

Refugees and Guesthood in Turkey

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This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced version of an article accepted for publication in Journal of Refugee Studies following peer review. The version of record Lamis Abdelaaty, "Refugees and Guesthood in Turkey," Journal of Refugee Studies (2019), Advance online publication, doi: 10.1093/jrs/fez097 is available online at:

<https://academic.oup.com/jrs/advance-article-abstract/doi/10.1093/jrs/fez097/5625572>.

Abstract

Even as Turkey took in over three million Syrians at great expense, Turkish officials were referring to these individuals as guests rather than refugees. Despite significant legal developments in the country, and particularly the formalization of a temporary protection regime, this choice of labels reveals the influence of underlying political trends on Turkish policy-making regarding refugees. This paper compares Turkey's reactions to the Syrian inflow with its responses to previous refugee groups, including Iraqis in 1988, Bosnians in 1992, Kosovars in 1998, and Chechens starting 1999. In so doing, it demonstrates that the refusal to designate certain populations as asylum-seekers or refugees enables Turkey to opt in or out of what might otherwise appear to be generally-applicable, national-level policies. Through these strategic semantics, policymakers retain a freedom to maneuver in response to international and domestic political incentives.

Introduction

In the face of a massive refugee influx, Turkey adopted an ‘open-door’ policy. Today, with 3.6 million Syrians, Turkey is the largest refugee-hosting country in the world (UNHCR, 2019b).

The government has spent a great deal of money – reportedly \$37 billion by February 2019 – and built some of the best-equipped refugee camps in the world (Zorlu, 2019). In 2014, the *New York Times* called Kilis, in south-central Turkey, ‘the perfect refugee camp’ (McClelland, 2014).

Even as Turkey took in millions of Syrians at great expense, government officials and official documents were referring to them as ‘guests’ rather than ‘refugees.’ For instance, a report issued by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) in late 2014 was entitled *Syrians Guests in Turkey* (AFAD, 2014). Despite being over 150 pages long, the report does not use the word refugee once, except in the context of referring to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). What explains Turkey’s use of the ‘guest’ label?

As I detail below, existing scholarship has addressed whether, and how, to distinguish between refugees and migrants, and questioned the analytical usefulness of the refugee category. Other work has focused on the process whereby the refugee label is constructed and applied, with powerful consequences for people on the move. The literature on guesthood, meanwhile, remains narrow. Scholarship in this vein has focused largely on implications of the guest label, rather than the function it serves for states.

Turkey is one of a handful of countries that maintain a ‘geographical limitation’ to the 1951 Refugee Convention, whereby it does not recognize non-Europeans for refugee status. As a result of the geographical limitation, many accounts of Turkish asylum policies emphasize the selective protection provided to European compared to non-European refugees. Scholars have

also interpreted the 2014 adoption of a Law on Foreigners and a Temporary Protection Regulation as evidence of a new Europeanization of Turkish migration policies.

The Syrian crisis is not the first time that Turkey has used the label ‘guests’ to refer to a refugee community. Below, I compare Turkey’s reactions to the Syrian influx with its responses to all previous refugee groups to whom the guest label was applied, including Iraqis in 1988, Bosnians in 1992, Kosovars in 1998, and Chechens starting 1999. In doing so, I demonstrate that Turkish policies are more nuanced than the conventional wisdom implies. A simple dichotomy between European and non-European refugees is too blunt and can be misleading. Moreover, Turkey’s ongoing treatment of Syrians shares striking similarities with its responses to previous refugee groups even prior to the passage of recent legal reforms. Turkey’s use of the guest label predates these legal and bureaucratic changes in the country, and has persisted despite them. Focusing on recent legal developments alone obscures the influence of underlying political trends on Turkish policy-making regarding refugees.

The refusal to designate certain populations as asylum-seekers or refugees enables Turkey to opt in or out of what might otherwise appear to be generally-applicable, national-level policies.

When it is applied to a refugee group, whether in the context of a mass influx or not, the ‘guest’ label places them outside the normal operation of the law. It thereby enables Turkey’s government to discriminate amongst groups who would otherwise belong to the same legal status, treating some better than others. Responding to foreign policy considerations as well as domestic identity politics, Turkish officials have used the guest label to favor some refugee groups (non-Kurdish Syrians, Iraqi Turkmen, Bosnians, and Kosovars), while singling out others (Syrian Kurds, Iraqi Kurds, and Chechens) for poor treatment. Similarities in treatment across

these disparate refugee groups point to the importance of investigating the ‘guest’ label as a distinct category in asylum policymaking.

Despite various differences between these refugee groups, the influence of foreign policy and domestic politics is consistent. Specifically, Turkey has treated refugees from rival countries generously, while cracking down on refugees from allies. At the same time, it has extended favorable treatment to refugees who are ethnic kin and unfavorable treatment to ethnic others. By placing them outside the law, the guest label gave Turkey the flexibility to vary its treatment of refugee groups who would otherwise belong to the same legal status. The guest label thus enabled Turkey to treat some refugees better than others, in accordance with foreign policy and domestic politics considerations.

This paper also contributes to scholarship on the political sources of responses to refugees. For example, many studies of asylum policy in the US emphasize what Zolberg et al. (1989) have termed the ‘Haitian-Cuban syndrome’. During the 1980s, the US was willing to define Cuban asylum-seekers as refugees since they were coming from an unfriendly communist country. However, similar treatment was not extended to predominantly black Haitian asylum-seekers who were cast as economic migrants. The US is hardly representative of refugee-receiving countries though, and few studies have examined whether these strategic dynamics operate similarly elsewhere. Focusing on Turkey, this paper illustrates the influence of foreign policy and ethnic politics on the country that currently hosts the largest number of refugees worldwide.

The Literature on Refugees and Labels

A number of scholars have wrestled with the refugee/migrant binary, assessed whether ‘refugee’ constitutes a sociological category, and considered the construction of the refugee label. While

this work has generated many important insights, it has largely neglected the guest label. A smaller literature has illuminated the consequences of hospitality discourses for forced migrants, but governments' motives for adopting the guest label require further analysis.

A large number of works address whether and how to distinguish between forced and voluntary migration, or between refugees and migrants. Some authors, like Feller (2005), are concerned that a blurred conceptual or legal boundary would endanger refugee protection. Others, like Richmond (1988), describe the distinction as false and misleading. Still other scholars have focused on the historical evolution of the refugee/migrant dichotomy (Long, 2013), or sought to propose new categories altogether (Betts, 2013, Martin et al., 2014).

Relatedly, a number of studies have questioned whether 'refugee' is a sociological category, that is, one that delineates a discrete group with distinct behaviors (e.g., FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, Hein, 1993). Malkki (1995) argues forcefully that there is no such thing as the 'refugee experience' or 'refugeeness.' Since the refugee label emerges from bureaucratic processes to meet policy needs, it may not be analytically useful (Scalettaris, 2007). For Bakewell (2008), academics have adopted policymakers' categories in a bid for greater relevance, thereby limiting their analyses and obscuring certain groups and processes (see also Polzer, 2008).

In a seminal article, Zetter (1991) shifted the focus to the process of refugee labelling itself. He argues that the refugee label not only describes, but also constructs. Labels can give us insight into the impacts of institutional and policymaking power over the lives of human beings. They are the tangible representation of bureaucratic policies, which differentiate categories of eligibility and entitlements. In a follow on piece, he examines how the spread of deterrent measures, temporary protection, and restrictionism amongst other trends constitute a fractioning

of the refugee label (Zetter, 2007). Chimni (1998) also notes that those arriving in western countries starting in the 1980s were labeled ‘new asylum seekers’, to distinguish them from previous flows of ‘normal’ (i.e., white, male, and anti-communist) refugees. The resulting myth of difference between refugee flows in Europe and the Third World, he argues, has served to legitimize non-entrée policies.

Other work has emphasized the negative impact on individuals and on policymaking of adopting simplified labels that do not reflect forced migrants’ view of themselves (Gupte and Mehta, 2007). For example, Crawley and Skleparis (2018) stress that categories are constructed, constantly negotiated, and deeply political. The dominant legal and policy categories, refugees and migrants, are both inadequate and extremely consequential. Unfortunately, this literature has not considered the guest label, which operates outside of the migrant/refugee binary.

There is a small literature that looks at forced migrants and hospitality. Brun (2010) examines how hospitality shapes the relationship between internally displaced persons and host populations. Carpi and Şenoğuz (2019) focus on the effects of the hospitality discourse on interactions between refugees, citizens, and earlier migrants in Lebanon and Turkey. And El-Abed (2014) examines the effect on refugee populations of the intersection between the guest discourse, the development discourse, and the security discourse in Jordan. This work has focused on the effects of the hospitality discourse on forced migrants, but it has not delved into how the guest label fits into policymakers’ calculations.

To be sure, there is a rich literature on temporary protection in situations of mass influx (for a recent overview, see Ineli-Ciger, 2018). When large numbers of people are rapidly fleeing conflict or violence, states may grant them temporary refuge on an ‘exceptional, emergency, and

time-bound basis' until conditions become suitable for their return or resettlement (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, 2007).¹ Crucially, unlike in the canonical examples of temporary protection (the 1989 Comprehensive Plan of Action in Southeast Asia, the Bosnian and Kosovo crises of the 1990s and the subsequent 2001 Temporary Protection Directive in Europe, and Temporary Protected Status in the US), 'guest' is not a formalized legal status. The guest label appears in Turkish political discourse, not in the country's formal laws and regulations. As I show below, Turkey's use of the term 'guest' (including for Syrians) preceded its adoption of a Temporary Protection Regulation in 2014. Moreover, Turkey has used the guest label in non-mass influx situations, namely with Chechens.² This paper demonstrates that, as Fitzpatrick (2000) warned regarding informal temporary regimes, the guest label has been used 'to de-legalize refugee protection and to relocate it in the realm of politics and humanitarian assistance.'

The guest label is theoretically distinct from migrant and refugee. During the 2015 surge in Mediterranean arrivals to Europe, the migrant label was used to delegitimize individuals and cast them as undeserving of protection; the refugee label was used to confer a legitimate claim to certain rights under international law (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). The guest label sidesteps concerns about the 'guest's' deservingness or the legitimacy of their rights claims, emphasizing the host's charity and hospitality rather than that host's legal obligations. To be labeled a guest is to be placed in a situation of precarity, where individuals are dependent on their host's goodwill and cannot appeal to international laws and rights. The case of Turkey demonstrates that the legal ambiguity inherent in the guest label enabled that government to vary its treatment

¹ In contrast to temporary protection, complementary (or subsidiary) protection 'is not an emergency or provisional device' (Mandal, 2005). It is generally used for individuals who, though not eligible for Convention refugee status, may still have sound reasons for not wishing to return to their home country.

² The guest label might be closest in function to informal temporary regimes adopted by non-signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention (see Bastaki, 2018)

across refugee groups in line with considerations related to foreign policy and ethnic politics, with significant consequences for refugees' lived experiences.

In emphasizing the role of foreign policy and ethnic politics, this study contributes to the literature on the political sources of responses to refugees. As noted above, many studies of asylum policy in the US have emphasized the 'Haitian-Cuban syndrome' (Zolberg et al., 1989). The influence of ideological competition during the Cold War is documented along similar lines by Teitelbaum (1984), Loescher and Scanlan (1986), Adamson (2006), Gabaccia (2015), Rudolph (2006), Totten (2017), and Toft (2007). Authors who have extended their analysis into the post-Cold War period have reported similar findings: Rosenblum and Salehyan (2004) assert that instrumental concerns (along with normative factors) shape US asylum enforcement, while Rottman et al. (2009) contend that 9/11 has increased the influence of political interests on asylum decisions in the US. However, whether these strategic dynamics are widely generalizable beyond the US has not been established.

The next section reviews Turkey's responses to Syrians, focusing on the role of foreign policy and domestic politics considerations. The following section then analyzes Turkey's responses to previous refugee groups that were also designated as guests: Iraqis, Bosnians and Kosovars, and Chechens. This analysis reveals that long-term underlying political trends have influenced Turkish policy-making on Syrians. By labeling certain groups as guests, rather than asylum-seekers or refugees, Turkey can act on international and domestic political incentives to treat some groups better or worse than others.

The Conventional Wisdom on Turkish Refugee Policy

Many accounts of Turkey's responses to refugees center on the country's legal framework. This section describes that legal framework and outlines two dominant explanations: one focusing on a European/non-European dichotomy stemming from Turkey's international legal obligations, and the other focusing on recent legal developments in the country. Neither of these explanations can account for Turkey's use of the guest label, nor can they fully explain the country's treatment of Syrian and other refugees. As I show below, the guest label places certain refugee groups outside the law, providing Turkey with the flexibility to respond to foreign policy and domestic politics considerations.

Out of 148 state parties to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its Protocol, Turkey is one of a handful of countries that maintain a 'geographical limitation.' As a matter of law, the government only extends *de jure* refugee status to individuals who have fled due to 'events occurring in Europe.' Meanwhile, non-Europeans can be recognized as asylum-seekers and permitted to reside in Turkey temporarily, pending resettlement. A Ministry of Interior official described extending rights to asylum-seekers until they are resettled as 'a big concession.'³

Turkish officials have long stressed the country's commitment to uphold the limitation. As far back as 1966, Turkish diplomats indicated to UNHCR staff that 'Turkey feels obliged to maintain the geographic limitation.'⁴ Two decades later, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official

³ Aydoğan Asar (Chief Superintendent, Migration and Asylum Bureau, Ministry of Interior). Personal interview by author, with translator. Ministry of Interior, Ankara, Turkey, February 23, 2012.

⁴ 17 May 1966, 'Note on Discussions with Mr. Idiz, Ankara, and Mr. Sirman of the Turkish Delegation in Geneva on 17 May 1966,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 1, Box 348, 22/1 TUR Eligibility - Turkey, Folio 47.

described it behind closed doors as ‘a long term policy ... there are no intentions of lifting it.’⁵

In 1989, the official emphasized that there was no ‘contractual obligation’ for the government to admit non-Europeans as ‘potential refugees.’⁶ And at a meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1990, a UNHCR official wrote that ‘the geographical limitation was emphasized yet again in relation to non-Europeans in Turkey. The government is firm on this point.’⁷ Even UNHCR has historically engaged in ‘self-censorship,’ avoiding the terms ‘mandate’ and ‘refugee’ in its correspondence with Turkish officials because these terms had provoked a ‘negative reaction.’⁸

Today, Syrians in Turkey are governed by a recent Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No. 6458) and Temporary Protection Regulation (No. 29153). The law-making process started in November 2008, that is prior to the Syrian civil war, when the Minister of Interior appointed two special inspectors. What followed was a major personnel change in the Department of Foreigners and the establishment of a new Asylum and Migration Unit to prepare a draft law on asylum. The draft law was sent to the Prime Minister’s Office in January 2011, adopted by parliament in April 2013, and entered into force one year later in April 2014.⁹

⁵ F. Galindo-Velez [Deputy Representative, UNHCR Branch Office (BO) in Ankara], 21 October 1986, ‘Note for the File: Meeting with Mrs. Fügen Ok, Ministry of Foreign Affairs,’ *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 10 TUR External Relations - Relations with Governments - Turkey [Volume A], Folio 7.

⁶ UNHCR BO Ankara to Head Regional Bureau for Europe and North America (RBENA), 23 November 1989, ‘Aide Memoire on Issues Related to Iraqi Kurds During the Month of November 1989,’ *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume C], Folio 52.

⁷ UNHCR BO in Ankara, 17 September 1989, ‘Re Tamils from Kuwait via Iraq,’ *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR LKA Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Sri Lankan Refugees in Turkey.

⁸ Lina Sultani and Patrick Tezier to Head, Desk I, Regional Bureau for Europe, 20 January 1994, *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 10 TUR External Relations - Relations with Governments - Turkey [Volume B], Folio 51. The Branch Office was referring specifically to Tunisians. The original text in French reads: ‘*Dans les relations épistolaires, la délégation éviter d'utiliser le termes de `mandat`, de réfugié, ces expressions avant suscite dans le passé une réaction négative des autorités turques. On peut d'ailleurs s'interroger sur les justifications de cette `auto censure.`*’

⁹ Prior to the coming into force of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection in 2014, Turkey’s asylum regime was regulated by a 1994 Asylum Regulation. Article 8 deemed it ‘essential that population movements be

Article 91(1) of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection defines temporary protection. Turkey had already announced that it would provide temporary protection status to Syrians in November 2011 at a UNHCR conference in Geneva, but this was formalized in October 2014 when the Council of Ministers adopted the Temporary Protection Regulation. There was bureaucratic change as well, with the establishment of a new Directorate General of Migration Management, or DGMM (Baban et al., 2017). However, the geographical limitation was left intact by Turkey's new legislation.

The initial spark for the reforms can be traced back to Turkey's European Union (EU) accession and harmonization process, and specifically Turkey's National Program for the Adoption of the EU Acquis. As Tolay (2012) has pointed out, a series of cases in which the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled against Turkey may have created a climate of urgency to reform the asylum system. Turkey's Temporary Protection Regulation is also modeled directly on the EU's Temporary Protection Directive.¹⁰

Due to Turkey's geographical limitation, many accounts of Turkish asylum policies emphasize the 'selective protection' provided to European compared to non-European refugees (see, for example, Amnesty International, 1994, Frelick, 1997, Kirişci, 1991, Zieck, 2010). Moreover, recent legal and bureaucratic changes have been interpreted by scholars as evidence of Europeanization of asylum and migration policies in Turkey (see Bürgin and Aşıkoglu, 2017,

stopped at the border, and that asylum-seekers be prevented from crossing over into Turkey,' unless there were 'political decisions taken to the contrary.' Article 11 specified that asylum-seekers and refugees be sheltered 'as close as possible to the border.' The Asylum Regulation also established two 'parallel tracks' for status determination of non-Europeans, one domestic and one conducted by UNHCR. The Ministry of Interior would conduct first-instance status determination interviews, then UNHCR would determine whether asylum-seekers qualified for protection and attempted to find a resettlement possibility for them (Zieck, 2010, Kirişci, 1996a, Frelick, 1997, Latif, 2002).

¹⁰ Still, the Temporary Protection Regulation departs from the EU directive on which it is modeled: there is no right to apply for individual asylum, it does not clearly enumerate the rights people are entitled to, it contains no time limitation, and the return procedure is left unclear.

Demiryontar, 2016). Kirişci (2012) argues that these legal reforms are evidence of socialization with European standards, especially since the bureaucrats involved in drafting the new laws received some training in Europe.

In contrast, my analysis in this paper reveals that Turkish policies are more nuanced. A simple dichotomy between European and non-European refugees is too blunt and can be misleading. Even seemingly general policies that exist on the books are applied selectively, a pattern that betrays the influence of foreign policy and ethnic politics on Turkey's asylum policies. Despite significant legal and bureaucratic developments in the country, Turkey's choice of the guest label reveals the influence of these underlying political trends on Turkish policy-making on refugees.¹¹

Syrian 'Guests' in Turkey

After 250 Syrians crossed into Turkey's Hatay province in April 2011, then Foreign Minister Davutoğlu announced that Turkey was prepared to admit Syrians 'who were not happy at their homes.' Syrian nationals were not required to obtain a visa to Turkey, under the terms of a Bilateral Visa Agreement. Turkey began setting up refugee camps in September, and the number of Syrians fleeing across the border jumped the following year (Ilgit and Davis, 2013). Partly to maintain control over these camps, Turkey initially refused offers of external aid (International Crisis Group, 2014). It also does not permit Syrians to register with UNHCR. The most recent figures put the number of Syrians in Turkey at 3.6 million. Only about 4% of Syrians live in the

¹¹ Indeed some scholars, like Şirin Öner and Genç (2015), have questioned how 'new' this 'new asylum regime' for Syrians really is. For Kırılıcı (2019), 'the adoption and implementation of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection did not make any significant change but generally formalized existing practices.'

13 temporary accommodation centers (TACs). The vast majority reside among ordinary Turks, predominantly in southeast Turkey and in large cities (UNHCR, 2019a).

Though the term does not exist in Turkish law, government officials consistently referred to Syrians as guests. In July 2014, Erdoğan clarified that ‘Sooner or later our Syrian guests will return to their homes’ (Taştan and Keneş, 2019). AFAD, the government organization tasked with camp construction and administration, used this label in its website and publications. One of their reports featured several government officials using this term in late 2014: Deputy Prime Minister Atalay, AFAD President Oktay, and Minister of Justice Ergin (AFAD, 2014). Taştan and Keneş (2019) document the use of this label, noting that opposition politicians adopted similar rhetoric, with Republican People’s Party (CHP) leader Kılıçdaroğlu and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Bahçeli criticizing the welcome extended to ‘Syrian guests’.

By all accounts, Turkey initially anticipated a rapid resolution to the uprising in Syria, with Syrians repatriating soon thereafter. Only in 2015 were there public acknowledgements that Syrians might stay in Turkey for an extended period. In September of that year, Deputy Prime Minister Kurtulmuş acknowledged that most Syrians would remain in Turkey and the government would work on integrating them. In December 2015, then Prime Minister Davutoğlu invoked a concept of ‘temporary permanence’ (International Crisis Group, 2016).

Still, as Bélanger and Saraçoğlu (2019) emphasize in their roundup of the literature on Syrian refugees in Turkey, Syrians’ ‘ambiguous legal status’ and their restricted access to work permits and social services has given rise to significant precarity (see also Kıvılcım, 2019, Korkut, 2016, Şenses, 2016). Temporary protection status allows Syrians access to some rights, but does not

provide long-term stability (Baban et al., 2017). While there are recent indications of efforts to integrate Syrians into Turkish society, these remain limited (Dadouch, 2019).

Indeed, as early as March 2012, then Prime Minister Erdoğan was already calling for the establishment of a ‘safe haven’ inside Syria (Ilgit and Davis, 2013). This appeal recalls the safe haven established in northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War, to which Turkey rapidly repatriated hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds. Turkey has continued its calls for the establishment of a safe zone along the Turkish-Syrian border, and has indicated its willingness to set one up alone if necessary (Özkızılcık, 2019).

Turkey’s asylum policies are clearly linked to foreign policy considerations. Bélanger and Saraçoğlu (2019) emphasize the link between Turkey’s responses to Syrian refugees and the role the country has taken in the Syrian civil war.¹² Turkey has provided political and military support to groups opposing Assad’s regime; the open-door policy initially allowed opposition fighters, alongside refugees, to cross the border. Sizeable and high-profile military defections to Turkey helped discredit the Assad regime and erode his army. Turkey expected that – following Assad’s quick fall – it would play a leading role in the country’s reconstruction, ensuring that a Sunni-dominated post-Assad Syria would align itself with the ruling Justice and Development Party’s (AKP) neo-Ottomanist orientation.

At the same time, Turkey’s asylum policies are shaped by domestic politics related to religious identity. The Turkish Republic was established on a secular ideology of Turkishness, but religious identity took on new prominence starting in the 2000s. Saraçoğlu and Demirkol (2015)

¹² Of course, the agreement reached between Turkey and the EU in March 2016 also involves the use of refugees to accomplish foreign policy goals (in this case, visa liberalization and an acceleration of accession negotiations). See Memişoğlu and Ilgit (2017).

document how the AKP has advanced the majority Sunni-Muslim identity as a central component of their conception of nation and nationalism. Erdoğan's repeated references to *muhacir* (Muslims who fled Mecca to Medina to escape religious persecution) and *ensar* (the people of Medina who welcomed them) with regards to Syrian refugees fit squarely within this orientation. For example, speaking in Kilis in 2016, President Erdoğan said:

Ensar and Muhacir, all of my brothers and sisters who are here now are well aware of what the homeland is all about. I say all the time, I repeat once more that as our country, our official borders are different, our heart borders are different. Our heart borders embrace the place where everybody we see as brothers and sisters live. Therefore, I would say to our guests from Syria; We see you as our brothers and sisters, and if you see us so, you are not far from your homeland, only from your house, from your land. Turkey is your country too. (qtd. in Gulmez, 2018)

Secularists and minorities also fear that the AKP is using Syrian refugees to alter Turkey's demographic balance and consolidate a Sunni national identity. Erdoğan's declaration in July 2016 that citizenship would be granted to Syrian refugees fueled concerns that the AKP was trying to stack the electoral deck in its favor (International Crisis Group, 2016). When Syrians poured into the streets to protest the failed coup in July 2016, it appeared that Erdoğan had successfully cultivated a large group who were grateful to him and his party. Journalistic interviews with Syrians naturalized under the aforementioned scheme indicate that they are likely to vote for Erdoğan, even if they otherwise disagree with his policies, because they fear the opposition's hardline stance on refugees from Syria (Smith, 2018).¹³ In this way, Turkey's foreign policy orientation and the AKP's nationalist project are mutually reinforcing.

¹³ At least 53,000 Syrians were eligible to vote in local elections as of January 2019. ('Over 53,000 Syrians to Vote in Turkey's Elections: Minister', 2019)

Meanwhile, Turkey's tone has been decidedly different regarding Kurdish refugees from Syria. The siege of Kobane by the Islamic State in 2014 led to an inflow of ethnic Kurds into Turkey, prompting Deputy Prime Minister Arınç to say:

We have always embraced those who escaped for their lives. Now, if a similar wave brings Kurds from north of Syria to Turkey, this can be devastation for Turkey both materially and spiritually. Therefore we need to provide security for them in their own territory as much as possible. (qtd. in Polat, 2018)

Of course, Turkey's central government has long discriminated against the country's sizeable ethnic Kurdish minority. It is certain that the Turkish government's wariness of its domestic ethnic Kurd outgroup shaped this response. Indeed, Turkey has tightened its border controls since March 2015 to block Kurdish fighters as well as Islamic State militants.

To summarize, Turkey admitted Syrian refugees, allowed them to reside outside camps, and permitted them limited access to social services. A small number of them have even been granted Turkish citizenship. However, their status remained ambiguous and precarious: government officials referred to them as guests, refusing UNHCR involvement and, at times, calling for the establishment of a safe haven inside Syria where they could be returned. Turkey's response to these refugees appears to be linked to the country's foreign policy orientation vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war, namely its opposition to Assad and its preferred vision for a post-Assad Syria. At the same time, the AKP may be using Syrians to consolidate an increasingly religious, Sunni national identity in Turkey. The guest label has also enabled Turkey to single out Kurdish refugees from Syria for harsher treatment, in line with Turkey's enduring persecution of its own ethnic Kurdish minority.

Much of the existing literature on Syrians in Turkey does not consider the country's responses to previous refugee influxes. As the following section demonstrates, the ways that Turkey has responded to Syrian refugees are strikingly similar to the ways it has responded to some previous refugee groups. For example, temporary protection was offered as far back as 1988, before there was a regulation formalizing it. The long-term trend is that the government creates a separate status for certain classes or groups of people on the move. Because it is not a formal legal status, the guest label provides Turkey with a freedom to maneuver, flexibility for ad-hoc responses, and the ability to opt in and out of international legal obligations according to this selective inclusion and exclusion.

In line with these patterns, Taner Kılıç, chairman of the board for the Association for Solidarity for Refugees has said: 'If not used as a result of a lack of knowledge, it means [the term 'guest'] was used deliberately and insistently for manipulation purposes. Perhaps the aim was to cover all the costs of Syrians taking refuge in Turkey and treat them in any manner that was deemed appropriate' (qtd. in Toğral Koca, 2016).

Turkey's Previous Refugee 'Guests'

Below, I analyze Turkey's responses to other refugee groups: Iraqis, Bosnians and Kosovars, and Chechens. This analysis reveals a long-term trend in Turkey, whereby the guest label has been deployed to maintain a freedom to maneuver in the face of external and internal pressures. By placing these refugee groups outside of the normal operation of legal regulations, the guest label enabled Turkey to favor some refugee groups who were considered kin or fleeing hostile countries (Iraqi Turkmen, Bosnians, and Kosovars), while poorly treating others who were ethnic others or fleeing friendly countries (Iraqi Kurds and Chechens). Given the marked similarities in

Turkish responses to Syrians and these previous refugee groups, this historical analysis shows that recent legal developments may not be as consequential as they appear.

The analysis below relies on archival research that I conducted at the UNHCR Archives in Geneva, Switzerland. The documents in these archives detail the Agency's activities in countries around the world between 1951 and 1994, and are comprised largely of correspondence between UNHCR's Branch Office in Turkey and the Agency's headquarters in Geneva. Specifically, I focused on Series 1 to 3 of Fonds 11 and examined folders related to UNHCR's External Relations, Specific Refugee Situations, Eligibility, Accreditation, and Administration and Finance in Turkey. I consulted 26 folders and collected over 3,300 document images in English, French, and German, looking for evidence of the determinants of Turkish refugee policies. I also draw on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012 with policymakers and representatives of relevant organizations in Ankara and Istanbul.¹⁴

Iraqis

There are several parallels between Turkey's treatment of Iraqis in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and their more recent responses to Syrians: the use of camps and their designation as 'temporary accommodation centers'; the initial refusal of offers of international assistance and the resistance to UNHCR involvement; and the calls for the establishment of a 'safe zone' on the other side of the border. In the same way that Turkey has varied its treatment across Syrian ethnic groups, it similarly treated Iraqi Turkmen more generously than Iraqi Kurds. Unlike

¹⁴ I conducted 21 interviews in total, but cite only a small selection in this paper where relevant. I sought to speak to the heads of organizations and government agencies that UNHCR designates as implementing and operational partners in Turkey. These interviews attempted to discern official policy and the reasons behind its adoption. Interviews involved questions on the individual's background and his/her organization's work; the conditions of refugees with which the individual/organization works; the country's official stance on refugees, legislation, and implementation; and the interviewee's assessment of the sources of asylum policy.

Iraqis, however, Syrians appear to have benefitted from higher quality camps. They have also not experienced a similar rush towards repatriation. Though they all ought to have similar legal status as non-Europeans, guesthood enabled Turkey to favor refugees who are ethnic kin (Iraqi Turkmen and Syrian non-Kurds) over those considered ethnic others (Iraqi and Syrian Kurds), resulting in a better experience for most Syrians compared to most Iraqis.

When Saddam launched an assault in northern Iraq in August 1988, some 50,000 Kurds who feared a repeat of the Halabja massacre began streaming across the border into Turkey. The Prime Minister quickly announced that Turkey would open its borders. Although they were received with much publicity and at great expense, Turkish officials preferred to refer to these asylum-seekers as ‘temporary guests’ or ‘peshmergas’ (Kurdish fighters). They were restricted to three closely-monitored ‘temporary accommodation centers’ (TACs) in Diyarbakır-Yenikent, Mardin-Kızıltepe, and Muş-Yenikent, with the expectation that their presence in Turkey would only be temporary (Latif, 2002, Kirişçi, 2000, Kirişçi, 1991, Kaynak, 1992). Though they were Sunni-Muslim like the majority in Turkey, Kurds lacked an ethnic tie with Turks.

Attempts to provide them with international assistance were largely rejected by the Turkish authorities. UNHCR had ‘every day repeated our offer of assistance in whatever way [the] government might find appropriate.’¹⁵ The Agency was permitted to conduct an ‘unofficial preliminary assessment visit’ to refugee sites, but was told to ‘keep [a] low profile ...’¹⁶ This resistance to international assistance persisted despite UNHCR assurances that it would ‘in no

¹⁵ Stefan Berglund [Deputy UNHCR Representative in Turkey] to Head, Desk I, Regional Bureau for Europe and North America, 1 September 1988, *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume A], Folio 7.

¹⁶ UNHCR Branch Office in Ankara to Head, Desk I, Regional Bureau for Europe and North America, 11 September 1988, *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume A], Folio 12.

way affect nor create a precedent for use against Turkey's position vis-à-vis the geographical limitation.'¹⁷ According to an internal UNHCR briefing note, the government 'declared they [Iraqi Kurds] were not of UNHCR's competence' due to 'political and international sensitivities surrounding the Kurdish question.'¹⁸

Conditions in the Iraqi Kurdish refugee camps were grim. Member of the German parliament, Angelika Beer, visited the camps in 1989. She described the living conditions as 'completely unbearable.' The Diyarbakır camp was 'filled beyond capacity' and sanitary conditions there were 'dire.' Living conditions at Mardin camp were 'completely catastrophic' with 'few water sources,' refugees 'exposed to extreme climate conditions,' and 'completely inadequate' medical care. Beer continued, '[t]o describe the sanitary conditions as scandalous or acutely health-jeopardizing would be an understatement.' Both camps housed refugees 'in prison-like conditions ... surrounded by barbed wire and patrolled by armed soldiers of the Turkish army.' As a result, the Iraqi Kurds lived 'in constant fear and uncertainty of being sent back to Iraq.'¹⁹

At the time, the relationship between Turkey and Iraq had been cordial. However, the 1990-1991 Gulf War worsened relations, as Turkey participated in the war and enforced sanctions on Iraq. With hundreds of thousands of Kurds attempting to escape the Iraqi military's crackdown in April 1991, the Turkish National Security Council initially decided to seal the country's borders. A letter was sent to the UN Security Council describing the situation as a threat to

¹⁷ UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva to Turkish Permanent Mission in Geneva, 25 October 1988, 'The Recent Influx into Turkey of Tens of Thousands of Iraqi National of Kurdish Origin who were Granted Asylum and Generously Assisted by the Turkish Authorities,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume A].

¹⁸ 5 March 1991, 'Briefing Note for the HC's Meeting with the Turkish Permanent Representative,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 10 TUR External Relations - Relations with Governments - Turkey [Volume B], Folio 31.

¹⁹ Angelika Beer [Member of the German Parliament], 12 June 1989, 'Anmerkungen zu einem Besuch in den Flüchtlingslagern der irakischen Kurden in der Türkei,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume B], Folio 330A.

international peace and security. The government had decided not to repeat what it saw as its 'mistake' in 1988 and may have been concerned about infiltration by the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). However, the Turkish military found it impossible to enforce the border closure and some 460,000 asylum-seekers poured in by mid-April (Latif, 2002, Frelick, 1997, Kaynak, 1992). At the same time, Turkish authorities convened a meeting of UN agencies to announce that they had decided 'to move all refugees back across the border into Iraq.'²⁰

Turkish President Özal called for the creation of a security zone on the Iraqi side of the border, where asylum-seekers could reside. May 3 saw the beginning of an extraordinarily rapid repatriation of these asylum-seekers to the safe haven north of the 36th parallel. By the end of May, the fewer than 14,000 who remained in Turkey were taken to Şırnak-Silopi pilgrimage accommodations. On 29 October 1991, only 4,000 asylum-seekers who had entered in April 1991 were still in Turkey. The total number of Iraqis from all influxes who remained in Turkey stood at around 25,000. The majority of those who did not want to be repatriated were later resettled in third countries (Latif, 2002, Kaynak, 1992, Kirişci, 2001).

In contrast with Kurds who lacked an ethnic tie with Turks, Turkmens were ethnic kin. When 50,000 Turkmen refugees entered Turkey as part of the mass influx from northern Iraq in 1991, they were permitted to reside in a special camp away from the border (and from the predominantly Kurdish refugees). Many were provided with residence permits (Kirişci, 1991, Kirişci, 1996b, Kirişci, 2000). Four years prior, some Iraqi asylum-seekers entering Turkey

²⁰ Daniel E. Conway, 11 April 1991, 'Gulf Emergency,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 10 TUR External Relations - Relations with Governments - Turkey [Volume B], Folio 34.

claimed to be of Turkmen origin ‘for fear of being deported’ by Turkish authorities. This situation necessitated UNHCR interviews ‘to identify ethnic Kurds among [that] group.’²¹

To summarize, Turkey designated ethnic Kurds from Iraq in 1988 as temporary guests. It refused international assistance and encamped them in difficult conditions while seeking their return or resettlement. After failing to keep its border closed in the face of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Kurds in 1991, Turkey successfully pushed for the creation of a security zone on the Iraqi side of the border where they could reside. Concerns about Kurdish separatism appear to have influenced Turkey’s responses in both cases, given the Turkish government distrust of Turkey’s own Kurdish minority. In contrast, Turkmen refugees from Iraq were considered ethnic kin and granted residence permits.

Bosnians and Kosovars

Guesthood for Bosnians and Kosovars in the 1990s was remarkably similar to Syrians’ more recent experiences in Turkey. As with Syrians, Bosnians and Kosovars were fleeing a government considered hostile by Turkey. In both cases, refugees were able to take advantage of visa-free entry, reside in urban areas, and access public services. The duration of these conflicts is different, of course, with Bosnians and Kosovars having been able to repatriate within the span of a few years. Still, with Bosnians and Kosovars, the guest label rendered them exempt from the usual rules and norms of refugee treatment in Turkey.

²¹ UNHCR Branch Office in Ankara to UNHCR Headquarters in Geneva, 2 September 1987, ‘Concerning Refugee Situation Kayseri,’ *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR IRQ Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Iraq in Turkey [Volume A], Folio 4.

Starting in March and April 1992, over 20,000 Bosnian Muslims fled to Turkey. Though Bosnians were European, Turkish officials declined to grant them refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention. Although they were not considered ethnic Turks, the 1934 Law on Settlement (No. 2510) – which permits individuals of ‘Turkish descent and culture’ to immigrate to Turkey, settle permanently, and obtain the country’s citizenship – had been interpreted to cover Bosnians in the past, but it was not applied either. Despite pressure from Bosnian immigrant associations, the government considered them ‘guests’ and gave them only informal temporary protection (Latif, 2002, Frantz, 2003, Kirişci, 1996b, Kirişci, 2001). Whereas refugee status would have permitted them to work, they could not obtain work permits as ‘guests.’²²

The Bosnian War in 1992-1995 had soured Turkey’s relations with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, as Turkey adopted an embargo, froze assets, closed its airspace, recalled its ambassador, and helped enforce a no-fly zone over Bosnia. Still, under an agreement between Turkey and Yugoslavia, citizens of the latter could receive visa waivers for stays of up to two months. As a result, Bosnians were able to enter Turkey as tourists using their Yugoslav passports. Their stay was automatically extended for up to six months, and they could obtain renewable residence permits. Starting in November 1992, Bosnians were able to use Turkish hospitals and schools. Many stayed with family members in Istanbul, while others were housed in refugee camps. These were officially run by the Turkish government, although the Anatolian Development Foundation (a Turkish NGO and UNHCR implementing partner) was actively involved in managing them. Only 3,000 formally applied for asylum and the vast majority were

²² UNHCR Branch Office in Ankara to UNHCR Branch Office in Zagreb, 21 April 1994, *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 3, 100 TUR BSN Refugee Situations - Special Groups of Refugees - Refugees from Bosnia in Turkey.

repatriated after the Dayton Agreement was signed at the end of 1995 (Amnesty International, 1994, Kirişci, 1996b, Frantz, 2003, Kirişci, 2001).

During the Kosovo War in 1998-1999, Turkey supported North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) action and contributed troops to the Kosovo Force. When about 18,000 Kosovars entered Turkey, they too were labeled 'guests' rather than refugees. They were admitted as tourists and issued with six-month residence permits. The majority lived in urban centers, with others staying at Kırklareli camp (formally, Gazi Osman Paşa Immigrant Guesthouse). This camp, at which Bosnians had also resided, was managed by the Turkish Red Crescent and received UNHCR-funded relief via the Anatolian Development Foundation. Similar provisions applied to a group of Albanians relocated from Macedonia as part of the Humanitarian Evacuation Program. Like the Bosnians, the vast majority of Kosovars were repatriated, or else resettled (Kirişci, 2001, Frantz, 2003).

To sum up, Bosnian and Kosovar refugees fleeing a hostile government were permitted to enter Turkey, to reside where they wished, and to access public schools and hospitals. However, they were not granted refugee status nor was the 1934 Settlement Law applied to them. Ultimately, the majority repatriated or were resettled.

Chechens

As it did initially with Syrians, Turkey refused to allow UNHCR to assist Chechen refugees. In this case, the guest label was used to sidestep Turkey's legal obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and to keep Chechens in a condition of neglect. Chechens were fleeing a friendly country, and were considered ethnic non-kin, providing few incentives for the Turkish government to extend them a warm welcome.

The 'guest' label has not just been limited to mass influxes. Refugees fleeing the Second Chechen War starting 1999 were sometimes denied admission and uniformly excluded from refugee status determination procedures. In February 2000, a hundred Chechens appeared at the Turkish-Georgian border. The Turkish government insisted that they remain in Georgia and pledged to provide them with humanitarian assistance. In 2003, there were about two thousand Chechens living in Istanbul without residence permits. UNHCR had been forbidden from making contact with or assisting them, as were NGOs. The Turkish government may have wanted to avoid the repetition of previous charges by Russia that it was harboring Chechen rebels (Kirişci, 2001, Frantz, 2003, Kirişci, 1996a). In addition, Chechens were considered ethnic others in Turkey.

Chechens ought to be considered 'European' under the 1951 Convention, since Russia is a member of the Council of Europe. Despite this, they were denied access to status determination procedures. According to Amnesty International, of the one thousand Chechens in Turkey in 2009, not one had been recognized as a refugee. Rather, officials at the Istanbul Directorate of Security refused to receive their asylum applications. Instead, the Ministry of Interior designated them as 'guests' who may receive resident permits and remain in the country temporarily. The community also faced detentions at times 'when their presence was politically sensitive,' such as during a 2004 visit by President Vladimir Putin to Turkey (Republic of Turkey, 1988).

Turkey and Russia enjoyed a warm relationship and signed trade and defense agreements during the 2000s. Several interviewees stressed the influence of bilateral Turkey-Russia relations on the treatment of Chechens in Turkey. One NGO worker explained that Turkey 'does not want to process [asylum applications from] Chechens' because of concerns about its relationship with

Russia.²³ An expert at the Ministry of Interior's Migration and Asylum Bureau also emphasized that, despite Russia's membership of the Council of Europe, Chechens were not granted refugee status due to 'political reasons' linked to 'Turkey-Russia relations.'²⁴

On several previous occasions, Turkey had claimed that the Refugee Convention did not apply to refugees from the Soviet Union. In 1962, the country refused to recognize Hungarians as refugees, on the pretext that they had fled their country after 1951 (the date of the Convention).²⁵

Three years later, Russian refugees were denied recognition because they were seen as having fled 'events outside Europe.'²⁶ According to Turkish diplomats, these 'hesitations' in granting refugee status stemmed from a desire 'to avoid anything that might lead to international tension.' Turkey preferred that 'the matter ... be solved in a pragmatic way.'²⁷

In short, after the end of the Cold War and as relations with Russia became cordial, Chechens were refused refugee status. In some cases, Turkey refused admission to Chechens appearing at the border. Otherwise, the government refused to accept their asylum applications. Instead, these ethnic others were designated as 'guests' who may remain in the country temporarily. UNHCR and NGOs were forbidden from assisting Chechens, who also occasionally experienced detention. As detailed above, interviewees from NGOs as well as from within the Turkish government have attributed this pattern to Turkey's desire to avoid antagonizing Russia.

²³ NGO worker. Personal interview by author. Istanbul, Turkey, February 2, 2012.

²⁴ Expert, Migration and Asylum Bureau, Ministry of Interior. Personal interview by author. Ankara, Turkey, February 21, 2012.

²⁵ A. Prince sur Lippe [Representative in Turkey of the UNHCR] to A. Inhan [Deputy Director General, Ministry of Foreign Affairs], 5 November 1962, *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 1, Box 348, 22/1 TUR Eligibility - Turkey, Folio 22.

²⁶ E. Jahn to P. Weis, 14 April 1965, 'Protection Turkey - Report on Mission 19-20 March 1965,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 1, Box 348, 22/1 TUR Eligibility - Turkey, Folio 45.

²⁷ 17 May 1966, 'Note on Discussions with Mr. Idiz, Ankara, and Mr. Sirman of the Turkish Delegation in Geneva on 17 May 1966,' *UNHCR Archives*, Fonds 11, Series 1, Box 348, 22/1 TUR Eligibility - Turkey, Folio 47.

Conclusion

The Syrian crisis is unprecedented for Turkey in terms of sheer size of the displaced population. However, as the analysis above demonstrates, the guest label has a long history in Turkey. As with the Syrians, Turkey refused international assistance for Iraqi Kurds who arrived in the late 1980s, calling them ‘guests’ and placing them in ‘temporary accommodation centers,’ and advocating (successfully in that case) for the establishment of a safe haven to which they could be returned. Bosnians and Kosovars who fled to Turkey during the 1990s were also designated as guests, receiving remarkably similar treatment to that accorded to Syrians today. Even a far smaller number of Chechens who arrived in Turkey starting in 1999 were called guests and excluded from UNHCR’s competence. In each case, the guest label was used to maintain a freedom to maneuver in the face of external and internal pressures.

Though both groups were European and technically eligible for similar protection under Turkey’s geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Bosnians were treated far more favorably than Chechens. Syrians have received a much warmer welcome than Iraqis, although both groups are non-Europeans. All Syrians ought to qualify for temporary protection, but Turkey shut out ethnic Kurds in particular. In similar fashion, Iraqi Kurds experienced harsher treatment than their Turkmen compatriots.

The ‘guest’ label enabled the government to vary its treatment across groups who would otherwise belong to the same legal status, treating some better than others. Since it is not codified in Turkey’s laws, guesthood is not a formal legal status. Rather, it is the label’s legal ambiguity that renders it useful to Turkish authorities. Labeling certain refugee groups as guests

enables government officials to ‘de-legalize’ their claims to protection and assistance, emphasizing Turkey’s hospitality instead.

In each case, Turkey’s responses appear to have been influenced by foreign policy and ethnic politics. Turkey’s treatment of Syrian refugees has been shaped by its anti-Assad stance, as well as the AKP’s affinity with the predominantly Sunni Syrians. The government’s persecution of Turkey’s own ethnic Kurdish minority is linked with the singling out of Iraqi (and Syrian) Kurdish refugees for harsher treatment. Bosnian and Kosovar refugees, fleeing a hostile government, were treated similarly to Syrians. Chechens were shunned, at least in part, in order to avoid antagonizing friendly Russia. The ‘guest’ label gave Turkey the flexibility to treat each refugee group in line with its specific foreign policy and domestic political considerations, rather than uniformly applying a single set of formal laws across all refugee arrivals.

In the final analysis, do these labels matter? Clearly, Turkey’s government seems to have been careful in their application. Moreover, the emphasis on hospitality and charity, rather than legal obligations and rights, reinforces Syrians’ precarity. The labels that have been used for Syrians, and other refugee groups before them, shed light on the long-term continuities in Turkish policy towards ‘refugees,’ ‘asylum-seekers,’ and ‘temporary guests.’

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