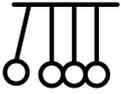


# **The Impact of Illegal (Irregular) Migration on Turkey's Labor Market**

**ECONOMICS**

**Emre Tanır**

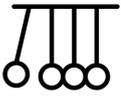


## **Abstract**

This study aims to examine the effects of illegal (irregular) migration on Turkey's labor market and social structure. In particular, the intense migration flows directed toward Turkey following the Syrian civil war are analyzed within the framework of the country's migration policies, the integration–assimilation debate, and the European Union's approach to migration. The study argues that the widespread employment of irregular migrants in the informal sector has expanded low-wage and precarious working conditions, thereby exerting pressure on the native labor force. The concentration of a relatively low-educated migrant population in blue-collar sectors creates a cost advantage for employers while negatively affecting the employment opportunities and wage levels of Turkish workers. In addition to economic impacts, the social and cultural consequences of migration are also discussed, with particular attention given to perceptions of crime, social cohesion, cultural adaptation, and the risks of ghettoization. The study emphasizes that current migration policies may lead to structural problems in the labor market in the long term and highlights the need for new legal regulations to protect native workers. The purpose of this paper is not to generate hostility toward refugees, cause political polarization, or promote racism in any way. Its primary aim is to defend the rights of Turkish workers and to inform the public about this issue.

## **Migration and Its Types**

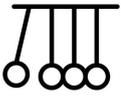
In order to ensure a clearer understanding of this paper and to prevent any possible lack of information or confusion, it is necessary to address migration and its types. According to the Turkish Language Association (TDK), migration is defined as “the act of individuals or communities moving from one country to another, or from one settlement to another, due to



economic, social, or political reasons; relocation, emigration, migration.” Fundamentally, migration is divided into two main categories: forced migration and voluntary migration. Forced migration occurs due to reasons such as war, disasters, or exile, and individuals affected by this type of migration are referred to as “refugees” or “asylum seekers.” Voluntary migration, on the other hand, occurs when individuals themselves decide to migrate in search of better living conditions. Such movements fall under the category of regular (legal) migration. There is also the category of irregular (illegal, undocumented) migration. Irregular migration refers to illegal migration movements whose timing, location, and direction cannot be predicted. These individuals usually lack identity documents, insurance, or other legal records proving their presence in the host country, and they are often invisible to legal or state monitoring mechanisms.

### **Migration in Turkey and Turkey’s Migration Policy**

When examining Turkey’s migration policy, it can be observed that the country has kept its borders open under the framework of “asylum,” particularly for migrants originating from the Arab Peninsula. Unlike the United States, Turkey has not yet implemented an intensive deportation policy. On the contrary, refugees—primarily Syrian individuals under “Temporary Protection”—have been admitted into the country. The Minister of the Interior, Mr. Ali Yerlikaya, stated: “Unfortunately, we witness that many countries have failed this test. Under the leadership of our President, Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey has successfully implemented a migration policy that places people at the center while never compromising public security. As we move toward the goal of a ‘Strong Turkey’ in the ‘Century of Turkey,’ our activities related to migration management have become one of our strongest areas. Turkey is a model country for the world in migration management. During

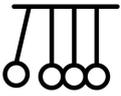


our cabinet term, we have taken very important steps in the field of migration management. We have successfully implemented practices that have become a model for the world, such as our mobile migration point vehicles, which have significantly accelerated our fight against irregular migration while being based on human rights and civilizational values. We have become a country that other nations closely and curiously follow and consult in migration management.”

Unfortunately, these statements suggest that the Minister of the Interior, Mr. Ali Yerlikaya, rather than focusing on the native workforce and employment rates, uses approximately 2,329,547 Syrian individuals who have sought refuge in our country as a political instrument to create a positive image and to demonstrate how successfully Turkey has passed this test. However, following these statements, it can be observed that according to Turkey's October 2025 data, residence permits are rapidly being issued particularly to Middle Eastern nationals who apply for international protection, with their estimated number ranging between 450,000 and 600,000 individuals.

## **Integration or Assimilation?**

How realistic is it to expect the integration of individuals—whether legal or illegal—who have come to our country and continue to reside here? I foresee that a significant majority of the asylum seekers who arrive will not leave Turkey, because most of them have no real reason to do so. Since the end of the Syrian civil war, the number of Syrian



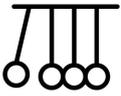
individuals under international protection who have returned to their country, as announced by the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Turkey since December 9, 2024, is 175,512. This figure may appear large at first glance; however, considering that there are more than two million asylum seekers in our country, it is not actually that significant.

So why are they not returning? Because there is no need to. No matter how much we criticize living conditions in Turkey, for them the country they would return to is emerging from war, with an unstable and unreliable administration. Even if they work for wages below the minimum wage and under conditions stripped of basic human rights, attempting to build a family in Turkey with the limited income they earn here is still more advantageous for them. This is precisely where the issue shifts from integration to assimilation.

We all know that after World War II, many Turkish citizens migrated to Germany to work in the post-war labor force. Each of these individuals was provided with the necessary documentation, such as social security registration, residence permits, and work permits. What happened afterward? As expected, a full German–Turkish integration did not occur. Turkish neighborhoods emerged, which later turned into Turkish ghettos. Turks lived within closed communities, speaking a mix of Turkish and German, and due to larger family sizes and higher birth rates, they have continued their lives up to the present day in a manner largely assimilated apart from German society.

My aim is not to promote racism or to create division between Syrians and Turks. However, if the Syrian community does not adapt to living together, does not speak Turkish, and—most importantly—if their fertility rates remain higher than ours, this familiar story may knock on our door this time.

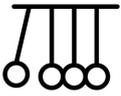
## **European Union and Turkey Policy**



The European Union claims that it has made significant progress regarding asylum seekers. The Migration and Asylum Pact was proposed on April 10, 2024, and was adopted one month and four days later. In addition, the European Commission published a Joint Implementation Plan for the Migration and Asylum Pact in July 2024. While the European Union accepted approximately 4.4 million Ukrainians into its territory, it has shown hesitation when it comes to admitting Syrian nationals. During the Syrian civil war, around 5.6 million Syrians fled the country. Turkey has hosted the largest share of this population, accommodating up to 3.1 million people, whereas other European countries have not come close to sharing this burden. In my humble opinion, the European Union uses Turkey as a gatekeeper. While selectively admitting refugees from the Middle East who have the potential to work as engineers or doctors—much like picking oranges from a basket—it attempts to keep the remaining refugee population at a distance from its own culture.

## **Labor Force**

According to a report written in December 2018, contrary to Friedberg's 2001 argument that the highly educated individuals who migrated to Israel after the collapse of the Soviet Union made a positive contribution to the labor force, the situation in Turkey is quite the opposite. I strongly agree with this assessment, because the majority of refugees coming from Syria are uneducated individuals. They are largely concentrated in blue-collar sectors or in jobs where they directly compete with local rural workers. This situation does not contribute positively to either the labor force or the demographic structure; on the contrary, it causes serious harm to Turkish workers. When employers have the option to hire someone for wages below the minimum wage, they will prefer foreign workers without considering labor rights, as this increases their own profits. Since there is no obligation to provide social



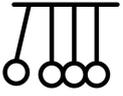
security or pay the legally required minimum wage to Turkish citizens in such cases, the choice becomes very clear. Furthermore, especially in cities where livestock farming is common, the fact that Syrians move and work in groups makes the situation even more advantageous for employers. To protect Turkish workers, a new legislative proposal is needed in parliament; otherwise, Turkish workers will continue to face increasing difficulties.

## **The Social Effects of Migration**

So how does this migration affect us? First and foremost, crime. Although TÜİK, Anadolu Agency, and various other sources state that the crime rate involving refugees in Turkey between 2022 and 2024 is 1.46%, there is a widespread perception in society—and even globally—that refugees, especially those coming from the Middle East, are more likely to be involved in crime. Seeing a group of young Syrian men on the street may make citizens feel uneasy. This is not racism; rather, our cultures are different. Feeling cautious toward a group of people whose cultural norms and behavioral patterns are unfamiliar is entirely natural. Increasing polarization and group-based separation will only intensify this feeling.

Expecting tourists to feel safe in a place where local citizens themselves do not feel secure would be naïve. Speaking specifically about Istanbul, the city has been one of the most visited cities in the world over the past few years, and there has been no observable slowdown in tourism so far. However, if ghetto-like formations similar to those seen in Germany were to emerge, my humble opinion is that this could eventually lead to a decline in tourism

## **Works Cited**



Wikimedia Foundation. (n.d.). *İnsan göçü*. Wikipedia.

[https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%B0nsan\\_g%C3%B6%C3%A7%C3%BC#G%C3%B6%C3%A7\\_t%C3%BCrleri](https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%B0nsan_g%C3%B6%C3%A7%C3%BC#G%C3%B6%C3%A7_t%C3%BCrleri)

Bakanlığı, T. C. İ. (2025, April 14). *T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı*. T.C.

İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı.

<https://www.goc.gov.tr/icisleri-bakani-ali-yerlikaya-turkiye-goc-yonetiminde-dunyaya-model-ulk-merkezicerik>

UNHCR. (n.d.). *Situation syria regional refugee response*. UNHCR Data Portal.

<https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113>

Ceritoglu, E., Yunculer, H. B. G., Torun, H., & Tumen, S. (2017, June 13). *The impact of Syrian refugees on Natives' labor market outcomes in Turkey: Evidence from a quasi-experimental design - IZA Journal of labor policy*. SpringerLink.

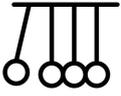
<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s40173-017-0082-4>

Aksu, E., Erzan, R., & Kirdar, M. G. (2018). The Impact of Mass Migration of Syrians on the Turkish Labor Market. IZA Discussion Paper, 12050.

*Türkiye'nin Aylık Göç Trendleri-Ağustos 2025*. Türkiye'nin Aylık Göç trendleri-ağustos 2025 – Göç Araştırmaları Vakfı. (n.d.).

<https://gocvakfi.org/turkiyenin-aylik-goc-trendleri-agustos-2025/>

Bakanlığı, T. C. İ. (n.d.). *Geçici Korumamız Altındaki Suriyeliler*. T.C. İçişleri Bakanlığı Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-korumamiz-altindaki-suriyeliler>



*Medya / Tüm Haberler / Avrupa Birliği Bakanlığı türkiye'nin ab'nin geleceğine Katkılarını Sivil Toplum temsilcileri Ile Birlikte Berlin'De Değerlendirdi.* Avrupa Birliği Bakanlığı Türkiye'nin AB'nin Geleceğine Katkılarını Sivil Toplum Temsilcileri ile Birlikte Berlin'de Değerlendirdi. (n.d.).

[https://www.ab.gov.tr/avrupa-birligi-bakanligi-turkiyenin-abnin-gelecegine-katkilarini-sivil-toplum-temsilcileri-ile-birlikte-berlinde-degerle\\_50507.html](https://www.ab.gov.tr/avrupa-birligi-bakanligi-turkiyenin-abnin-gelecegine-katkilarini-sivil-toplum-temsilcileri-ile-birlikte-berlinde-degerle_50507.html)

Asylum report 2025: Executive summary - EUAA. (n.d.-a).

[https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-06/2025\\_Asymum\\_Report\\_Executive\\_Summary\\_EN.pdf](https://euaa.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/2025-06/2025_Asymum_Report_Executive_Summary_EN.pdf)

Quarterly migration report | displacement tracking matrix. (n.d.-b).

<https://dtm.iom.int/report-product-series/quarterly-migration-report>

BBC. (n.d.). *Ab Sığınma ve Göç Anlaşması: Neler öngörüyor, türkiye'yi Nasıl etkileyebilir?*

BBC News Türkçe. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cj7mmpx10gno>

Türkiye-Ab Arasında 18 mart'ta Varılan Mutabakata ilişkin Soru-Cevaplar / T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. (n.d.).

[https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ab-arasinda-18-mart\\_ta-varilan-mutabakata-iliskin-soru-cevaplar.tr.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ab-arasinda-18-mart_ta-varilan-mutabakata-iliskin-soru-cevaplar.tr.mfa)

*Pact on migration and asylum.* Migration and Home Affairs. (n.d.).

[https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/pact-migration-and-asylum_en)

