



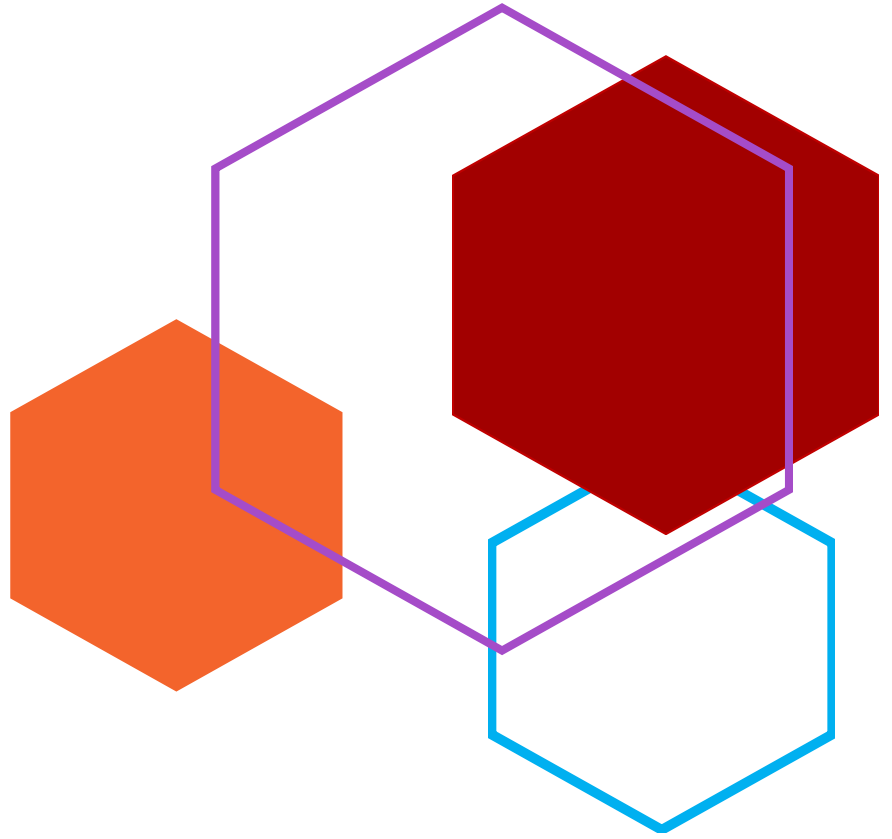
**MiReKoc**

# **MiReKoc Working Paper Series**

**Quakes Do Strike Refugees:  
Hyper-precarity of Syrians in  
Turkey**

**Mehmet İhsan ÖZDEMİR and Burak AĞALDAY**

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### **ABOUT MIGRATION RESEARCH CENTER AT KOÇ UNIVERSITY**

The Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc) was established in 2004, with the purpose of advancing the state of the art in migration research through original and innovative scholarship, academic collaboration, and dialogue between researchers, civil society actors, and policy makers. MiReKoc is an interdisciplinary research center which conducts research on migration within several disciplines, including anthropology, economics, law, political science and international relations, sociology, and medicine. MiReKoc examines how states, communities and individuals are affected by, and engage with migration. To create an environment of exchanges, MiReKoc also organizes courses, seminars, workshops, and conferences where various actors in the field meet.

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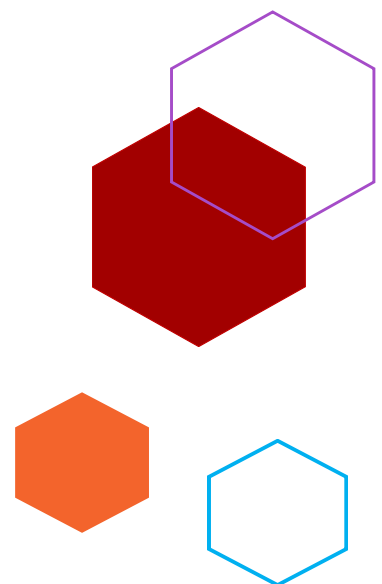
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## Introduction

On February 6th, twin earthquakes with magnitudes of 7.7 and 7.6 on the Moment Magnitude scale hit the southeast of Turkey wrecking ten provinces. At the time of writing, the death toll had already exceeded 50 thousand and over a hundred thousand persons have been wounded. Turkish authorities stated that over 40 thousand of 307 thousand apartments in the ten provinces have collapsed or been seriously damaged (CSB, 2023), meaning that nearly 15% of the buildings are no longer feasible shelters by February 13. Since the earthquakes hit, Turkey has received massive international aid in the form of cash and in-kind contribution as well as rescue teams from across the world arriving to the ten provinces (ERI, 2023).

Syrian refugees in Turkey are one of the communities which have been adversely affected by the disaster. As indicated in Table 1, the region hit by the earthquake hosts almost half of the total refugee population in Turkey. The provinces of Adıyaman, Hatay, Kahramanmaraş and the districts of Gaziantep alone accommodate nearly a million Syrian refugees<sup>1</sup> and many thousand non-Syrian refugees.

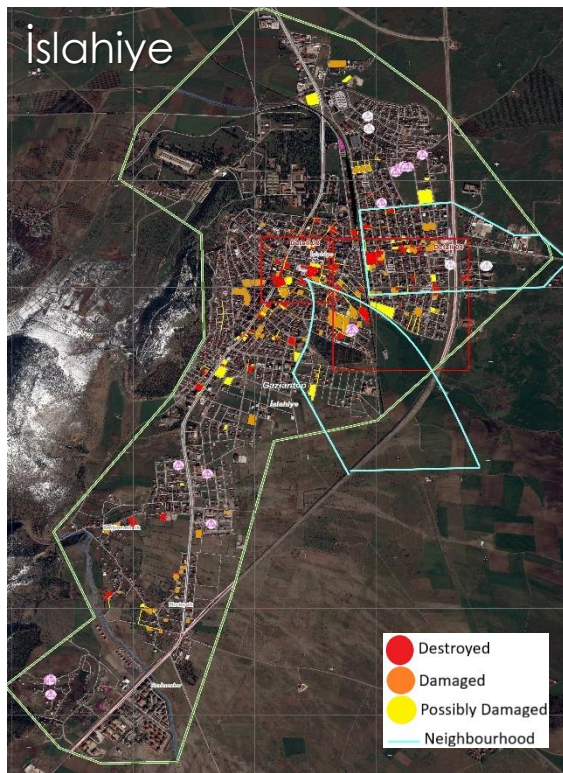
This paper explores the dimensions of refugee vulnerability in Turkey following the earthquake disaster.

Province	Total Population (TP)	Refugee Population (RP)	RP/TP (%)
Adana	2,514,084	250,711	~10
Adıyaman	653,836	21,688	~3.5
Diyarbakır	1,813,045	21,672	~1
Gaziantep	2,590,582	460,150	~18
Hatay	2,025,360	354,648	~17
Kahramanmaraş	1,262,938	91,640	~7.5
Kilis	233,235	87,409	~37.5
Malatya	840,113	31,421	~3.5
Osmaniye	591,297	38,285	~6.5
Şanlıurfa	2,511,243	368,223	~14.5
<b>Total (Region)</b>	15,035,733	1,725,847	~11.5
<b>Total (Turkey)</b>	85,279,553	3,500,964	~4

**Table 1: Population distribution in disaster area (PMM, 2023)**

<sup>1</sup> We use the term “refugee” throughout the text to refer to the Syrians under temporary protection status

## Possible Impact on Refugees



The earthquake hit at least 1.7 million Syrians residing in the southeast provinces of Turkey. The lack of official figures regarding the number of deaths and injured Syrians prevents a true estimate of the impact of the disaster on refugee communities. To assess the possible impact on refugees, we matched the satellite images with refugee-

populated neighbourhoods.<sup>2</sup> By juxtaposing this information, we demonstrate that the most affected regions and neighbourhoods include high refugee concentration. The images from İslahiye (Gaziantep), Nurdağı (Gaziantep), Antakya (Hatay) and Kahramanmaraş, in which noticeable destruction was observed, show a great parallel with neighbourhoods with high refugee concentration. In most cases, these are central urban areas comprised of older building structures and markets (bazaars) due to the affordable rent prices. Although the images do not provide precise data on the number of Syrian refugees affected, they provide insight into the earthquake's possible massive impact on refugees.

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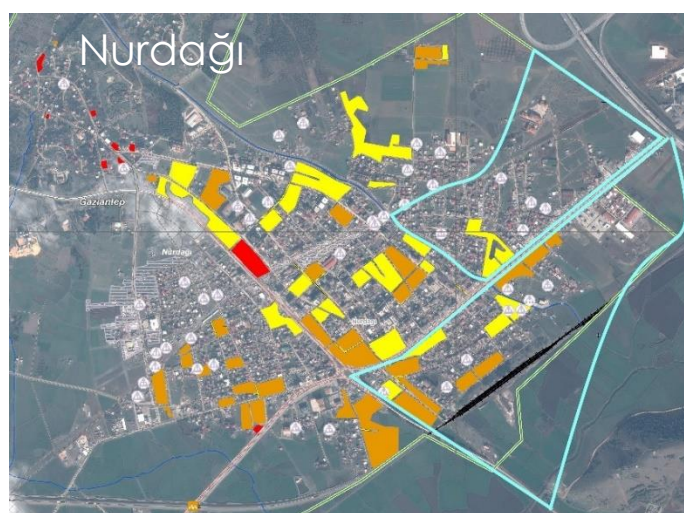
<sup>2</sup> The satellite images are taken from Copernicus Emergency Management Service (COPERNICUS, 2023). For the refugee-populated neighbourhoods, we utilize the Presidency of Migration Management's list of neighbourhoods which do not allow the registration of foreigners (PMM, 2022). These neighbourhoods host at

least as many as 25% of the total population by mid-2022. The authors verified Syrian-populated neighbourhoods from academic studies (Cengiz, 2020, p.104) and the information from the Syrian NGO workers in the disaster area. The authors also regularly visit the Syrian-populated areas for academic research.

Province	District	Neighbourhood
Hatay	Antakya	Narlıca
		Ürgen Paşa
		Odabaşı
		Cumhuriyet
		General Şükrü Kanatlı
Kahramanmaraş	Dulkadir-oğlu	Yavuz Selim
		Menderes
		İsmet Paşa
	Onikişubat	Hayrullah
Gaziantep	Nurdağı	Aslanlı
		Esenyurt
	İslahiye	Atatürk
		Cevdetpaşa

**Table 2: Syrian-populated damaged neighbourhoods (PMM, 2022)**

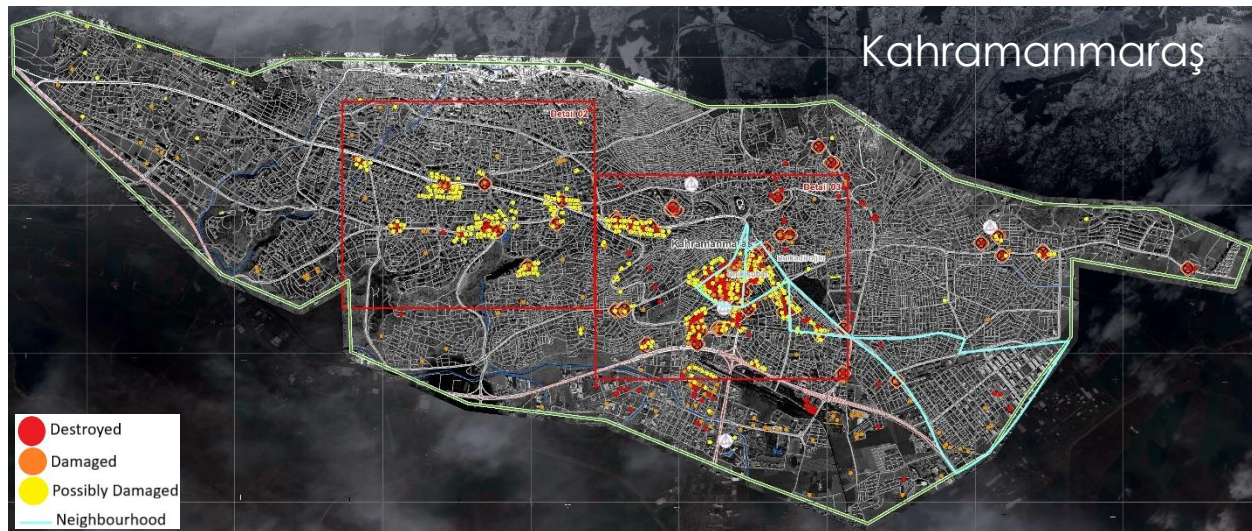
We also contacted two officials from the SIG (Syrian Interim Government), eight Syrian NGO workers, academics and activists coordinating refugee services in the region, four Syrian victims resettled in Mardin, and two Turkish officials to understand the situation on the ground. A Syrian activist, Taha al-Ghazi, stated that at least 6,700 Syrians died in the earthquake as of February 17 (Açık Radyo, 2023), which was also verified by the interlocutors dealing with Syrians' funerals in the disaster region. The figure does not include those still under the debris, persons whose corpses were not claimed or identified by anyone, and those who were not registered under Temporary Protection or residence permit holders. Nearly a month later, on March 13th, the Minister of Interior announced the death of 6660 foreigners, mostly Syrians (Ceylan, 2023). Considering the time gap, difference between the official figures and the data from the field is worth noting.





The ratio of Syrians to the total population in the region is 11%, while the death rate is proportionally higher if the official death toll contains the Syrians. These numbers complement the satellite images in terms of the impact of the quake on the Syrian refugees.

that some landlords in Reyhanlı (Hatay) asked their Syrian tenants to leave their homes, claiming that their Turkish relatives need to use those houses. Then it is necessary to consider that Syrian refugees unaffected by the earthquake in terms of loss of life, injury or loss of shelter may still face homelessness.



Beyond the loss of life, the earthquakes are expected to amplify the socio-economic vulnerability of refugees. As the disaster struck around 15 million individuals, it is expected that a massive outflow from the region to neighbouring provinces will occur resulting in a housing shortage and soaring rent prices (see Ayırkan, 2023; Habertürk, 2023). Syrian refugees are more likely to experience hardship in finding shelter in neighbour cities due to their lower economic status. Refugees in less affected areas close to the disaster zone are also facing housing issues. An NGO employee<sup>3</sup> explained

Unemployment and underpayment of Syrians have been major issues in Turkey (Pinedo Caro, 2020, pp. 20-22), particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (ASAM, 2020). Syrians' difficulty in accessing the labour market may be exacerbated due to damaged economic activities in the region, and supernumerary workers due to the massive outflow outside the region.

Despite the disadvantages, positive steps in disaster response regarding the Syrians should also be noted. The

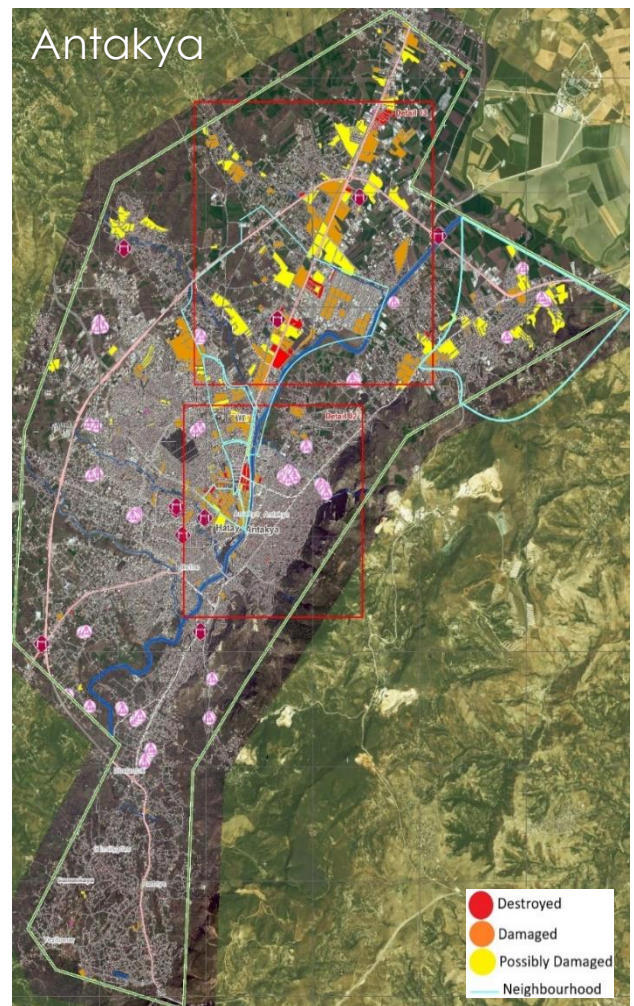
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<sup>3</sup> The interviewee is based in Reyhanlı, and has worked on the burial procedures of Syrians, the distribution of financial aids and

the resettlement of the victims after the earthquake. The interview was held on February 15 by phone.



member of the SIG<sup>4</sup>, who has actively involved in assisting the Syrians in Nurdağı (Gaziantep), Islahiye (Gaziantep) and Antakya (Hatay) revealed that the Syrians are not discriminated against by the officials in the distribution of materials and tents. Additionally, a Syrian academic <sup>5</sup> residing in Gaziantep confirmed the payment by the government for those whose houses are wrecked, heavily or moderately damaged.<sup>6</sup> The inclusion of Syrians in financial aid packages may alleviate their vulnerability. The scope of the inclusion, however, is still ambivalent. We communicated with senior officers from the AFAD (Turkish Disaster and Management Authority) and the PMM (Presidency of Migration Management) to inquire about the details of the payments but received conflicting responses regarding the details of the payments, whether the Syrians are included, if so, which payments they will receive.



<sup>4</sup> The interview was held on February 17 by phone. During the interview, the participant was actively working in Nurdağı, Gaziantep.

<sup>5</sup> Face-to-face interview was held on February 21.

<sup>6</sup> The government declared a relief package covering financial aids to the victims. These include reparation for

damage, rental assistance for landlords and tenants, compensation for death and transportation aid. Reparation for damage is paid to the residents via Ziraat Bank after the Ministry in charge decides on the damage of residence. The government receives application through e-Devlet (e-State) for the other items.

## Refugees as IDPs Now!

Syrians under temporary protection (SuTP) are subject to strict travel restrictions in Turkey as inter-city mobility is only allowed with a travel permit and for a short period of time (AIDA, 2020, pp. 155-156). Registration in another neighbourhood is even prohibited in refugee-populated provinces, let alone inter-city movement (PMM, 2022).

The PMM abrogated the travel restrictions on February 7, a day after the disaster, for three months (MULTECI, 2023), allowing inter-city mobility of the SuTP registered in ten provinces of the disaster area<sup>7</sup>. Thereafter, the travel permission was delimited with two months and five provinces and was subject to official authorization in the remaining five cities (RSN, 2023). Furthermore, the SIG, based on their communications with the Turkish authorities, announced that the Syrians in the region are permitted to move to Syria, providing that they will stay one month at a minimum and will not stay longer than six months (SIG, 2023). We further investigated the minimum length of stay of SuTP allowed in Syria, and we encountered conflicting answers regarding how long the minimum period is, the names of the

open border gates and which Syrians (in the disaster region or in the rest of Turkey) are allowed to cross the border (Ali, 2023; SyriaTV, 2023). According to the announcement by the SIG, SuTP's status will be abrogated, and they will be listed as voluntary returnees in case of an over-six-month stay. Refugees thus face several decisions: staying where they are (mostly in tents), returning to Syria or moving within Turkey to other provinces. By February 28, the Turkish officials announced the return of over 40 thousand Syrians to Syria (MSB, 2023). The noticeably low number of returnees suggests that Syrians prefer staying or moving within Turkey for the moment. Since the twin earthquakes, the region has been hit by 6,212 aftershocks as of February 21 (AFAD, 2023) and by two more earthquakes in Hatay on February 20 with the magnitude of 6.4 and 5.8 on the Moment Magnitude scale. The continued earthquakes and aftershocks imply that for many, staying in the region is no longer a viable option materially and psychologically.

A Syrian NGO worker<sup>8</sup> stated that internal displacement within Turkey is a possible option for some members of the refugee community based on

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<sup>7</sup> Istanbul is an exception. New registry is not allowed even for the Syrians registered in the disaster area. However, rumour has it that some Syrians move to İstanbul despite the restrictions. If true, this may create a further vulnerability due to the forced

repatriation of unregistered Syrians (see Arpacık, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> The interviewee is based in Kahramanmaraş, and has worked on the evacuation of Syrians after the earthquake. The interview was held on February 15 by phone.

their socio-economic status, in other words, for those who have the means to move, and availability of relatives outside the region. Otherwise, they avoid the uncertainty of finding a home, a job and facing discrimination in a new environment since the cultural, linguistic and historical proximity between the Syrians in the disaster region and the host community would not be observed in the majority of Turkish provinces (Erdoğan, 2021, pp. 186-187). Secondly, a massive literature emphasized the refugees' vulnerability due to the difficulty in accessing the labour market, the challenging integration process and the language barrier (Nimer & Rottmann, 2021; Şimşek, 2018). The disaster, however, pushed thousands of refugees towards central Turkey along with the Turkish citizens. Neighbouring provinces are likely to receive a mass inflow including Turkish nationals, which may be more likely to be favoured over Syrians in terms of accessing the job market and dealing with landlords.

Therefore, the struggle for social and economic integration into new areas would exacerbate the refugee vulnerability and would be overcome by an economically upper class.

## Lynching and Scapegoating

In times of crisis or uncertainty, refugees are usually made into scapegoats by state actors or host communities (Baylouny, 2020, pp.75-78; Savun & Gineste, 2018). Although anti-refugee sentiments are not a new phenomenon in Turkey (see Getmansky, Sinmazdemir & Zeitzoff, 2018) the earthquake in Turkey inflamed social and political reactions against the Syrians.

Shortly after the disaster, news and social media posts on robbery, looting and border violations, which were attributed to the Syrians, began circulating on online platforms. Some of the allegations were either produced or disseminated by political party leaders such as Ümit Özdağ, the head of Zafer Partisi (Victory Party), and Muharrem İnce, the head of Memleket Partisi (Homeland Party) and the current presidential candidate. Among the salient allegations were that Syrian refugees were illegally crossings from Syria to Turkey, looting from the debris field and robbing aid trucks. The claims were widely circulated over social media and fuelled pre-existing anti-refugee hostility.<sup>9</sup> The state of emergency due to the earthquake has also intensified the magnitude of hostility, which ended up with the reiteration of calls for forced

repatriation. At some point, the social media posts had circulated so rapidly that the fact-checking platform, Teyit, disclaimed several allegations about the Syrian refugees (Karadeniz, 2023; Keskin, 2023; Saklıca, 2023; Tarcan, 2023). However, misinformation spreads faster than reality (Vosoughi, Roy & Aral, 2018).

A Syrian NGO worker, who deals with the burial procedures of Syrians in Turkey, underlined several difficulties in accessing corpses and their transportation to the cemeteries or to Syria due to the social reactions. Another Syrian NGO worker<sup>10</sup>, who participated in search and rescue activities expressed Syrians' concern about being accused of robbery or looting, particularly after the rise in anti-Syrian social media posts. Also, it is stated that the Syrians are exposed to verbal abuse in the tents and during the distribution of aid by the Turkish residents, which results in refugees' reluctance to approach the aid providers. Beyond verbal abuses, the refugees have also experienced specific sanctions. For instance, the Turkish nationals and Syrian refugees in the disaster area were evacuated after the quake and temporarily settled in student dormitories. After social media accusations were made against the

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<sup>9</sup> Anti-refugee hashtags (i.e. #Ülkemdemülteciistemiyorum - idonotwantrefugeeinmycountry-, #suriyelileryağmayapıyor -syriansarelooting-, #suriyeliistemiyoruz -wedonotwantsyrians-) on Twitter soared after the earthquake.

<sup>10</sup> The interviewee is based in Gaziantep, and has worked on the distribution of aids to the Syrians after the earthquake. The interviewee was contacted several times on February 8, 10, 14, 21 by phone.

Syrians in the dormitories and far-right party leader, Ümit Özdağ's statements, the refugees were taken out of the dormitory to be placed in tent cities (SENDIKA, 2023). On February 13th, the PMM issued a further regulation to reiterate the travel permit, yet forbid Syrians from air evacuation and accommodation in the state facilities (MULTECILER, 2023). A Syrian NGO worker, based in Kahramanmaraş, remarked that the evacuation and resettlement of Syrians were executed and funded by the Syrian community. The active role of the Syrian community and some Syrian NGOs in the resettlement of Syrians and the fulfilment of their basic needs was confirmed by other Syrian refugees in the disaster area.



## Concluding Remarks

SuTP's pre-existing socio-economic vulnerability in Turkey has transformed into a hyper-precarious situation after the earthquake. Social reactions followed by legal enforcements are likely to exacerbate the situation and affect their surroundings in Turkey which they sought refuge. Several recommendations are made below to alleviate the vulnerability of refugees in Turkey and contribute to the refugee response.

To begin with, refugees' access to information in Turkey remains as an issue. While controversial information is still circulating, the PMM's online platforms have not announced any directives after a month from the disaster. It is worth noting that the authors accessed the details of the legal regulatory documents from the secondary sources, which mostly contain either conflictual or insufficient information. In times of crisis, lack of information may aggravate existing vulnerabilities. Syrians in the disaster area should be informed regularly by the authorized institutions to ease their access to services and to avoid legal sanctions.

Considering the enormity of the disaster, a habitable environment in the region is not very likely to exist soon. It can be recommended that a two-month exemption from the travel restriction should be extended. Additionally, travel permits should be available for the Syrians living outside the disaster area. Interaction

between the Syrians in the region and outside the region may alleviate the difficulties experienced by the victims who could not leave the region. In emergencies, anger towards the refugees may transform into physical violence. It is observed that misinformation consolidates anti-refugee movements. In this respect, official and civil initiatives should combat misinformative attempts in more efficient ways.

The disaster may instigate the forfeiture of Syrians' real estates. As legal ownership is prohibited, Syrians buy properties via Turkish citizens or naturalized Syrians, which may be abused by the legal owner (see Özdemir, 2022, pp.98-99). How the Syrians would claim the right on their properties after the destruction is a matter of concern among Syrians. Establishing provincial determination committees might be helpful in receiving requests and delivering solutions to prevent the Syrians' loss of rights.

Many international and national NGOs take an active part in support of Syrians. However, the lack of coordination may lead to unjust distribution and inefficient use of resources. State-led coordination or inter-organizational authority between the stakeholders using official data may be helpful for efficient aid distribution.



Two points are worth mentioning. Firstly, Turkey is on the verge of national elections, and political discourse particularly on the opposition side takes an anti-refugee position. Post-election period may trigger more sanctions due to the deteriorating Turkish economy, socioeconomic implications of the earthquake and possible change of government. Secondly, Syrians grab the attention of researchers due to their high population. It is worth noting that Turkey hosts thousands of foreigners under international protection and irregular migrants. The impacts of the disaster on these groups should also be studied.

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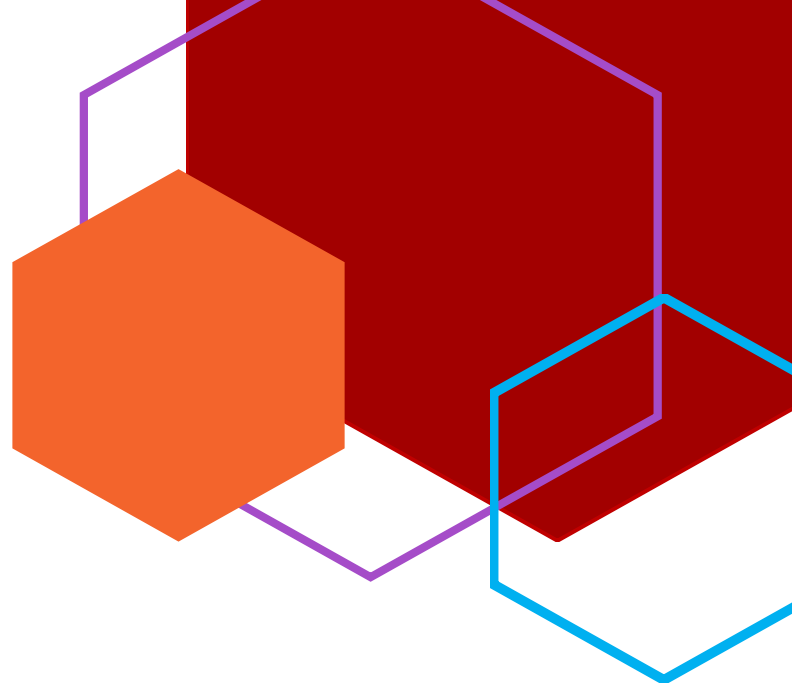
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