern. We don’t distinguish among the warring groups. Turkey has been providing arms to the rebels from the start, has trained them and sent them in Maybe Turkey could have stopped Assad; maybe it could have been a mediator between him and the rebels. But Turkey lost its neutrality and cannot be effective”. Rıza Türmen, deputy of the main opposition party, CHP, quoted in “The government provoked war in Syria”, *Taraf*, 27 January 2014.

kidnap of two Turkish pilots in Beirut in August 2013.²¹⁸ Critics warn that Turkey may not be able to handle the pressure of increasing entanglement: “It does not have the capacity or experience in enacting a regime change, in dealing with proxies. [Western countries] come and train the Syrian opposition here. Turkey just lets it all happen on its soil”.²¹⁹

Ankara may also feel unable to go back on the support it has invested in certain groups without risking a backlash. However, its existing engagement conceivably could be used, in coordination with regional counterparts, to impose conditionality on support for the opposition groups, in particular compliance with international humanitarian and human rights law, including safe access for people in need and demonstrable non-sectarian behaviour. A foreign policy adviser to the government said Turkey is already trying to do this and that, as a result, religious sites were treated with respect when an opposition force advanced into the Christian Armenian town of Kesab in northern Syria in March 2014.²²⁰

B. *Security Strategies Recalibrated*

Stray shells, car bombs and clashes in both border and central Turkish towns continue to claim lives. More than 75 Turks have died from spillover fighting since April 2011.²²¹ President Gül has warned of growing threats from Syria, including radical movements, and underlined the need for policy recalibration.²²² Turkey’s coordinating governor in charge of Syrians said, “there was once one enemy in Syria, but there are now three enemies [Assad’s regime, the PYD and al-Qaeda affiliates]. Until one or two years ago, there was an oppressor regime and a people seeking their rights. Now ... we no longer know where the bullet comes from”.²²³

Turkey has increased patrols and troops along the border and is stricter about entries (see above). Crossings are temporarily closed when clashes intensify on the Syrian side or jihadi groups take hold of territory close to them.²²⁴ But, an official admits, “it is a porous border we can never fully secure”, particularly while simultaneously implementing an “open-door policy” towards Syrians escaping the conflict.²²⁵ A

²¹⁸ They were released on 20 October 2013. The kidnappers, from Zuwwar al-Imam Rida, demanded Turkey use its influence to free eleven Lebanese Sunni rebels kidnapped in Syria in 2012.

²¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Middle East expert, Ankara, December 2013.

²²⁰ Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, 26 April 2014. Armenian and some other international media accused Turkey of supporting the Kesab attack. See, for instance, “Syria’s Armenian villages of Kesab targeted by al-Qaeda front groups in cross-border attack from Turkey”, Armenian National Committee – International, ancnews.info, 24 March 2014. Turkey said it had opened its doors to Armenian refugees from Syria, and more than eighteen had reached Hatay province in early April. “Press release No: 106 regarding the developments in Kesab”, foreign ministry, 6 April 2014. Crisis Group has encountered no credible evidence of rebels targeting local civilians in Kesab. There is a documented case of a cross being removed from one church, but also evidence that rebels guarded and did not damage other churches. For more on the “social-media storm of disinformation” about the battle and interviews with Armenian residents, see “Syrian Armenians, who had been insulated from war, forced to flee after rebel offensive”, *The Washington Post*, 2 April 2014. For a pro-opposition version of the story, see <http://bit.ly/1nWhh7O>.

²²¹ According to Crisis Group’s informal, open-source tally of casualties.

²²² “The key to a solution is common reason, dialogue and empathy to understand your counterpart. I believe we have to recalibrate our diplomacy and security policies in light of the realities on our southern border and the threat perceptions of the centres around us”. Speech at Sixth Ambassadors’ Conference, 14 January 2014. The leaked recording allegedly of a high-level Turkish official also cautions that “being a neighbour to ambiguous structures like ISIL ... creates a great and vital security risk”. “Başcalanın Seçim Gündümlü Savaş Planı 1-1 & 1-2” [The election-oriented war plans of the prime thief], videos, Youtube, 26 March 2014, *op. cit.*

²²³ Governor Veysel Dalmaz, quoted in “Turkey says ISIL convoy hit necessary as ‘threat comes near us’”, *Today’s Zaman*, 2 February 2014.

²²⁴ For instance, Turkey temporarily closed the Öncüpınar crossing (across from Bab al-Salameh) in September-October 2013 and February 2014; Akçakale (Tal Abyad) in August 2013 and early January 2014; Cilvegözü (Bab al-Hawa) in December 2013 and late January 2014; and Karkamış (Jarablus) in early January 2014.

²²⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, 27 January 2014.

resident of Kilis's Akıncı village complained "there was no border left anymore", with tens of people crossing illegally in each direction at any given point, sometimes leading to armed intervention from Turkish soldiers.²²⁶ Parts of the border are mined, though mostly with anti-tank devices that require more than 500 kg of weight to detonate.²²⁷ A Turkish study warned:

There is a significant security weakness on the border giving rise to widespread smuggling of goods and people The authority gap on the Syrian side also puts border security at risk. Some border gates are only guarded by [Turkish] police and/or gendarmerie forces, which are units of internal security and [vulnerable] in the event of an attack or provocation.²²⁸

Military tensions escalated in 2012, fell in early 2013 and rose again in March 2014.²²⁹ Turkey changed its rules of engagement after Syria shot down a reconnaissance jet on 22 June 2012, killing its two pilots. The army has responded by firing into Syria after stray shells land in Turkey, and jets are deployed to the border if Syrian military aircraft approach.²³⁰ Turkey shot down a Syrian helicopter on 16 September 2013, saying it had violated Turkish airspace by two km, and a Syrian warplane for a similar reason on 23 March 2014.²³¹ A Western diplomat indicated that at times, including on the latter occasion, Turkey was supporting opposition military operations by implementing limited "no fly zones" for Syrian aircraft just inside northern Syria.²³² In retaliation, Syrian missile batteries put patrolling Turkish jets under radar lock, sometimes for several minutes.²³³

Risks of a large-scale confrontation nevertheless remain low, despite a parliamentary mandate, still in place, allowing cross-border military operations.²³⁴ Some pro-government columnists at times entertain the idea of a large-scale direct intervention, but it is a remote possibility, not least due to strong public aversion.²³⁵

Smuggling along the border has proliferated. According to Gaziantep sources, fuel oil, cigarettes, tea, sugar and auto parts are among the goods moved from Syria to Turkey; foodstuffs and hygiene products are among those taken the other way. Syrian children can be seen selling smuggled cigarettes outside the main Kilis bus terminal. More dangerous items also sneak in: vehicles with twenty bags of sulphate and other unidentified materials were seized in Hatay province on 2 November 2013. On 20 November, in

²²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Kilis, November 2013.

²²⁷ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²²⁸ "The Struggle for Life", op. cit.

²²⁹ For earlier incidents, see Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., p. 28.

²³⁰ According to the new rules, any military entity approaching Turkey from Syria is perceived as a threat and treated as a military target. See, for instance, "Syrian defense systems put Turkish F-16 jets under radar lock: General Staff", Anadolu Agency, 2 January 2014.

²³¹ The Turkish military said in the latter case that two Syrian jets were warned four times they were approaching Turkish airspace; one turned back; the other entered 1.5 km into Turkey, at which point missiles brought it down 1.2 km inside Syria. The pilot parachuted to safety and in an interview said he was seven km inside Syria when shot down. The two pilots and technical personnel on the downed helicopter ejected, supposedly falling in Syrian territory, though their fate is unknown.

²³² Crisis Group interview, Istanbul, March 2014. The late March fighting between rebels and the regime involved a mainly Armenian town, Kesab in Syria's Latakia province.

²³³ See Turkish Security Forces statements on the issue, 16, 24 November 2013 and 2 January 2014, www.tsk.gov.tr, and "Syria missile system locks Turkish jet", Anatolian Agency, 24 March 2014.

²³⁴ The parliament passed the mandate in October 2012 after a stray shell from Syria killed five Turks in Şanlıurfa province and renewed it for another year in October 2013.

²³⁵ "We should not dismiss the possibility that Turkey will have to intervene militarily in a crisis that Iran is actively involved in and that will thus last a long time There may arise the need for Turkey to establish a stable zone on the other side of the border". İbrahim Karagül, "Why are the Turkish Security Forces not involved in the Syrian problem?", *Yeni Şafak*, 24 January 2014. A little over 5 per cent of respondents supported military assistance to Syria's armed opposition. "Türk Dış Politikası Kamuoyu Algılar Araştırması", Istanbul Kadir Has University, op. cit, 4 December 2013.

Kocaeli province just outside Istanbul, anti-smuggling units seized over twenty tons of cartridges, shell casings and nearly eighteen tons of used brass items, believed to be from Syria.

There have also been some direct, large-scale security threats, though often the identity of the perpetrators has been uncertain. Remote-control bombs in a truck in Gaziantep detonated on 20 August 2012, killing eleven and wounding over 60. No one claimed responsibility, but many Turks assumed it was the PKK, which denied it.²³⁶ The public did not dwell at length on a possible link to the Syrian regime. In the following months, several incidents with Turkish casualties drew attention to increasing spillover risks: on 3 October 2012, a mortar shell fell in Şanlıurfa's Akçakale district killing five Turks; on 11 February 2013, a car bomb at the Cilvegözü crossing in Hatay killed ten Turks and four Syrians; a Turkish guard died in a 2 May 2013 border skirmish, again in Akçakale.

It was not until the worst terror attack in the country's republican history that the public realised the extent of the danger. Two car bombs that exploded in Hatay's border Reyhanlı district on 11 May 2013, killing 53 and wounding around 140, were quickly linked to the Syrian regime, working with a left-wing terrorist organisation, the Turkish People's Liberation Front (Türkiye Halk Kurtuluş Partisi Cephesi, THKP-C).²³⁷ Tensions in Reyhanlı rose, as did hostilities towards Syrians refugees. The incident put security at the top of national priorities and further limitations on the open door policy. That there has been no repeat may indicate the government is watching more carefully.²³⁸ Protection also comes from U.S., German and Dutch Patriot missiles stationed at the border since January 2013, on Turkey's NATO request.

C. *Two Steps Forward, One Step Back with the PYD*

A year ago, Turkish officials were uncompromising toward the PYD, which they considered directly subordinate to the PKK insurgency and accused of collaborating with the regime in Damascus and threatening other Kurdish groups in Syria.²³⁹ Ankara's reflex was to prevent the PKK/PYD from advancing in northern Syria, and it was even accused of helping other Syrian opposition groups, including jihadis, fight the PYD.²⁴⁰

This changed in spring 2013. In the midst of an ongoing settlement process with the PKK, and reflecting efforts to diversify reliance on Kurdish factions backed by Massoud Barzani, the Kurdistan Regional Government leader in Iraq, officials held a first meeting with PYD leader Saleh Muslim, in Cairo in May. Meetings in Istanbul and Ankara in July and August followed, involving foreign ministry and intelligence officials. Statements, at least from the PYD, softened; Saleh Muslim spoke of "friendly and cordial" sessions and the PYD not wanting tensions with Turkey.²⁴¹ Turkey started allowing humanitarian supplies to

²³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²³⁷ Several Turkish newspapers, however, reported in September 2013 that ISIL claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement reprinted on the *breakingnews.sy* website. A court case continues; the indictment, announced in October 2013, named 33 suspects, eighteen of whom are under arrest. It said the attacks were linked to President al-Assad, the regime's intelligence service (al Muhabarat) and the outlawed THKP-C and its Acilciler unit, whose leader was personally involved.

²³⁸ Other incidents with Turkish casualties include: on 17 July and 1 August 2013 in Ceylanpınar, stray bullets from Syria killed four Turks; on 3 September 2013, live ammunition exploded while being smuggled into Turkey, killing one Turk and five Syrians just across the border from Hatay; on 29 September, a stray bullet killed a villager in Hatay as the army clashed with Syrian smugglers; on 27 October in Ceylanpınar, a stray shell from Syria killed one Turk.

²³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Turkish officials, Ankara, February 2013. See also Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the Borders*, op. cit., pp. 24-26. Founded in 2003, PYD's roots go back to Syria's decision to ban the PKK in 1998, which created the need for a proxy organisation. The PKK and PYD belong to the same Kurdish national movement umbrella body, the Kurdistan Communities Union (Koma Ciwakên Kurdistan, KCK). See also Crisis Group Report, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, op. cit.

²⁴⁰ There were persistent reports in November 2012, denied by Turkey, that Syrian opposition fighters crossed the border at Ceylanpınar to fight against the PYD on the Ras al-Ayn and Kobane fronts. See Crisis Group Report, *Blurring the borders*, op. cit., p. 25

²⁴¹ "Warning to the PYD", *Sabah*, 23 July 2013

Kurdish areas in northern Syria. Showing the dramatic shift in state thinking, an official acknowledged that fighting against Jabhat al-Nusra had “helped PYD consolidate its position and legitimise itself”.²⁴²

The positive mood eventually fizzled. Turkey wanted the PYD to join the opposition National Coalition and maintain Syria’s unity, which meant shelving plans to declare autonomy.²⁴³ It was dissatisfied on both fronts. The PYD remained outside the National Coalition and in November began setting up transitional administrations in areas under its control in north-east Syria, referred to by Kurds as Rojava (western Kurdistan).²⁴⁴

There were also tensions between the PYD and the Kurdish National Council (KNC), a Syrian Kurdish group backed by Barzani and Turkey.²⁴⁵ The KNC joined the National Coalition in September 2013. The PYD and KNC met in Erbil in December to discuss ways for Syrian Kurds to attend the next month’s Geneva II talks, whether united or with each part of a different body – KNC in the National Coalition, PYD in the National Coordination Body, the internal opposition in Damascus – but representing a united Kurdish front. In the end, only the KNC went to Geneva, leading the PKK and the PYD to declare the arrangement illegitimate and not representative of Syrian Kurds.²⁴⁶

As long as its PKK problem remains unresolved, Turkey sees the PYD as a security threat and is suspicious of its disruptive potential in the difficult PKK peace process.²⁴⁷ Officials continue to accuse it of co-operating with the Syrian regime, as do some international officials.²⁴⁸ While high-level visible meetings have stopped, channels of communication remain open. PYD officials from the Kobane canton visited Ankara on 14 March 2014 to talk with Turkish officials and foreign missions.

D. *Coming to Terms with the Jihadi Threat: Too Little Too Late?*

Heightened awareness and sensitivity have replaced indifference toward jihadi groups in Syria.²⁴⁹ Whether repeated news of ISIL bomb threats on Turkish cities are well-founded or not, Ankara takes them seriously.²⁵⁰ An official warned: “The armed al-Qaeda elements will be a problem for Turks. As a secular coun-

²⁴² Crisis Group interview, Ankara, October 2013.

²⁴³ “We want a unified opposition in Syria. This is what we tell PYD”. Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, October 2013.

²⁴⁴ This included three non-contiguous enclaves -- Afrin (Efrin), al-Jazeera (Cezire) and Kobane (Kobani) -- that later became federated local governments.

²⁴⁵ For more on Syria’s Kurdish opposition, see Crisis Group Report, *Syria’s Kurds*, op. cit.

²⁴⁶ Leading PKK figure Cemil Bayık said, “the Kurds would go together [as an independent Kurdish delegation to Geneva II], or [they] would boycott it”. “Syrian Kurds not united behind opposition delegation to Geneva talks”, *Al Monitor*, 26 January 2014.

²⁴⁷ “The PKK sees the PYD as a force-multiplier and a balancing factor. It [can take advantage of] the Syrian crisis as it creates pressures on Turkey economically and socially”. Süleyman Özeren, academic, International Center for Terrorism and Transnational Crime (UTSAM), speech in conference, Ankara, October 2013.

²⁴⁸ Foreign Minister Davutoğlu quoted in “İŞİD ile Suriye rejimi arasında ortaklık var” [There is a partnership between ISIL and the regime], *Akşam*, 9 January 2014; and Crisis Group interview, Damascus-based international official, Istanbul, March 2014.

²⁴⁹ “Initially, maybe Turkey thought that extremist elements in the opposition like Jabhat al-Nusra could be helpful to the FSA [Free Syrian Army]. But recently there has been a moderation in that view This is a crisis that has overwhelmed the system in Turkey, it has come at it from different angles and the jihadi threat is only one aspect. It is not something Turkey had to deal with in the past, to this extent”. Crisis Group interview, Western official, Ankara, December 2013.

²⁵⁰ The media said ISIL threatened suicide attacks in Istanbul and Ankara if Turkey did not reopen the Cilvegözü border crossing in Hatay. “ISIL threatens Erdoğan with suicide bombings in Ankara, İstanbul”, *Today’s Zaman*, 30 September 2013; “El Kaide’den tehdit!” [Threat from al-Qaeda], *Vatan*, 1 October 2013. Similar warnings were issued in early 2014 for İstanbul, Ankara and Hatay. “Türkiye’de 3 kent için bombalı intihar saldırısı alarmı!” [Bomb threats for three cities in Turkey], *Radikal*, 21 January 2014. Turkey warned the Syrian opposition of possible ISIL attacks against it in İstanbul, Ankara, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Hatay. “Turkish authorities issue suicide attack warning amid Syria talks, after tip on al-Qaeda linked group”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 21 January 2014.

try, we do not fit in with their ideology. What happens if they can't get what they want in Syria? They will blame Turkey and attack it". Another said, "it is impossible not to be worried [about jihadis in Syria]. It is now a transnational threat".²⁵¹

The frequency of ISIL incidents is rising and in more central locations. Dangerous direct military escalation was already evident in border clashes,²⁵² and tensions heated up particularly in March 2013 over a tiny Turkish sovereign exclave in Raqqqa province, about 30km inside Syria, where ISIL apparently threatened 25 soldiers guarding an Ottoman tomb.²⁵³ On 20 March 2014, three armed men, Arabic-speaking foreigners linked to Syria by Turkish authorities, commandeered a vehicle from Hatay to a military checkpoint in south-central Niğde province and started a firefight, killing two soldiers, a policeman and the Turkish owner of the vehicle, and wounding some dozen Turkish bystanders.²⁵⁴ Syrian-related jihadi trouble reached Istanbul on 25 March, when three police and two militants were wounded in a raid on a suspected ISIL safehouse.²⁵⁵

A year ago, officials estimated jihadi numbers in Syria at 700 to 1,500; now they speak of at least 5,000 for Jabhat al-Nusra alone, which they consider "as bad as the others but [at least] is homegrown".²⁵⁶ Few jihadi-looking men were visible on Gaziantep and Kilis streets in November 2013 and February 2014 when Crisis Group visited, but locals said they were in the area.²⁵⁷ While Turks worry about "sleeper cells" or safehouses in the south east,²⁵⁸ many believe ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra would not dare attack for now.²⁵⁹ Jihadi Turks are also a potential future problem. A November 2013 interior ministry report said 500 went to Syria to join al-Qaeda-linked groups.²⁶⁰ A security expert close to the police said Turkey did not yet have a strategy for if and when they returned.²⁶¹

Ankara is in the uncomfortable position of defending itself both internationally and domestically against accusations of supporting al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria. In November, President Gül warned that Syria was becoming an "Afghanistan on the shores of the Mediterranean", pointing to the "radicalisa-

²⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, October 2013; telephone interview, January 2014.

²⁵² Turkish soldiers and ISIL exchanged fire across the border in Kilis on 16 October 2013. On 28 January 2014, at the Çobanbey border police station in Gaziantep, Turkish Security Forces said ISIL fired on their truck with light arms, and they responded with tanks and heavy machine guns, destroying three ISIL vehicles. A senior Turkish official said there were heavy ISIL casualties. Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2014.

²⁵³ The tiny Turkish sovereign exclave on the shore of Lake Assad is the burial place of Süleyman Şah, grandfather of the Ottoman Empire's founder. After the area fell under ISIL control, Turkish media reported that soldiers at the tomb have been instructed to engage if attacked, and military reinforcements, already at the border, can be sent. Prime Minister Erdoğan said Turkey would do "whatever necessary in case of a threat against its territories". "PM says Turkey would respond to attack on its land in Syria", Anatolian Agency, 25 March 2014. Turkey sent a military relief and resupply convoy to the tomb on 23 April 2014 without apparent trouble.

²⁵⁴ The three gunmen were a Macedonian, an Albanian citizen of German origin and a Swiss citizen of Kosovar origin. "Türkiye'ye yönelen IŞİD tehdidi" [The ISIL threat to Turkey], *Al Monitor*, 24 March 2014.

²⁵⁵ "İstanbul'da Işid operasyonu" [ISIS operation in Istanbul], *Akşam*, 26 March 2014.

²⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Turkish official, January 2014 and interview, senior Turkish official, Ankara, February 2014. U.S. estimates are much higher; intelligence chief James Clapper said there are 26,000 extremist fighters in Syria, mostly in ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, 7,000 of whom are foreign nationals. "Clapper Says Syrian al-Qaida Wants to Attack US", ABC News, 29 January 2014. For more on jihadi groups in Syria, see Crisis Group Report, *Tentative Jihad*, op. cit.

²⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²⁵⁸ The existence of safehouses in the Reyhanlı district of Hatay was described in "Syria conflict: Foreign jihadists 'use Turkey safehouses'", BBC News, 7 December 2013.

²⁵⁹ "Their focus is not on Turkey. They don't see it as an enemy for now. They have bigger fish to fry inside Syria. Also Turkey is strong and capable of closing down its border". Crisis Group interview, Syrian activist, Gaziantep, November 2013.

²⁶⁰ "Suriye'de 500 Türk savaşçı" [500 Turkish fighters in Syria], *Bugün*, 26 November 2013.

²⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, October 2013. An opposition parliamentarian said thirteen Turkish families from Gaziantep had approached him to find their sons who had been recruited by jihadi groups in Syria. Crisis Group interview, Mehmet Seker, Gaziantep deputy of the main opposition party, CHP, Ankara, 24 October 2013.

tion of ordinary people” as a growing risk to neighbours and Europe.²⁶² Foreign Minister Davutoğlu said allegations Turkey supported al-Qaeda were “psychological moves”, and Turkey was struggling against the group.²⁶³ On 14 January 2014, after several Syria-bound trucks with unknown cargo had been stopped in previous weeks by the security forces, police carried out an operation against al-Qaeda across six provinces, detaining 28.²⁶⁴

Partners want Turkey to do more to stop or track foreign fighters crossing its borders into Syria. A European official, concerned that over 1,000 European jihadis may eventually return to EU member states, explained they were not necessarily “asking Turkey to arrest them but to follow them and share intelligence”.²⁶⁵ Turkey apparently did send around 1,000 European jihadis back home,²⁶⁶ but it is mainly asking third countries to stop suspects on their own territory before they board a plane.

It is not fair to say Turkey is not doing enough to stop the transit of jihadi fighters. According to international law, we can’t just tell people with valid travel documents that they can’t go to Syria if there is no warrant against them. Besides, not all people cross over legally [and] we can’t control all illegal crossings.²⁶⁷

European countries should be forthcoming with names and details of suspects, while Turkey should adopt a zero tolerance policy for radical militant breaches of its border, even though this may cause backlash on its territory. The longer it delays, the more difficult its eventual disentanglement will be. The head of an influential Turkish think tank warned:

When Turkey starts arresting them, which it will do, we know what will happen. There will be bombs all over Turkey All the policy flip flops created this mess. [One] option is simply to talk to [President] al-Assad and to establish a secure area, and to focus on solving the problem for Turkey. Turkish and Syrian troops are going to end up fighting the jihadis one day.²⁶⁸

For now, however, it seems highly unlikely that Prime Minister Erdoğan intends to withdraw his demand for Assad to go, or that Ankara will find in the regime an effective or willing partner to deal with the jihadis in northern Syria. Its best bet may be to hold to the hope that mainstream, local Sunni Muslim groups will turn against the radicals in greater numbers and push them to the margins of Syrian society.

²⁶² Quoted in “Turkish president: Syria becoming Afghanistan in the Med”, *The Guardian*, 4 November 2013.

²⁶³ “Syrian rebels reject interim government, embrace Sharia”, CNN, 26 September 2013; “Davutoğlu: Turkey doesn't support al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Syria”, *Today's Zaman*, 8 October 2013.

²⁶⁴ The Kilis offices of the aid organisation IHH were raided; one employee and two senior al-Qaeda figures were among those detained. Thirteen of the suspects detained throughout Turkey were subsequently arrested. “IHH'ya polis baskını” [Police raid on IHH], *Sabah*, 14 January 2014.

²⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, December 2013.

²⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Ankara, February 2014. Officials initially denied news reports that 1,100 European citizens who had come to Turkey to join al-Qaeda-linked groups in Syria were deported. “Turkey deports 1100 Europeans to countries of origin”, *Today's Zaman*, 1 December 2013.

²⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, October 2013. Another official complained: “They are dreaming if they think Turkey will solve this by itself. We need international cooperation We need [third countries] to provide us with tangible proof [against suspects], not just their names and flight numbers”. Crisis Group telephone interview, January 2014.

²⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ankara, February 2014.

V. Conclusion

Among Syria's neighbours, Turkey is best positioned to absorb the war's repercussions, including over a million refugees by year's end. Though increasing spillover is evident, particularly in border provinces but throughout the country, the crisis has not yet seriously upset internal balances and security. Turkey has built for its Syrian guests the world's best, most orderly shelters, almost entirely with its own money, but they are expensive, temporary and barely sufficient for the continuous inflow.

Three years into the crisis, policymakers are significantly adjusting initial expectations of a quick resolution. As part of this, and as the refugee bill grows, Ankara has opened up somewhat to international assistance. Full cooperation is still absent, however, and the onus remains largely on the government. Many border towns are swamped by Syrians in an uncontrolled manner. Since there is no immediate solution to the crisis in their country, Syrians will continue to come; even if the conflict ends tomorrow, many will remain in Turkey for several years. Ankara may need to take more control of the process by working with the international community to establish better-planned housing arrangements and giving refugees better opportunities for education, employment and cultural and social integration. In turn, the donor community may need to consider much more generously funding any mutually agreed schemes.

From a security perspective, Turkey is increasingly vulnerable. While it has mostly aligned itself with its Western allies against extremist elements in Syria, it has not yet fully hardened its borders against jihadi breaches in both directions. To help reach a political solution in Syria, it may also need to consider publicly disassociating itself from Sunni Muslim sectarian factions, reenergising efforts to diplomatically engage major Syrian Kurdish groups that are dominant along its border and continuing to apply humanitarian policies to all Syrian civilians in a non-discriminatory manner.