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## The role of non-state actors (NSAs) regarding Syrian refugees in Mersin, Turkey

Barış Can Sever<sup>1</sup> and Mehmet Gökay Özerim<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*After the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Turkey undertook a prominent role by becoming the leading host country for Syrian refugees. The volume of the flow and the urgency of the refugees' situation have necessitated the involvement of several actors apart from the state. This study reveals and discusses the role of non-state actors in managing refugees through a field study on Syrians in the Turkish city of Mersin. The role of non-state actors in this process is analysed by discussing and presenting (i) their profiles, (ii) the major types of activities and services that they provide for refugees and; (iii) their contribution to integrating Syrians in Turkey.*

**Keywords:** non-state actors; Turkey; Syrians; refugees; NGOs.

### Introduction

Following the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Turkey undertook a prominent role by hosting around 3,6 million Syrians and becoming the leading host country for Syrian refugees (DGMM, 2019). Only around 3% of this population stay in official camps while most of them have been living outside of the camps in different provinces. The prolongation of the civil war has made the Syrians' stay permanent and beyond humanitarian aid, this process has created an urgent need for policies and activities towards integration (Unutulmaz et al., 2016). Simultaneously, and over a very short time, the crisis has also triggered efforts to institutionalize migration management in Turkey. Within this process, both due to the length of the crisis and the range of challenges, non-state actors (NSAs) have also become one of the remarkable complementary contributors to dealing with Syrians in Turkey. These NSAs are also worth analysing because of their roles in developing, implementing and monitoring policies and activities for refugees.

Based on this background, this study aims to reveal and analyse the role of NSAs in managing refugees through the case of Syrians in the southern Turkish city of Mersin. The first section discusses the concept of NSAs and the role of these actors in migratory movements. The remainder presents the findings of the field study conducted in Mersin. It analyses the role of NSAs by discussing and presenting (i) their profiles, (ii) the major types of activities and services that they provide for refugees and; (iii) their contribution to integrating Syrians in Turkey.

### NSAs and migratory movements

Transnational relations have gained much more importance with the intensive participation of NSAs in world politics during last three decades (Risse, 2002). According to Büthe (2004), the

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concept of “non-state actor” (NSA) includes actors like “international governmental organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multinational corporations, formal and informal transnational networks of government bureaucrats, general public (opinion), international professional associations and commercial lobbying groups, as well as international criminal and terrorist networks” (2004: 281). In addition, individuals, religious institutions and communities, trade unions, employers’ organizations, professional chambers, political parties and groups, media outlets, and other civil society actors can be included in the wide sphere of NSAs (Penninx, 2003).

Regarding migration issues, states have the ultimate authority to control their borders in accordance with nation-state sovereignty within the international system. This authority of states regarding nation-state sovereignty has ensured their dominance not only in policy-making regarding migratory movements but also settlement and integration of refugees and immigrants. Thus, states are powerful actors in matters of international migrations as they are responsible for “initiating, selecting, restraining, and ending international migration movements” (Teitelbaum, 2002: 157). However, it is also possible to observe the increasing involvement of NSAs in processes related to human flows while states remain dominant in decision-making processes regarding migratory movements. NSAs can take on diverse roles in managing migratory flows. These include providing services for refugees and migrants, advocacy, consultancy, lobbying to shape norms and policies about migrants and refugees both at a global and also a state level, working for transparency and accountability, social protection and research (IOM, 2016: 47). While these non-state actors can provide supplementary support to state activities, they can also contribute to emergency aid for refugees and their integration. Integration concerns the interplay between refugees and local actors, and comprises various aspects, such as cultural, social, economic, religious and legal dimensions (IOM, 2008). Moreover, it is a dynamic process that requires the participation of the whole society (Läärä, 2012: 47) and IOM defines integration as “the process of mutual adaptation between the host society and the migrant” (IOM, 2017). Therefore, the involvement of diverse actors is critical for successful integration and the role of these actors varies according to their engagement with the refugees. Without the effective participation of NSAs in addition to state authorities, integration is unlikely to function properly. NSAs can help to provide links between the local community and migrants. As a result, NSAs have become accepted as part of the global migration governance today because, in many cases, they can provide quicker and more flexible migration management than states (IOM, 2016:47).

Yet, despite the emerging importance of these actors, adequately specific and theoretical debates are lacking on the roles of NSAs in managing migratory movements of both immigrants and refugees. Only a few studies have focused on specific regions or countries and different types of non-state actors. For instance, Lopez Sala and Godenau (2016) identified NSAs, particularly NGOs, as part of the migration industry in the case of Spain. Nassali (2015) studied the role of NSAs in refugee social protection in Uganda while Laubenthal (2008) analysed the role of economic NSAs in shaping labour migration policies in Germany. Lahav (2003) discussed the role of these actors based on the migration-security nexus in liberal democracies while Dean and Nagashima (2007) discussed the role of NGOs in protecting asylum seekers in Japan. Another prominent area for discussing the role of NSAs is EU migration policies and practices. For instance, Irrera (2016) analysed the role of NGOs in the EU’s SAR (rescue) operations while Menz (2011) investigated the impact of NSAs on the Europeanization of migration policies.

Regarding Turkey, and Syrians in particular, the number of academic studies about the role of NSAs in migration issues is still limited. Fieldwork on the issue is lacking and analytical academic work is needed, including theoretical and conceptual debates and analysis of fieldwork. The



exploratory research design adopted for this study is appropriate for investigating the circumstances in this field and for filling the gap in the fieldwork concerning the roles of NSAs in Turkey.

## Field study and results

### Methodology and data sources

This study was designed to reveal the roles of NSAs regarding refugees in Turkey through an empirical analysis based on a fieldwork research conducted in 2017 in Mersin, which is one of the important destination cities for Syrians in Turkey. Mersin is located on the south coast 300km from the Syrian border and has become a popular destination for Syrians. Due to the geographical proximity, family ties, commercial connections and Mediterranean culture, many Arabs especially from Syria and Lebanon have been coming to Mersin for variety of reasons. The city has had its peculiar dynamics, which has readily hosted people from outside. The Christians such as the Greek community from the Islands and Cappadocia, and Arab Orthodox from Syria and Lebanon were the first migrant residents of Mersin (Erjem, 2009: 33). There were also Arab Alawites among these first migrants. As the intensity and magnitude of the war increased throughout Syria, mass influxes started from Syria to Turkey around the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. According to official DGMM statistics, Mersin has been one of the top 10 provinces in Turkey, hosting 209,089 registered Syrian refugees under Temporary Protection (DGMM, 2018).

The in-depth interviews for this study were conducted in 2017 with representatives of 20 selected and different NSAs, operating in the field of migration by providing various services for Syrians in Mersin. Snowball sampling was applied to reach different institutions and individuals working with Syrian refugees in Mersin. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the respondents to obtain quantitative and qualitative data, which helped the researchers to gather some statistics and verbal interpretations concerning the actions of NSAs in providing services and contributing to the integration of Syrian refugees. The data was processed by coding under specific themes in accordance with the responses. The interview schedule began with several questions aiming to reveal the role of NSAs in the integration of Syrian refugees in Mersin. While some questions were asked to discover the profiles of these NSAs, other open-ended questions aimed to explore their actions in the field and their opinions about state policies and actions regarding the Syrians. Each interview lasted for almost one hour. Several publications of NSAs, and the statements and activities of state authorities were also analysed as the other data sources.

## Findings

### *(i) Profiles of the interviewed organizations*

In total, twenty NSAs, including ten civil society organizations (CSO), two city council bodies, two university research centres, two professional chambers – a chamber of commerce and industry and a chamber of medical doctors, two religious communities –one which is associated with the Catholic church and the another one is a djemevi, one local municipality unit (Social Services Directorate) and one international non-governmental organization were involved in the survey. The city councils were included since they are one of the most important umbrella organizations for the civil society stakeholders in the province. By the time of survey, there were around 40 CSOs in Mersin, which has been directly working on the issues related to migration.<sup>3</sup>None of the interviewed

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<sup>3</sup> The data was obtained by researcher from Mersin Provincial Directorate of Associations in 2017.



NSAs could provide a certain number of their beneficiaries since they didn't have a proper registration system but as a target group, they confirmed that they provide their services for around 200.000 registered Syrians in Mersin.

While five of these non-state actors (NSAs) had been working with refugees for less than a year, eight had experience between more than a year and less than three years, and seven of had worked for more than three years in the field. This data demonstrates that the involvement of these actors mostly developed in parallel with the increasing flows of Syrians into Turkey and the transformation of their stay into permanent residency. Mostly small-scale NSAs were involved in Mersin regarding refugee integration work. While fourteen NSAs had no branches in their organizational structure, six had several other branches elsewhere in Turkey. Eleven NSAs (55%) employed up to five personnel and the number of the NSAs who have more than five personnel is only nine.

The funding resources of these NSAs were highly diversified, with 30% indicating that they had not received any external funds and had just relied on their own institutional budgets. Other participants stated that they received different types of funds and financial resources, including international funding (25%) and state funding (5%), while 10% reported having no financial resources and acting voluntarily. Finally, 30% of participants stated that they relied on diverse resources, including international funding, state funding or their own institutional budget depending on their activities and projects.

*(ii) Accessing the target group*

One particular set of questions aimed to reveal how these NSAs communicated with the Syrian refugees, how they accessed them and when they started to work with them. Fourteen respondents reported that they were directly communicating with the refugees which meant that they had a dialogue with them through their own employees or had individually contacted them in their shared neighbourhood. The other six NSA representatives declared that they indirectly communicated mostly by using mediators from outside of their organizations, or that they had made announcements calling for communication.

The interviews revealed that only six NSAs had engaged with Syrian refugees since they first arrived in Mersin in 2011 whereas the others, for various reasons, only started to communicate with them and provide services within the first five years after 2011. The reasons for this delayed communication can be clustered under three main headings. Firstly, half of the interviewed NSAs reported that they did not initially perceive the migration of Syrian refugees as a major phenomenon. Secondly, the organisations or their projects were not ready to be activated immediately at the beginning of the refugee flows (42%). Finally, a few NSAs indicated that they had not expected the war to be as prolonged or the Syrian refugees in Mersin to stay permanently (8%).

Another question aimed to discover the specific target groups of NSAs working with refugees in Mersin. Children were in the forefront, with nine different NSAs working for their integration while seven NSAs were acting in support of women specifically, and five NSAs were working to integrate young refugees. In contrast, support for other underrepresented groups among Syrians, such as LGBTI+ people and disabled people, remained weak since only 5 of these NSAs reported to provide services for these groups. Lastly, five NSAs reported that they contributed by working for all groups without any specific priority. Regarding their sources of information about their target group, the NSAs listed reports, observation, fieldwork, surveys and institutional experience.



*(iii) Services and Contributions to Integrating Refugees*

The representatives of NSAs in Mersin had greatly varying opinions regarding the future of Syrian refugees in the city. 60% believed that they would stay permanently in Turkey. Of these, 31% thought that gradual integration policies were the best option for those staying in Turkey while 26% believed refugees should be granted citizenship, although 3% considered the current temporary protection status as adequate. Finally, 40% of respondents believed that the best scenario for the refugees was to leave Turkey by returning to Syria when the war ends or moving on to European countries. Regarding the possibility of integrating the Syrians into Turkish society, the results were more positive than negative since 89% of respondents believed that they could be integrated into Turkish society. Of these respondents, 47% indicated that the refugees could fit into Turkish society and become integrated under certain circumstances, specifically by focusing on several factors. These were legal regulations (55%), education (26%), more emphasis on cultural and religious commonalities (9%), more inclusion of NSAs in the process (6%) and the positive attitudes of the local community (4%).

The findings of the fieldwork were interpreted by using the integration parameters such as housing and accommodation, health, education, legal assistance, language courses, employment, skills development, social and cultural aspect, and the participation which are derived from the sources of Ager & Strang (2008) and Spencer & Charsley (2016). In addition to that, Penninx's (2003) study is another prominent source to evaluate the relevant categorization of non-state actors before processing the results. Eventually, these parameters are clustered as (i) skill development and education, (ii) social and cultural participation (iii) health, (iv) legal assistance, (v) language support and (vi) employment. According to the respondents, "skill development and education" was the primary field in which NSAs supported Syrians in Mersin. Thirteen NSAs declared that they were engaged in activities related to the education and training needs of the refugees. The educational services of these actors included projects for vocational education, providing guidance for children to be registered in schools, supporting university students and raising awareness on their needs. In addition, supporting students and providing information on the educational rights of refugees, contacting institutions to solve the problems of refugee children in schools, organising activities to make the refugees' educational life sustainable, and encouraging children to gain education in Mersin.

Skills development is an important step for refugees to find a job in the market of the host community. The research demonstrated that the same NSAs involved in employment also participated in attempts to develop the skills of Syrian refugees in Mersin. Most of them contributed by implementing or joining particular projects by focusing on vocational training, which was intended to lead to employment for the refugees in local firms and factories.

The second major activity field for NSAs in Mersin was social and cultural participation, with nine NSAs reporting that they had organised activities related to this for the Syrian refugees. One of the professional chambers interviewed planned to establish a social innovation centre, which could contribute to social cohesion, activate social entrepreneurship and offer innovative approaches to the Syrians' social problems. Civil society organisations mostly held activities like chess, sports, dance and drama to socialise the refugee children and familiarise them with the culture of the host society. Some of the interviewed organisations stated that they had already held an intercultural day in Mersin and had organised football games for the young refugees and local people. One research centre organised a large-scale workshop in Mersin, which included various state and non-state actors, to discuss the problems of the city with Syrian representatives and





individuals. In addition, several Syrian civil society organisations in the fieldwork reported that they helped Syrians to join in Mersin's civil life.

An equal number of NSAs referred to health, legal assistance and language support. Eight non-state actors indicated that they were involved in various efforts and activities concerning the refugees' health issues. These included supporting patients with guidance and consultancy, psychological support, vaccines for children, medical observations and preparing reports, medical screenings for teeth and eyes, clinical and medication support, support for translation in health services, providing medical devices and cooperation with doctors. Two NSAs stated that they had undertaken a monitoring role in the field and prepared reports for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other top-level institutions. Mostly, the responses highlighted the complementary role played by these NSAs regarding health.

Another prominent service provided for the refugees' integration by NSAs was legal assistance. In particular, they had assisted refugees with official processes to help them integrate better with the local community by determining their legal status and operating services properly. Eight NSAs claimed that they were working on legal assistance for the refugees. This included various issues, such as helping the refugees to get registered, taking the initiative over identity cards, informing people about legal processes, helping the refugees through judicial processes with lawyers, communicating with the official bodies in emergency cases, offering consultancy and advocacy for refugees, supporting refugees in bureaucratic processes, providing translation services in various circumstances and giving counselling services to Syrian business people who wanted to start or maintain their business in Mersin concerning registration and information.

Eight of the twenty NSAs were involved in teaching Turkish and engaged in language support activities. While some were included in specific projects for language training in cooperation with various actors, there were also language centres founded within the organisational structure of some NSAs to facilitate the refugees' integration.

As mentioned before, Syrians living outside the official government camps constitute almost more than 95 per cent of the total Syrian population in Turkey. Therefore, housing and accommodation was an important part of the sheltering mechanism. While six NSAs conducted actions related to the refugees' housing and accommodation needs, almost all mentioned that they played a complementary role to the state's policies and activities, and its shortcomings regarding some points. Work in housing and accommodation in this case included helping refugees find accommodation, paying bills, transferring them to a new site after a natural disaster occurred in Mersin, and giving them blankets and domestic utensils.

The final activity area for NSAs in Mersin province concerned employment. Six of the interviewed NSAs joined in efforts to boost refugee employment within the local market. However, NSAs were less involved regarding refugee employment than for education, health, legal assistance and language support. Regarding the content of their involvement, several NSAs had promised to help the refugees find jobs after they participated in vocational training while one NSA directly used its own network to find employment for vulnerable refugees regardless of vocational training.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

Considering both the pace of refugee flows and the urgency of their situation, NSAs have become a strategic group of actors for managing Syrians in Turkey. They have also become part of a mechanism to reduce the state's burden and support its efforts, which have mostly focused on emergency aid and regulations during the initial years of the refugee flows. Although the survey in this study is limited to only one province, it provides valuable data regarding the involvement of



NSAs in refugee management in Turkey, which has not been comprehensively researched yet. With its large Syrian population, its experience of refugees from the earliest years of the civil war in Syria and its comprehensive eco-system for refugees, including state and non-state actors, Mersin has a strong potential for discussing as a case for the active involvement of NSAs, including both its pluses and minuses.

The field study we conducted in Mersin province reveals that NSAs actively contribute to refugee management by undertaking a supplementary role and complete state-centred efforts. This study demonstrates that the types and activities of these NSAs greatly vary and that they are not a homogeneous group of organisations. Instead, different types of NSAs provide different services for Syrians living in Mersin. A large part of these migration-focused NSAs are CSOs, but they are not limited to these organisations as there are examples of almost every sort of NSA. The survey also shows that the field of migration and refugees is a relatively new experience for NSAs in Turkey, as confirmed by the timelines of their involvement and activity in the case of Mersin. In addition, most of these NSAs have modest capacities as they mostly employ ten people or less. Both this lack of staff and limited funding and budget are likely to reduce the efficiency of their activities since most remain small-scale organisations deprived of external support and funding. A considerable number rely on their own limited budgets whereas only very few have external funds or projects. This indicates that greater efforts at contributing to the fund raising and project management capacities of these NSAs could strengthen their active involvement and sustainability and support their refugee-centred activities. Moreover, since the field of migration is a relatively new area of expertise for most of these NSAs, training programmes related to migration and to developing the skills of their staff could be useful for enhancing their capacities and providing solutions for their human resource problems.

The study also confirms that the contribution and involvement of NSAs already go beyond providing only emergency humanitarian aid. Rather, they are also part of the refugee integration system by addressing several components of the integration process. Most of the interviewed NSAs are involved in integration services at different levels, which are also closely related to the increasing perception that these refugees will become permanent residents of Mersin province.

The survey analysis also demonstrates that the involvement of NSAs in refugee integration varies in method and content. They provide services in all domains of integration, including skills development and education, social and cultural participation, health, legal assistance, language support and employment. However, most of these NSAs organise such activities without proper planning and structured needs analysis. Moreover, several organisations conduct similar activities and provide the same services. Therefore, establishing stronger communication platforms for these organisations could enable a more functional management of their activities and a smarter division of labour based on the refugees' needs and the NSAs' fields of expertise. Due to the large number of refugees relative to the capacities of state and non-state actors, cooperation between the authorities and NSAs would be beneficial for themselves, the local community and Syrian refugees in Mersin.

Finally, the interviewed NSA representatives are very aware about the facilitators and barriers for integrating Syrians in Turkey since most of them are directly in touch with these groups through their active involvement in the field. There is therefore a strong potential to take advantage of this accumulation of knowledge to learn more about the needs of the refugees and to establish stronger ties between the host society and the Syrians. The state authorities and institutions can use this accumulation of knowledge by engaging in a continuous dialogue with these NSAs.





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