

Evolving Roles and Regulations: The Role of International Ngos in Türkiye's Response to the Syrian Crisis

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Abstract

Dating back to 2011, the Syrian civil war caused one of the greatest crises in modern history, with over 3 million Syrians seeking refuge in Türkiye. Through an open-door policy, Türkiye guided the crisis with emergency relief response, which later resulted in more emerging needs; structured, long-term integration strategies. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) were one of the main actors who took their roles during this shift. With their increasing involvement, particularly in education, healthcare, and employment, Türkiye took this as an opportunity. Intensification of the crisis introduced the society in Türkiye new legal and administrative frameworks to regulate INGO operations. Türkiye paved a way for INGOs to formalize their participation through *2013 Law on Foreigners* and *International Protection and the Temporary Protection Law*. Through these actions, partnerships with government institutions like the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), now the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) were initiated. Followed by these steps, the *2015 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)* and the *2016 EU-Türkiye Deal* significantly expanded INGO engagement. These initiatives created a new phase for the humanitarian efforts in Türkiye, merging it with development goals together with the public institutions, emphasizing resilience and integration. Being emergency actors, INGOs found themselves as key partners in Türkiye's refugee response. Considering regulatory barriers and political sensitivities, INGOs have still created an atmosphere where their vital role in managing both short-term humanitarian needs and long-term integration efforts solidified their place in Türkiye's migration governance framework.

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1. INTRODUCTION

No one could have predicted that the escalation of the crisis in Syria in 2011 would evolve into one of the most protracted and complex crises in the modern history. With the involvement of regional and international actors, Syria found itself in a never-ending multidimensional quagmire. As of 2014, more than 3 million Syrian people plunged into a huge displacement perplexity by seeking refuge in mostly neighboring countries, such as Türkiye, Lebanon and Egypt. While those neighboring countries proceeded to carry on the biggest responsibility on this unpredictable refugee influx, Türkiye's open-door policy allowed Syrian people to cross border with relative ease. While the numbers kept increasing, it grew into Türkiye's realization into its need in specialized policies and a more organized structure to manage the refugee influx in terms of longer-term support mechanisms and their integration into the Turkish society. Recognizing the severe conditions, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) launched several projects and programs through different initiatives to address humanitarian challenges posed by large scale displacement. The European Union (EU), in particular, was one of the key actors in this regard as it took its major part in For Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT) Agreement, known as EU-Türkiye Deal². The 6 billion Euro Funding Deal between the EU and Türkiye was directed at the enhancement in the situations of Syrian people in Türkiye by supporting refugee-related programs, specifically taking into consideration the integration and basic needs matters and the enhanced border controls to prevent irregular migration to Europe.

In this article, I will delve into Türkiye's evolving regulations regarding the INGOs by addressing the multifaceted needs as well as taking into consideration the Turkish Government's main role as a primary actor which was to manage the refugee influx through DGMM, currently known as the Presidency of Migration Management (PMM). In the later stage, I would like to take more time on the increasing role of international NGOs after the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and EU-Türkiye³ Deal.

2. TÜRKİYE'S EVOLVING REGULATIONS REGARDING THE INGOS

It is a well-established fact that international non-governmental organizations have stood as a crucial part of society as an auxiliary role to governments. The increasing number and effect of INGOs across world

2 Carriages preview | Legislative Train Schedule

3 It is now recognized as Türkiye.

in international relations and world politics are a strong validation to the above-mentioned point. Beyer (2007) highlights this importance, noting that while there were about 1,000 international NGOs in the 1950s, there were roughly 30,000 worldwide then.

In this regard, I would like to reflect on the early years of the Syrian refugee crisis, where Türkiye's response was most notably marked by emergency relief efforts to elevate the urging needs through the provision of shelter, food, and healthcare by the efforts of Turkish government who had taken the lead since then. In due course, with the escalation of the crisis, support from the international organizations grew as one of the priorities in specifically access to education, employment, and social services as it became discernible that there was intensifying urgencies in the country since INGOs not only focused on immediate humanitarian needs but joined in the long-term plannings together with the governmental organizations as well. Despite initial apprehension, Türkiye eventually acknowledged the need for INGOs' resources in critical sectors like healthcare, education, and livelihoods.

INGOs increasingly contributed to long-term planning and capacity building alongside governmental institutions. Their involvement in sectors such as education and employment reflected a recognition that the Syrian refugee crisis was not a temporary emergency but a protracted situation requiring comprehensive, sustainable solutions. The Turkish government's recognition of a more sustained international support paved a way to a shift in Türkiye's policy toward international NGOs. As MDPI (2024) shows that the Turkish government has demonstrated an ambivalent policy response, shaped by a preference for controlling its own borders and limiting the influence of external actors like the EU and international organizations. This ambivalent approach may be a sign for sovereignty concerns, perceived risk to national security and an increasing focus on localization efforts. Nevertheless, Türkiye's austere approach had been mitigated by time, leading to an acknowledgement the value of the external expertise and recourses, notably in the education, healthcare and livelihoods sectors. Due to the integration of the iNGOs, Türkiye orchestrated a series of regulatory frameworks in addition to the existing ones. Alongside this, another critical point here is Türkiye's snap audit activities, making instant interviews with the iNGOs' staff in order to ascertain that money going to Syria in an informal way was made in the right way possible since there was no formal oversighting tool due to the absent banking system in Syria (Heller, 2017). Even though there has been a law in force since 2004 under the name of Associations Law, it remained concise during the early years of Syrian crisis

with respect to the iNGOs. To cover the persisting gaps in the Associations Law, Türkiye both facilitated and restricted the activities of iNGOs. State-led approach became Türkiye's main objective during this period. While simultaneously prioritizing the national interest, the local authorities directed the iNGOs to align their projects with the current context of Türkiye.

To strengthen its proposition, in 2013, Türkiye put in force the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which further legitimized the role of international organizations in the refugee response. Under this law, iNGOs were obligated to have formal cooperation agreements with the governmental agencies in place to affirm that their activities were in conformity with national development and humanitarian goals. In recognition of this policy, iNGOs were encouraged to work with the governmental institutions through a more structured partnership model rather than independently. Their direct partner in this regard was the DGMM which oversaw the legal and administrative procedures for refugees. Not only they were subject to governmental audits, but they needed necessary permits and authorizations to operate in Türkiye as well. Their money transactions were audited by more than one institution, Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through the *Guide to the Auditing of Associations (Derneklerin Denetlenmesine Dair Rehber)*⁴ published by the General Directorate of Civil Society Relations, Turkish Government have adopted an organized and formal procedures and principles on how associations should be monitored and to ensure transparency in their operations.

Moreover, Temporary Protection Law enacted in 2013 is another critical point regarding the management of iNGOs and their operations in Türkiye, specifically addressing the status and rights of Syrians seeking refuge in Türkiye. Beneficiaries of temporary protection were to be provided with protection and assistance in Türkiye, which included the right to stay in Türkiye until a more permanent solution was found for the situation, protection against forcible returns to Syria, as well as access to the most fundamental rights and needs (UNHCR, n.d.). Besides, the law inherently engaged iNGOs through collaboration opportunities in the provision of services to refugees, which aligned with Türkiye's proposition of the Syrian crisis mandate thanks to both governmental and non-governmental efforts.

4 Sivil Toplumla İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü: Derneklerin Denetlenmesine Dair Rehber - Sivil Sayfalar

3.THE INCREASING ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL NGOS
AFTER THE REGIONAL REFUGEE AND RESILIENCE
PLAN (3RP) AND THE EU-TURKIYE DEAL

As time progressed, the international community conceived a new approach to develop humanitarian responses and combine the aid to meet the challenges faced in the host countries. As a result, in 2015, the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), an integrated humanitarian and development plan in response to the Syria Crisis⁵, was implemented in 2015 and continues to be in effect to this day. Under the lead of UNHCR and UNDP, this strategic plan synthesized humanitarian and development objectives with the components of resilience, stabilization and development needs of impacted people and institutions. The 3RP has two interconnected components, protection and humanitarian, addressing the needs of refugees apart from the resilience, stabilization and development needs aiming to strengthen the capacities of national actors (UNHCR, n.d.). In Turkiye, the 3RP has been a part of the efforts to mobilize resources and collaborate across internal and external partners, where iNGOs have located in regions heavily affected by the influx of refugees. In this case, the 3RP, which is a comprehensive framework regarding the need of refugees and host communities, enables a platform to coordinate efforts more effectively through the engagement and collaboration of UN institutions and iNGOs.

Table 1.1: The table shows the distribution of work among the United Nations (UN) agencies.

Table 2
Segments of 3RP Turkey with their leading UN agency, national institution and responsibilities (3RP Turkey Country Chapter, 2020, pp. 17–79).

Sector	Leading UN agency	Main collaborating national institutions	Primary responsibilities
Basic needs	WFP and UNHCR	DGMM, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, Turkish Red Crescent	enhancing the living conditions of the most vulnerable members of refugee and host communities
Protection	UNHCR	DGMM, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services	legal protection under the Temporary Protection Regulation; child protection; reduction of sexual and gender-based violence
Education	UNICEF	Ministry of National Education, Ministry of Youth and Sports	providing quality and durable education for both Syrian and Turkish school-aged children;
Livelihoods	UNDP	Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, Turkish Employment Agency (ISKUR), Social Security Institution	improving livelihood opportunities both for refugee and host communities
Food security and Agriculture	FAO	Ministry of Agriculture, DGMM, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services	promoting food security among Syrian refugees and host communities; promoting self-employment and self-reliance
Health	WHO	Ministry of Health, Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services	reinforcing national health services; providing access to quality health care with a particular focus on most vulnerable social groups

5 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) | The Global Compact on Refugees | UNHCR

Comparably, the EU-Türkiye Deal, signed in 2016, set out to restrain the irregular migration and expedite the management of the continuous refugee crisis, particularly from Syria. With the fund coming from the EU-Türkiye Deal, specific mechanisms have been available to those in need, such as refugee protection, resettlement and financial support. An important aspect to consider is that iNGOs have also had great opportunities to strengthen their presence in Türkiye aligned with EU objectives. Expanding their operations, iNGOs have increased their participation in humanitarian projects together with the governmental institutions, which also resulted in capacity building opportunities for the local institutions. Within this framework, iNGOs have had a chance to reach out to the impacted regions in Türkiye and increased their impact by securing the critical support and facilitating long-term integration strategies under the Syria Crisis. Extended funding opportunities and involvement of multiple stakeholders enhanced the approach taken by the iNGOs. Not only actors involved in this process conceptualize platforms where host community and refugee population could get engaged in, but they had a chance to improve their coordination among internal and external actors as well as governmental institutions.

INGOs' involvement in Türkiye's refugee response was further solidified by the 3RP and the EU-Türkiye Deal. Development and resilience in addition to humanitarian help, giving INGOs, UN agencies, and the Turkish government developed a platform to work together more successfully. In a similar vein, the EU-Türkiye Deal's financial support mechanisms gave INGOs the means to grow their operations and support long-term refugee integration plans.

4.CONCLUSION

In the light of these events, the role of iNGOs in Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis has significantly moved from being an external actor to the main responders to the crisis. Initially providing emergency relief, iNGOs evolved into an indispensable actor in the region. Türkiye's efforts to manage the crisis and continuous refugee influx which had become more than 3 million in 2016 demanded more support and assistance from outside. Even though emergency relief such as food, non-food items, shelter and protection were the primary objective of all actors, this increasing demand highlighted the inadequacy of specialized policies and organized structures regarding the long-term support mechanisms.

As the situation escalated, the Turkish government, through its DGMM led the process of the integration of the displaced population into the

Turkish society which also provided iNGOs the opportunity of growth and their involvement in the sectors such as education, employment and healthcare, apart from their emergency relief efforts. Following five years of an open-door policy, Türkiye has reached equilibrium with regards to its Syrian population. With the EU-Türkiye Deal of March 2016, Türkiye had effectively stopped being a transit country (TEPAV, 2016). The understanding that Türkiye's Syrian refugee issue is far from "temporary" was internalized by all actors and institutions, and strategies geared at their long-term and sustainable integration were developed. During this period, iNGOs played a significant role with their expertise and resources necessary to address complicated needs beyond the government could handle. In this regard, the regulatory framework of Türkiye adjusted to the increasing number of iNGOs, acknowledging their significance while tightly regulating their activities to bring them into line with national objectives. This collaboration was codified by laws like the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which mandated that INGOs collaborate with government agencies.

In conclusion, iNGOs have emerged as important players in Türkiye's handling of the Syrian refugee crisis, providing vital assistance and services to support government initiatives. iNGOs have successfully navigated Türkiye's complicated political and social environment through changing laws and strategic alliances, enabling them to effectively address both short-term humanitarian crises and long-term development obstacles. iNGOs have been able to significantly improve the integration and well-being of refugees while upholding the nation's sovereignty and development objectives thanks to a combination of foreign assistance, especially through the 3RP and EU-Türkiye Deal, and Türkiye's regulatory framework.

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