

# Afterword

## Refugees in Limbo

### A Question of Ontological Insecurity

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The Syrian refugee population in Turkey is a young community; nearly four-fifths of the population is under the age of thirty-five.<sup>1</sup> Young refugees' experiences and perceptions about their displacement, settlement, and integration are crucial in exploring the successes and failures in refugee situations and the prospects of the entire refugee community in the coming years. In this context, this book conveys two main sets of empirically distinct yet analytically and theoretically interconnected arguments. First, the importance and significance of studying the precarious lives of Syrian youth in Turkey is underscored. Second, the centrality of permanent temporariness to the precarious lives of refugee youth is highlighted. As we observed in earlier studies, refugees exhibit a distinct age distribution compared to other international migrants, with a marked prevalence of young individuals in the former group (Hugo, Abbasi-Shavazi, and Kraly 2017). According to the Pew Research Center Data Sets, in contrast to the mostly middle-aged adult makeup of the global migrant population, children and young people make up a significant proportion of refugees, comprising more than three-fourths of their demographic.<sup>2</sup> This observation suggests that the refugee issue is primarily a matter of concern for children and young people and necessitates a specific focus from both scholarly and policy perspectives.

It is crucial to point out that the precarious lives of refugee youth are shaped by a range of factors that generate poor and insufficient conditions regarding housing, education, working life, and social and health-related

services (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2021). What is also very crucial is the fact that these young cohorts of refugees are continuously tested by a state of permanent temporariness (İçduygu and Sert 2019). The inadequacy of the international refugee regime, as outlined by the 1951 Convention, in effectively addressing the protection requirements of extensive refugee movements has compelled numerous states to adopt temporary protection measures for cases that have become prolonged. While the prevalence of temporariness has become the predominant norm within contemporary refugee protection regimes, many refugees find themselves enduring prolonged periods of waiting for a formal and permanent status. Although this practice of keeping refugees in a state of limbo may serve the interests of states, there is no doubt that it not only inflicts harm upon refugees but also constitutes a fundamental injustice (Buxton 2023). The injustice of maintaining such a legal and political limbo is one that we hear throughout this book in the voices of Syrian youth in Turkey.

It has been over a decade since the initial arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Throughout this period, the Turkish government's policies toward these refugees have undergone numerous shifts and transformations. Consequently, the experiences and perceptions of individual Syrian refugees have also had significant changes within the framework of these policies and the responses of refugees to these policies. It appears that precariousness, a condition of uncertainty and unpredictability often experienced by refugees because of their displacement and lack of resources, is very central to the lives of Syrian youth in Turkey. This book demonstrates how and to what extent precarious lives emerge in relation to housing conditions, education, working life, and access to various social services. As the vast majority of Syrians in Turkey have not lived in camps but resided in various neighborhoods of urban areas, one of the most significant challenges for refugee youth is finding adequate housing (Balkan et al. 2018). Many young refugees and their families are forced to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions, which can lead to health problems and exacerbate existing mental health issues. Some aspects of precariousness emerge in relation to housing conditions when refugees are forced to live in unsafe and unstable city environments with limited access to basic services. Access to education is another critical factor that contributes to the precarious lives of refugee youth (Çelik and İçduygu, 2019). Many refugees have limited access to formal education because of language barriers, problems of recognition of their prior education, financial constraints, and discrimination. There is no doubt that the question of no or limited schooling can have long-term consequences, because it limits their opportunities for working life, social mobility, and economic stability.

It is obvious that the ability to work and earn a living is crucial for refugee youth to achieve economic stability and independence. However, it

is found that many young refugees face significant barriers to employment due to the lack of recognition of their occupational skills, discrimination, absence or limitations of work permits, and limited access to job training and support services. This leads to a cycle of poverty and precariousness as refugees struggle to make ends meet and are forced to rely on informal and exploitative work. Precariousness emerges in relation to working life when refugees are denied access to decent work and fair wages, which can perpetuate their marginalization and exclusion from native communities (Caro 2020). Moreover, it seems that the precarious lives of refugee youth are also shaped by their access to social and health-related services, which is essential for them to maintain their physical and mental well-being. Many refugees face hurdles in accessing these services due to language barriers, lack of documentation, and discrimination (Baban, Ilcan, and Rygiel 2017). In short, a wide range of factors, mainly related to housing conditions, education, working life, and access to social and health-related services, interact to create a complex web of challenges that can perpetuate the marginalization and exclusion of refugee youth from mainstream society. Addressing the precariousness of refugee youth requires a multifaceted approach that tackles the limits of structural economic, political, social, and cultural conditions surrounding them and provides them with the support and resources they need to achieve economic stability, social inclusion, and physical and mental well-being.

At the core of the precarious lives of Syrian youth lies the formation of a state of temporariness, wherein refugees are confronted with escalating feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the outcomes of these sentiments are not always negative or disheartening; they also contribute, to a certain extent, to the development of resilience, wherein we witness the active agency of the refugees. The chapters in this book unequivocally demonstrate the complex ramifications of displacement on the lives of Syrian youth residing in Turkey. Although their experiences are undeniably influenced by structural factors, including policies and the broader economic, social, political, and cultural dynamics and mechanisms surrounding them, it is important to note that they have not become resigned captives of these structural frameworks. This work also attentively offers varying perspectives on the nature and limits of refugee youth agency within the boundaries of migratory structures.

In this context, to better understand the perceptions and experiences of Syrian refugee youth in Turkey, let us first look at the main structural factors that contribute to their experienced state of permanent temporariness. Selectively, one can name four main structural factors here: the informal, ad hoc, and instrumentalized nature of Turkish state policies; the failures of established international refugee protection regimes; the lack of international concern and responsibility sharing; and the protracted nature of the

refugee situation. These factors create an environment where Syrian refugee youth are confronted with challenging options for their future, leading to uncertainty and insecurity and resulting in a sense of permanent temporariness. One of the key factors contributing to this limbo is the nature of the Turkish state policies, which have been mostly informal, reactive, ad hoc, and politically instrumentalized (İçduygu and Aksel, 2021). In the early stages of the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey initially treated Syrians as guests rather than refugees, often referring to religious (Islamic) values. This informal approach was influenced by cultural and historical ties between the two countries, as well as the expectation that the conflict in Syria would be short-lived. Meanwhile, as the political crisis in Syria was prolonged and the number of refugees increased, Turkey shifted its policies and introduced the Temporary Protection Regulation in 2014. This has provided Syrians with a relatively formal temporary protection status, opening the way to granting them access to some basic formal services and opportunities, such as those in the fields of education, work, and health. While this policy was a significant step toward addressing the needs of Syrian refugees, it also meant the institutionalization of the temporariness of their stay.

However, there have also been contradictory signals sent by Turkish authorities that have further exacerbated the sense of limbo experienced by Syrian refugees. While efforts have been made to integrate refugees into Turkish society through language courses, vocational training, and employment programs, and even with the development of an arbitrarily operating naturalization program that gives some chances of obtaining citizenship for selected Syrian refugees, there have also been rising instances of discourse and actions, signaling potential repatriation or encouraging onward migrations to Europe. The Turkish government's 2016 refugee agreement with the European Union, its decision to open the Greek border to enable the movement of refugees to Europe in early 2020, and its continuously escalated military interventions in northern Syria over the last five years all serve as illustrative instances highlighting the ad hoc, reactive, and instrumentalized nature of Turkish policies toward Syrian refugees. These policies clearly reflect contradictory elements in government policies, particularly when one considers them with the coexistence of integration measures also being implemented. These policy inconsistencies have left Syrians uncertain about their prospects and contributed to their feeling of being in limbo.

The state of permanent temporariness experienced by Syrian refugees, particularly by Syrian refugee youth, is further worsened by limited international concern and responsibility sharing (Şahin Mencütek 2021). Despite the enormity of the Syrian crisis, the responsibility of hosting millions of refugees has predominantly fallen upon Syria's neighboring countries, including Turkey. The absence of a comprehensive and coordinated global response has severely constrained the resources and support available to address the

needs of Syrian refugees, especially those of young people. For instance, as mentioned earlier in this volume, many Syrian youth aspire to seek educational and employment opportunities in third countries. However, the stringent admission policies imposed by various countries, particularly those in the Global North, hinder their mobility and leave them stranded between Turkey, their current country of asylum with seemingly uncertain prospects for them, and Syria, their home country that lacks viable conditions for voluntary, safe, and sustainable repatriation. This predicament underscores the need for a global solution that prioritizes responsibility sharing rather than responsibility shifting. Such a solution is crucial not only to alleviate the challenges faced by Turkey but also to ensure a more sustainable future for Syrian refugee youth in other parts of the world.

Moreover, the protracted nature of the refugee situation further aggravates feelings of temporariness for Syrian refugee youth. As protracted refugee situations are defined as those in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo (Gibárti 2021), it is obvious that with no end in sight to the conflict in Syria, these youths find themselves confronted with limited options for their future. As noted earlier, they could consider only three options: integrating into the country of asylum, returning home, or seeking resettlement in third countries. However, none of these options currently offer a promising outlook. Integration in Turkey is hindered by limited access to education and employment opportunities, while the prospect of returning home is marred by ongoing conflict and instability. Resettlement in third countries is highly competitive and uncertain, leaving Syrian refugee youth in a state of limbo.

As their displacement continues, the Syrian refugees' plight has been compounded by multiple crises that have hit their host country, Turkey, in recent years—first by COVID-19, then a severe economic downturn, and finally by a devastating earthquake. The first of these crises was the COVID-19 pandemic, which swept across the globe in early 2020. The pandemic significantly impacted Syrian refugees in Turkey, who were already living in precarious conditions (Elçi, Kirişcioglu, and Üstübcici 2021). The pandemic led to economic and social disruptions, with many losing their jobs and struggling to access basic necessities such as food and healthcare. The pandemic also led to the closure of schools and other educational facilities, which affected the education of refugee children. According to various studies, the pandemic has had a severe impact on refugees worldwide, with many facing increased risks of poverty, exploitation, and abuse (Schomaker and Bauer 2020). It is reported that refugees' access to healthcare has been severely affected by the pandemic, with many struggling to access essential medical services. Moreover, the economic crisis that has deepened in Turkey in recent years has had a profound impact on Syrian refugees in the country: first, refugees' economic and social lives have been harshly

affected by the worsening economic conditions; second, they have been unjustly blamed for the country's economic downturn, becoming a convenient scapegoat for public reactions; and third, consequently, rising anti-refugee sentiments, which were strikingly visible in the 2023 election period, have sparked intense debate on returning them to Syria. Such debates have further compounded refugees' already precarious situation. More recently, in early 2023, Turkey was hit by a devastating earthquake that caused widespread destruction and loss of life. The earthquake affected Syrian refugees living in the impacted areas, with many losing their homes and possessions. The earthquake also significantly disrupted essential services such as water and electricity, further worsening refugees' living conditions.

In conclusion, if one refers to Anthony Giddens's (1990: 92) definition of the term "ontological security" as "a sense of confidence and trust in the world as it appears to be . . . The confidence that most human beings have in continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their social and material environments," it is possible to argue that refugees often experience a loss of ontological security during the displacement process as they are removed from their familiar social environment, leading to feelings of vulnerability and dependency that contribute to an intensified sense of uncertainty and insecurity. As emphasized above, as contemporary international refugee protection regimes have made temporariness the norm, which is widely seen in the form of temporary protection status applied to Syrians in Turkey or Ukrainians in Europe, many refugees experience and endure prolonged waiting periods for more stable status. Consequently, one of the most significant challenges that refugees face is the feeling of permanent temporariness. The lack of legal status, uncertainty about the future, and lack of integration are just a few factors contributing to this feeling. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves providing refugees with legal status, access to basic rights and services, and opportunities for integration. By addressing these challenges, we can help refugees overcome the feeling of permanent temporariness and feel a sense of stability and security in their new homes.

## Notes

1. See, Webpage of Presidency of Migration Management, Türkiye. Retrieved 27 December 2023 from <https://en.goc.gov.tr/#>.
2. Pew Research Center, "Asylum Seeker Demography: Young and Male." *Pew Research Center*, 2 August 2016. Retrieved 27 December 2023 from <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2016/08/02/4-asylum-seeker-demography-young-and-male/>.