



**“EXCEPT GOD, WE HAVE NO ONE”:**

**LACK OF DURABLE SOLUTIONS FOR NON-SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY**

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## Introduction

Turkey is the world's largest host of refugees and asylum-seekers, with the majority – 2.8 million – having fled the conflict in neighboring Syria. Another 290,000 come from other countries, including Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. The Turkish government has taken a number of positive steps to improve the lives of Syrians in Turkey, particularly in education and employment, even holding out the possibility for citizenship. Humanitarian actors are primarily focusing their efforts on the needs of the Syrians, but the protection measures available to displaced persons of other nationalities are far fewer and their living conditions are underreported. Turkey categorizes people who are not Syrian and who have fled from persecution in countries other than in Europe as “conditional refugees,” allowing them to stay in Turkey only temporarily, and placing heavier restrictions on them. This includes constraints on their movements and access to work and leaves them with greater uncertainty about their future. Among the “conditional refugees” are many who face particular vulnerabilities and even more hardships, including LGBT people, single women and single parents, survivors of sexual or gender-based violence, religious minorities, and refugees from African countries. The asylum system in Turkey is relatively new and faces great challenges, but it must be updated to reflect current realities. It should be based on an equitable protection for refugees of all nationalities, and include specific protection measures for refugees facing particular vulnerabilities.

## Recommendations

**In order to address the specific needs of non-Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers, the Turkish government should:**

- Lift its geographic restriction to the 1951 Refugee Convention and enable people of all nationalities to benefit from the rights provided under the Convention, including the rights to work and to freedom of movement.
- Until the geographic restriction is lifted, improve its “satellite cities” system of assigning international protection applicants by:
  - Taking into account the existence of support networks based on nationality, faith, sexual orientation or gender identity, and of places of worship of a person when selecting their satellite city;
  - Providing temporary accommodation that is accepted as a valid address during the process of registering with the authorities;
  - Systematically providing financial support during the first stages of the process of applying for international protection at least until applicants are eligible for a work permit;
  - Facilitating the application process for international protection, search for housing, and access to healthcare and education by adding an appropriate number of dedicated officials and interpreters;
  - Covering the transportation costs of international protection applicants from their initial registration in Ankara to the satellite city to which they are assigned.
- Support resilience and enable “conditional refugees” to better integrate into Turkish society by:
  - Extending the scope of the type of work permits available to “temporary refugees” (currently only applicable to Syrian nationals) to include “conditional refugees,” and thus facilitate their access to the labor market and their ability to support themselves financially;

- Providing support to refugee children attending public schools through Turkish language and cultural orientation classes to help them adjust to the Turkish education system and avoid school dropouts;
- Ensuring that Turkish lessons for adults are provided to help “conditional refugees” with access to services and administrative procedures as well as their social interactions;
- Engaging community representatives and refugee and asylum-seeker civil society organizations of all nationalities through opportunities for dialogue at the national and local level.

**The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should better support refugees from countries other than Syria and European countries by:**

- Operationalizing its planned telephone system by which people can access relevant information to their situation, including asylum status and opportunities for assistance in a language they understand. UNHCR should also ensure that the lines are adequately staffed to be available for callers on a regular basis and continuously evaluate and improve upon the system;
- Increasing outreach to refugees and asylum-seekers living in towns and cities across Turkey, including Istanbul, to better understand the challenges they face and help provide solutions;
- Establishing and maintaining a dialogue with community representatives and civil society organizations of refugees and asylum-seekers from a range of nationalities;
- Ensuring that winterization programs benefit all those who need them and include asylum-seekers as well as recognized refugees;
- Providing additional support in the form of specialized counselors to refugees facing discrimination, including based on their ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, or religion;
- Providing support to survivors of sexual or gender based violence, including providing them with safe accommodation and financial assistance. Measures should include places in safe shelters and psychosocial support with the assistance of an interpreter if needed.

**The European Union (EU) and its member states should:**

- Refrain from sending asylum-seekers back to Turkey under the EU-Turkey statement of March 18, 2016;
- Ensure that EU-funded humanitarian assistance programs in Turkey effectively benefit refugees and asylum-seekers from all countries, not only Syria;
- Include refugees from countries beyond Syria in the EU’s resettlement program and increase the number of non-Syrian refugees resettled by individual EU member states.

**The United States should:**

- Continue to provide resettlement opportunities to refugees from all countries present in Turkey and consider extending the number of available places.

## Background

In 2015, an unprecedented 800,000 people crossed the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Greece with the aim of reaching western and northern European countries. This flow was significantly cut back in 2016, following an agreement between Turkey and the European Union (EU), in which Turkey agreed to prevent people from crossing its borders irregularly and accept refugees returned from Europe in exchange for visa-free travel for Turkish citizens to the EU, revival of EU accession talks for Turkey, and billions of Euros in assistance from the EU.

More than three million refugees now live in Turkey, making it the host to the largest number of refugees in the world. This includes 2.8 million from Syria and 290,000 from other countries, particularly Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran. Adding to this quantitative challenge is a complex political context. Turkey has faced terrorist attacks that have claimed more than 400 lives since June 2015, a conflict in the southeast of the country and significant domestic political upheaval, including a coup attempt, within the last year.

Though it is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Turkey maintains a geographic limitation to its scope and only grants the status of “refugee” within the meaning of the Convention to people fleeing persecution in a European country.

In 2013, Turkey enacted a new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), its first law on asylum. Under that law, those fleeing persecution in other countries are either European refugees, “conditional refugees” from other parts of world whose stay in Turkey is meant to be temporary<sup>1</sup>, or beneficiaries of “subsidiary protection” (people who do not qualify for either status but who cannot return to their country because they would face death, torture or other ill-treatment, or indiscriminate violence). Syrian nationals are granted “temporary protection,” which applies to foreigners forced to leave their country and who arrive in Turkey in a “mass influx.” A particular set of rules and rights apply to Syrians benefiting from “temporary protection.”

The LFIP established the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), within the Ministry of the Interior, as the authority that is responsible for determining who is eligible for international protection and providing that protection. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which had previously determined refugee status in Turkey, continues to play a major role, but it is carrying out a transfer of its tasks and responsibilities to DGMM.

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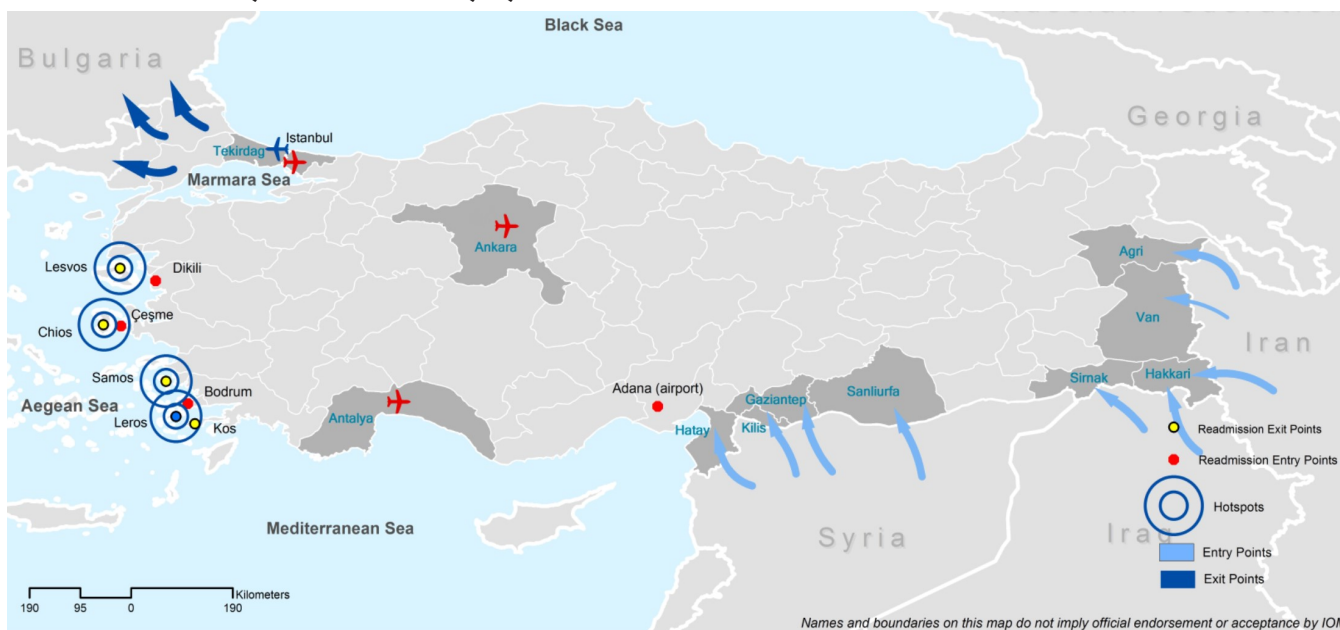
**The high cost of paying smugglers and the closure of Europe’s borders in the spring of 2016 have left thousands of refugees with no other choice but to stay in Turkey with little prospect of moving to another country or of going home.**

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Applicants are currently faced with two parallel procedures in Turkey: the international protection procedure through which they can be recognized as “conditional refugees” on the one hand, and the UNHCR procedure that can lead to a refugee status determination (RSD) and, for a few, to resettlement. All the refugees and asylum-seekers Refugees International (RI) interviewed in Turkey – all non-Syrians – had applied through UNHCR or were intending to do so. Given that their stay in Turkey is meant to be temporary and that they do not have access to a sustainable livelihood, the hope of resettlement is a key motivation for them to apply to UNHCR.

For “conditional refugees,” who are neither European nor Syrian, resettlement numbers are low and the process can take several years. The vast majority of non-Syrians in Turkey – 91 percent – are resettled to the United States, but less than 7,000 refugees of all nationalities had been resettled from Turkey to the United States by mid-December 2016. Some have made the dangerous journey to Europe, but the high cost of paying smugglers and the closure of Europe’s borders in the spring of 2016 have left thousands of refugees with no other choice but to stay in

## Main Exit and Entry Points to Turkey by Land, Air, and Sea



Credit: International Organization for Migration

Turkey with little prospect of moving to another country or of going home.

Refugees of nationalities other than Syrian are excluded from the EU’s resettlement program agreed upon under the EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016, which provides that for every Syrian returned from the Greek islands to Turkey, another Syrian will be resettled in the EU. The majority of projects by humanitarian actors in Turkey, including nongovernmental and international organizations, focus on Syrian refugees.

In December 2016, RI traveled to Turkey to look into the living conditions of refugees from countries other than Syria, their access to international protection, and their prospects for the future. RI staff met with more than 50 refugees and asylum-seekers in five cities as well as representatives of Turkish nongovernmental organizations, the United Nations, EU, and U.S. officials.

*A note on terminology: Unless otherwise specified, the term “refugee” in this report is meant within the meaning of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Where relevant, the terms “conditional refugees” and “international protection applicants” refer to that status as defined under Turkish law. Turkey maintains a geographic limitation to the scope of*

*the 1951 Refugee Convention and only recognizes people as “refugees” if they have fled persecution in a European country. However, for the purposes of this report, a “refugee” is a person fleeing persecution anywhere in the world.*

*To protect the identities of refugees and asylum-seekers cited in this report, their names have been changed.*

## Turkey’s “Satellite City” Asylum System

Upon arrival in Turkey, refugees from Syria are able to register in the city of their choice. Refugees from other countries, however, fall under Turkey’s “satellite city” asylum system, meaning they are assigned to a specific city, required to check in regularly with local authorities, and restricted from movement outside of the city without special permission. Turkey has 62 “satellite cities” (these do not include Istanbul, Ankara, or Izmir), and each month, the Turkish Ministry of the Interior determines which cities are “open” to receive new asylum-seekers. At the time of RI’s visit to Turkey, seventeen cities were “open,” though it varied by nationality.<sup>2</sup> While set up to help share the burden of refugee influxes and avoid over-

## Satellite Cities in Turkey for Refugees and Asylum-Seekers



*Credit: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)*

whelming public services, the system faces and creates many challenges.

The usual process for non-Syrian asylum-seekers begins in Ankara where each individual registers with UNHCR's implementing partner, the Association for Solidarity with Asylum-Seekers and Migrants (ASAM). They are then referred to one of the "open" satellite cities determined by the government, and they must travel there and register with the office of the relevant Provincial Directorate of Migration Management (PDMM). For their registration, applicants must provide an address in that city and then wait for their identity card (in Turkish, kimlik). The applicant must generally find their own mode of transportation to their assigned city and somehow locate an available home and pay enough rent up front to satisfy the landlord.

The time it takes for people to receive their kimlik varies from one place to another and can take between a few days to a few months. The lag carries great significance for the individual since holding a kimlik is required for access to public healthcare as well as primary and secondary education.

Under Turkey's LFIP, "conditional refugees" and applicants for that status have access to free primary and

secondary education and social security and medical insurance – their medical costs in public hospitals are free or, for certain treatments, covered by the state at 80 percent. Six months after they apply for international protection in Turkey, applicants and conditional refugees can apply for a work permit.<sup>3</sup>

Refugees and asylum-seekers must check-in regularly in person or by the head of household with the PDMM office by signing in with a regularity and method that vary between cities. Signing in can involve a photograph, a retinal scan, or simply a signature. Most people interviewed by RI said they had to sign in every two weeks. If they fail to sign in three consecutive times without a justification, their kimlik is no longer valid and the Turkish authorities consider that their asylum case is withdrawn and can take steps for their deportation from Turkey.

The system for applicants and beneficiaries of "conditional refugee" status in Turkey restricts their freedom of movement since they are only allowed to leave their satellite city with a travel permit which the PDMM office grants at its discretion. As reported to RI during its visit to Turkey, they are generally only granted for travel to interviews with UNHCR or for medical reasons, and not always even for those.

According to the LFIP, an in-person interview must take place within 30 days of the applicant’s registration, and a decision made within six months or the applicant must be informed if the process will take longer.<sup>4</sup>

In practice, the process does take longer and the many challenges and restrictions make the system unsustainable. A major challenge is that asylum-seekers in many satellite cities have little to no livelihood opportunities, making it difficult to pay for and sustain housing, food, and the fuel necessary to heat homes in the winter. This forces many refugees and asylum-seekers to work in the informal sector, often outside of their assigned city, facing increased exposure to exploitation and often requiring extensive travel between their city of employment (often Istanbul, which is not a satellite city) and their assigned city.

## Lack of Assistance and Information

One of the greatest challenges faced by refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey is a lack of information on the asylum process and their status within the system at any given time. Those with whom RI spoke described a sense of helplessness and recounted difficulties in accessing information and in following-up on their case with UNHCR, its implementing partner ASAM, and DGMM or PDMM. Several said they had travelled or were intending to travel to Ankara to follow-up on their case at the main UNHCR office, incurring additional costs when they were struggling to cover their basic expenses.

Sara, a 47-year-old woman from Afghanistan caring alone for four of her children, said that once she and her family were recognized as refugees by UNHCR, it took a further four years to start the resettlement process. “After four years, they called us and asked us to go to Ankara for the resettlement interview,” she said. “During those four years, half my salary was spent going to Ankara and trying to approach them.”

Hanan, a 15-year-old Afghan girl, said she left Afghanistan because her family was planning on forcibly marrying her to a man old enough to be her grandfather, as his third

wife. She said she obtained a fake passport stating her age as 23 so she could leave Afghanistan. She said that despite informing the local authorities and UNHCR and its partner organization of her situation and trying to change her age back to her real age, her Turkish identity card stated her age as 23 and not 15. As she was considered to be an adult, she could not go to school nor be considered as part of her older sister’s resettlement case. “My sister was recognized as a refugee. I’m afraid she’ll be resettled, and I’ll stay in Turkey,” she said. “I think the best way to get some information is to go to Ankara and wait at the door [of UNHCR] until someone talks to you. But the cost of going to Ankara is too high.”

UNHCR in Turkey informed RI that they would put in place an assistance helpline in partnership with ASAM and that it would be available in Arabic, Farsi, English, and Turkish. As of January 2017, UNHCR reported that the counseling lines had been equipped and staffed and were expected to be operational within weeks. This is a welcome development given the difficulties people face in accessing the right information. The helpline should be adequately staffed so that it is available for people on a regular basis. UNHCR should also increase its outreach across Turkey to ensure people have access to information about the procedures, their own cases, and about available financial assistance programs. This would enable people to receive information and to avoid the costs and time they incur when traveling to Ankara without a guarantee that they will receive any answers.

## Housing

Under the LFIP, “applicants and international protection beneficiaries shall provide their own accommodation.”<sup>5</sup> The law adds that DGMM “may establish reception and accommodation centers to meet the accommodation, food, healthcare, social, and other needs of applicants and international protection beneficiaries.”<sup>6</sup> However, only 10 percent of Turkey’s 2.8 million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers, and hardly any people of other nationalities, live in state-run camps. The vast majority live in mostly urban settings around the country and have to rely on their own funds and networks to find accommodation. Asylum-seekers and refugees of other nationalities interviewed by RI reported difficulties in finding accommoda-

tion and affording the rent, having to share apartments with strangers, and in the winter months, coping with the cold, humidity, and lack of heating. Most of them said they had arrived in their assigned cities not knowing anyone and never having been there before. The language barrier only adds to the challenge.

Yet, despite the numerous challenges to this legal requirement for registration under the Turkish system and the fact that the problem is widely known, there is little to no assistance available for those seeking housing. Of the more than 50 refugees and asylum-seekers interviewed by RI, only one had received temporary accommodation while searching for housing: her five-year-old son had a serious medical condition and she reported that ASAM had covered the cost of a hotel twice for a total of three weeks.

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In the absence of any assistance or familiarity with their assigned cities, some asylum-seekers resort to sleeping in parks for days or even weeks. Parveen, a 33-year-old Afghan woman alone with her two children, told RI she and her children had lived in a park for two months in Istanbul before being offered accommodation by another Afghan family. She had not registered with the Turkish authorities or with UNHCR at the time of the interview with RI. A 23-year-old Afghan man told RI that his wife and seven-year-old daughter spent two days sleeping outside in their assigned city of Tokat, looking for housing so that they could provide the address required for registration. The

man could not accompany his wife and daughter because he had just found informal employment in Istanbul and could not afford to miss a day of work and risk losing his job. The need for income to pay for housing had to be balanced with the search for housing itself. After a fruitless search, his wife and daughter returned to Istanbul and remained unregistered at the time of the interview with RI.

The man told RI he was waiting for the end of winter to register with UNHCR in Ankara because he feared being referred to a small satellite city on Turkey's borders, where he would have no accommodation and no job opportunities. "If I go to UNHCR now they'll refer me to the borders. We'll be homeless for a week and we'll die," he said. "After the winter, if we're homeless for a week, we can stay in a park."

Those who do find housing often have to settle for crowded and unsafe conditions and face a constant struggle to keep up with the rent. In Aksaray, Khaled, a 39-year-old father of four, said that while he found work during the summer selling balloons in the street, at the time of the interview with RI he had not worked in two months. His rent is TRY 300 (USD 86)<sup>1</sup> per month, and he had not paid it in three months. Abdullah, a 64-year-old asylum-seeker from Afghanistan living in Kayseri said nine members of his family share one apartment to reduce the costs. He and four other family members rely on one of his sons who works in a furniture workshop earning TRY 600 (USD 172) per month. Once they have paid the rent, only TRY 150 (USD 43) is left for the five family members. "The furniture, the clothes we are wearing, we haven't bought anything here," he said. He even pointed to the cardboard stacked next to the stove. He said they were given to him and his family by local Turkish people.

Finding accommodation is particularly difficult for those facing additional vulnerabilities, including the cases of LGBT refugees, members of religious minorities, and single women.

Women alone or with children described the challenges of having to share homes with people they barely knew.

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<sup>1</sup> Conversions are based on the exchange rate as of December 1, 2016: 1 Turkish Lira (TRY) = 0.286 US Dollars (USD) ([www.xe.com](http://www.xe.com)).





Afghan refugees in Aksaray, Turkey.

On the day of the interview with RI, Parveen, the woman who had lived with her son and daughter in a park for two months, was looking for a place to live because her hosts were leaving Turkey three days later. “I found a room in a flat shared with another Afghan family, for TRY 700 [USD 200].” The room had no furniture. “I offered 200 or 300, I explained that I can’t work, there’s no one to look after my children.” She said she had tried to find work and approached textile workshops, but they said she could not bring her children to work.

Judith, a 32-year-old single mother from Nigeria and a survivor of sexual abuse, said she had already moved several times, including from a crowded apartment in which two other women were raped, saying she was only saved because she was pregnant at the time. At the time RI spoke with her, she and her daughter were sharing a room with a woman from Zimbabwe and her daughter in an apartment with men from other countries, sharing one bathroom and kitchen. “It’s not ok,” she said about living with those men, “but there’s nothing we can do.”

## Winter

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**The difficulties in finding accommodation are particularly difficult for those facing additional vulnerabilities, including the cases of LGBT refugees, members of religious minorities, and single women.**

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RI visited Turkey in December and witnessed first-hand how many refugees and asylum-seekers are exposed to the cold due to the poor quality of their accommodation and their inability to afford proper heating. During the winter months, temperatures in Turkey can fall below freezing and it sometimes snows. For refugees and asylum-seekers living in homes without heating and without the funds to pay for heating or to buy wood or coal, conditions are particularly harsh. At the time of writing, a UNHCR winter assistance program aimed to support 510,000 refugees in Turkey between November 2016 and January

2017, covering 50 provinces. The target was 480,000 Syrians and 30,000 refugees of other nationalities. The assistance consisted of a one-time payment of between TRY 600 (USD 172) and 900 (USD 257) per household, in the form of debit cards beneficiaries can spend in any store that accepts MasterCard. Eligibility criteria included: “i) households with at least one child; ii) elderly-headed households; iii) single females; iv) single parent households; v) households with family members affected by disabilities or serious medical conditions; vi) unaccompanied and separated children with a caregiver; vii) LGBT individuals.”<sup>8</sup>

While the winterization program is an important effort to help refugees during the winter months, many people who need assistance are excluded from its scope due to the limited number of beneficiaries and to the exclusion of asylum-seekers. As for the other eligibility criteria, most of the refugees and asylum-seekers of non-Syrian nationality interviewed by RI fell into at least one of those categories. The Turkish Government also has winterization programs which benefit some refugees and asylum-seekers, but these are also limited. Furthermore, while RI



An Afghan refugee in Denizli, Turkey. Many refugees and asylum-seekers depend on coal-burning stoves during the winter, but not all receive the assistance they need to afford heating.

found that both asylum-seekers and recognized refugees urgently needed help to keep their homes warm during the winter, the main barriers – their inability to work in the formal sector and to have an adequate and regular income – remain and must be addressed.

## Health

Turkey provides generous access to its public healthcare system, but it remains insufficient amid the immense challenges faced by refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey, including financial and language barriers and inadequate housing conditions. Though several people said they received good medical treatment in Turkey, many said their lack of financial means to cover even the 20 percent they are required to pay in Turkish hospitals made it difficult. Poor living conditions and exposure to the cold weather and humidity also make it difficult for people to treat some medical conditions.

Sana, an 18-year-old Afghan girl living with her parents and siblings in Denizli, said she had dropped out of high school because of her asthma. She and all her family sleep on the floor of a ground floor apartment, where they try to keep the cold and humidity away with a coal stove.

Some asylum-seekers and refugees raised their inability to communicate with medical professionals as an obstacle when seeking healthcare. Ashraf, a 46-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker living with his wife and six children in Kayseri, told RI that: “we have problems communicating with doctors. Sometimes we have medical problems but we can’t go because we can’t communicate [with them].”

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**“We have problems communicating with doctors. Sometimes we have medical problems but we can’t go because we can’t communicate [with them].”**

— Ashraf, 46, Afghan asylum-seeker in Kayseri

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Selma, a transgender refugee from Iran living in a home where other LGBT people are living, described the living conditions as particularly harsh during the winter: “We don’t have a bath, we don’t have hot water.” She said there was no heating in the house and that when she washed her hair, she used a kettle. The conditions were particularly difficult for her because she is HIV positive. “What can I do now?” she asked. “The weather is getting colder. The doctor told me you mustn’t catch cold because of your illness. I don’t have any place to go.”

Fatima, an Afghan asylum-seeker who said she had medical problems that started in Afghanistan, told RI she faced difficulties because of the lack of food. “I usually have many medicines daily,” she said. “But I don’t have enough food to take the medicines.”

## Livelihoods

Applicants and beneficiaries of the “conditional refugee status” in Turkey can only work if they obtain a work permit and as of six months after they apply for international protection. The work permit application must be submitted by both the employer and employee to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the employer must submit other documents including a balance sheet of loss and profit statement for the past year certified by the tax authorities. The workplace must employ at least five Turkish nationals for every foreign employee.

All the refugees and asylum-seekers interviewed by RI in Turkey who were or had been working were employed in the informal sector in difficult conditions: long hours, little pay that was often reported as being lower than their Turkish co-workers’ salaries, and unpaid wages.

Some described sexual harassment and discrimination on grounds of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Because of Turkey’s satellite city system, refugees and asylum-seekers of non-Syrian nationality can find themselves in places with little or no employment opportunities. As a result, many live in Istanbul and either travel regularly to the city to which they were assigned to sign-in – which can be costly and time consuming – or lose their status and the validity of their Turkish identity document. According to an NGO working with refugees in Turkey,



Ali, a 48-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker with his grandson in Kayseri, Turkey. “Financial problems can be solved, something figured out, but not having a clear future really is worrying for us,” he told RI about one of the most widely shared concerns among refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey.

there are 3,000 non-Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Istanbul.

Sara, the Afghan woman caring alone for four of her children, has been in Turkey for six years and lives in the city of Konya. She said that despite her health problems, she has worked to support her children and to ensure they went to school. “Foreigners here don’t have work permits. And when we approached employers for jobs, they said you don’t have a work permit. We said ‘should we steal?’” She said she found work packaging sweets and clothes, working from 8:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. six days a week, but she wasn’t paid as much as her Turkish co-workers. “It’s very difficult to live in Turkey,” she said. “First, the financial problems, then the medical problems. Because if you’re healthy, maybe you can work.”

Stephane, a 12-year-old Iraqi Christian boy from Mosul, Iraq, lives in an apartment in Istanbul with his parents, three brothers, uncle, and aunt. At the time of the inter-

view with RI, he had been working for two months as a cleaner in a hair salon, from 10:00am to 11:00pm with a one hour lunch break, six days per week. He said he had no salary and relied on tips.

## Pay

The majority of refugees and asylum-seekers interviewed by RI who were or had been employed in the informal sector said they were not paid as much as their Turkish co-workers or that they had not received the wages they were promised. Almost all said they were paid below the Turkish minimum wage, which as of January 2017 was TRY 1,300 (USD 372) per month. Interviewees also felt they could not complain about the pay or their working conditions because they are foreigners and working illegally. This results in exploitation, feelings of discrimination, and great difficulties for people to support themselves and their families financially.

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**“We can’t complain to the police because they’ll say you’re illegal (and) because we’re illegal, we can only do construction [work] outside. We can’t work in factories inside, where it’s warm. We approached many factories and restaurants and they said, ‘you don’t have documents and you don’t have work permits.’”**

— Reza, 41, Afghan refugee in Aksaray

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Reza, a 41-year-old refugee from Afghanistan living with his family in Aksaray, said although some employers do not pay the amount they promised, “We can’t complain to the police because they’ll say you’re illegal (and) because we’re illegal, we can only do construction [work] outside. We can’t work in factories where it’s warm and inside. We approached many factories and restaurants and they

said, ‘you don’t have documents and you don’t have work permits.’”

Jalal, a 28-year-old from Iran living in Istanbul (though he is registered in the city of Yalova), said, “I do occasional work but because I’m working illegally, they don’t pay much: if the salary is TRY 1,000 [USD 286], they pay me TRY 300 [USD 86]. For example I was working in a hotel for 12 hours per day. I got TRY 300 [USD 86]. It drove me crazy. We had agreed on TRY 1,500 [USD 429] for a month.”

Hasan, a 34-year-old asylum-seeker from Afghanistan, said he had tried to find work in the city of Bolu, where he was referred: “I looked for work in textile shops in Bolu. They requested a police work permit. I went to the police and they said it is not possible to give you a work permit.” He moved to Istanbul and worked in a textile workshop there. He traveled to Bolu every two weeks to provide his signature, leaving at night and coming back to work by 2:00pm the next day. He told RI he had worked from 8:00am to 8:00pm five and a half days per week for TRY 1,300 (USD 372) per month. He, too, said he sometimes did not receive his pay.

“The problem is that when you work here, you don’t know the language,” Somaya, an Iranian refugee living in Istanbul who had worked in a hair salon, told RI. “They can take advantage of you and not pay you... Every month, they had their reasons for not paying me,” she said. “I tried to find other jobs, but I saw the situation was the same.” As a result, she was relying financially on her sister, who sometimes works as a hairdresser and also supports her husband and three children.

## Working Conditions

Asylum-seekers and refugees interviewed by RI also described difficult working conditions, harassment, and discrimination at work.

Nadine, an asylum-seeker from Cameroon, said she tried different types of work in Istanbul, but she faced sexual harassment. “If the boss hits on you and you refuse you can’t work,” she said. “If you accept, you become a sexual object.”



Many refugees in Turkey face particular vulnerabilities based on their race, religion, or sexual identity. Pictured above are two transgender women from Iran.

Judith, the 32-year-old refugee from Nigeria and single mother, told RI she had worked in a restaurant for TRY 100 (USD 29), from 8:00am to 11:00pm, but that she stopped when she could no longer take her daughter. “I took my daughter, but it was not okay because so many people were smoking. It was three months ago. My baby is sick and with smoking...she gets sick easily.”

Ahmad, a 58-year-old torture survivor and refugee from Afghanistan, said, “I worked a couple of months in a textile workshop. I had to stay on my feet, and my knees got worse. So I left.” He said the salary was TRY 600 (USD 172) per month, working from 8:00am to 8:00pm five and a half days per week. His daughter is a doctor in Istanbul, and he and seven other relatives live with her. “It’s really difficult for me,” he said. “I’m a burden for her. She’s paying for me because I can’t work.”

Ronak, a 36-year-old refugee from Iran, told RI she had tried working in textile workshops in the city of Denizli, but she left when she did not receive her wages. She then went to work in a plastic recycling factory. “I worked there for 14 months and got sick, and now I have asthma

because of the chemicals,” she said. She said day shifts were 12 hours and night shifts were 14 hours, and that she only had two days off per month. She was paid TRY 1,000 (USD 286) per month.

## People with Particular Vulnerabilities

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**“The problem is not identifying the vulnerable, but whom do you pick? The vulnerable among the vulnerable?”**

— UN official in Turkey

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The challenges in accessing adequate and affordable housing and in supporting themselves and their families financially were shared by all the refugees and asylum-seekers interviewed by RI. But among the vulnerable were

many who faced additional difficulties due to their race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, or past experiences of sexual or gender-based violence. Women who had survived sexual or gender-based violence and LGBT refugees and asylum-seekers described particularly difficult and painful experiences, and a lack of support from the Turkish government and aid organizations.

Africans interviewed by RI reported rampant racism. Judith, the refugee from Nigeria, said, “If you enter the bus, if you sit down, they [the other passengers] get up. Or they even ask you to get up. It happened so many times. When I was pregnant, normally there’s a seat for pregnant women. Because we’re “yabancı” [foreigners] they don’t get up.”

Daniel, a 38-year-old asylum-seeker from Cameroon, recounted problems he faced working in a factory, telling RI, “When the others take a break, you, the black person, you’re told ‘work fast.’” When he requested a raise, he was fired. He also faced discrimination at the hospital, being turned away by hospital staff when trying to donate blood for his ailing son and was told that they did not accept blood from black people.

“It’s not all Turkey that’s bad. But some people don’t like black people,” said Daniel, an asylum-seeker from Cameroon. “The contempt we get because we’re black... we’re humiliated. We Africans here in Turkey, we suffer... In the metro, if you sit down others get up. It’s unbearable,” added his partner Nadine, also an asylum-seeker from Cameroon.

Christian refugees and asylum-seekers face the added challenge of integrating into a mostly Muslim society. Several Iraqi Christians in Istanbul told RI that one of the main reasons they chose not to stay in their assigned satellite cities was because there were no churches. One refugee searching for housing reported being told outright, “We do not rent to Christians.”

LGBT refugees and asylum-seekers faced their own discrimination, adding to the already formidable challenges of finding work, housing, and medical treatment.

Sina, a 31-year-old gay man from Iran, told RI that he had faced difficulties finding an apartment and was insulted and humiliated when traveling by bus, shopping, and completing administrative tasks, and even at the dentist’s office. He said finding a job as a refugee was difficult, “but it gets more difficult when you’re found to be LGBT, for example if someone (a co-worker for instance) tells the boss you’re LGBT. I’ve never found a job in Turkey, but my partner was fired for being LGBT.”

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**“The contempt we get because we’re black... we’re humiliated. We Africans here in Turkey, we suffer... In the metro, if you sit down others get up. It’s unbearable.”**

— *Nadine, asylum-seeker from Cameroon*

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Jalal, a 28-year-old gay refugee from Iran said that when he was living in Yalova, the satellite city to which he was referred, he was beaten-up three times in the street. He said the police mocked him when he went to file a complaint.

Anna, a 30-year-old transgender refugee from Iran, said she tried working in a textile factory and in a restaurant in Denizli but was dismissed by both when the managers found out she was transgender. She said one of them cut her on her arm. “After that, I stopped working in Turkish places because I knew I would never be free. Now I’m just teaching English to Iranian refugees.”

She said that when she tried living in Eskisehir, one of the cities LGBT refugees are referred to, she was physically attacked, was once threatened by a man with a gun in her home, and faced discrimination in finding accommodation and in healthcare: “I got a toothache. I went to the doctor as myself [as a woman]. The doctor said ‘there’s nothing wrong with your tooth. There’s something wrong with your mind. Go to a psychologist.’ After one month, I went back to the doctor’s in boys’ clothes. He fixed my teeth in two hours.” Anna said that both in Denizli and Eskisehir, she could not find a place to rent as long as she

## Amina's Story

Amina, a 20-year-old Afghan woman, left Iran – where she had been living with her family – and traveled alone to Turkey. In high school, a man raped her and threatened to tell her family, who were very religious. “He kept persecuting me. It lasted three or four years,” she said. “Even if I made a complaint, my father would be the first to kill me.” She said she had made several suicide attempts. “I came illegally [to Turkey]. I was the only female in the group crossing the borders. I went directly to Ankara and applied for asylum with UNHCR.” Amina was referred to Yozgat, in Central Anatolia. “It was a very conservative city. I got depressed. I was not wearing my hijab there, I noticed all the men looking at me differently. There were some women without hijabs but they were Turkish. I looked different.”

“After I decided not to live in Yozgat anymore, I was in Istanbul, but I was going through the [asylum] process, going to Ankara and Yozgat. [At the bus station], when the bus was moving, I asked them to take me to Ankara, for example [at a cheaper rate], and sometimes they accepted. I was harassed,” she said. “There were two drivers who took turns driving. I used to pretend I was sleeping and they used to approach me, sometimes touch me. Once a week I went to Ankara or Yozgat. I used to wear a ring to pretend I was married, but it didn't change.” Yozgat is 450 miles from Istanbul.

Amina said she tried to change her city to a place nearer Istanbul, so she went to Yalova to see if she would be able to live there. “I saw a sign saying they needed women to serve in a cafe, so I approached the boss. The first day was calm, then the boss suggested intercourse.” Amina said she requested her wages for the hours she had worked. He suggested she leave the next day, so she stayed and waited for her money. “That night, two Syrian men raped me,” she said.

Amina returned to Istanbul and found two other women to live with. She said she worked in cafes but that she had to change many times because of sexual harassment. She was paid TRY 35 (USD 10) per day for 12 hours of work. “I received less money than others [who were Turks] because I'm an asylum-seeker. Others got TRY 50 [USD 14], or TRY 60 [USD 17], or more, but I worked more than them,” she said. She found out she was pregnant from the time she was raped in Yalova and decided to have an abortion.

Her request to change her city from Yozgat to Ducze, 150 miles from Istanbul, was accepted. She said she was happy about the transfer because she could continue living in Istanbul with her friends.

“What I want is to have an education, to go to school, to develop myself,” she said.



An Afghan family in Kayseri, Turkey.

was dressed as a woman. “Ten days after I came to Turkey, I was forced to live like a boy again... I understood no one will rent a house to me, so I changed to boy’s clothes. Within one hour, they gave me a room. It made me feel awful,” she said.

## Durable Solutions?

Enshrined in the international refugee architecture is the objective of durable solutions to the plight of refugees, yet none of these are certain in Turkey. UNHCR’s core mandate aims for three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. The first is limited by the fact that the conditions from which refugees have fled in their countries of origin largely persist. The second is limited by the “conditional refugee” status under Turkish law, which effectively rules out the possibility of local integration. That leaves only resettlement to a third country, but the reality is that only a fraction of refugees in Turkey are benefiting from the minimal number of resettlement places offered by other countries.

A person working with refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey told RI that: “One of the main problems with the asylum system is that it’s temporary. Anyone who isn’t a European is seen as temporary... Even if they’re resettled, it takes years, they have to rely on their own resources. Local integration is out of the question, there are very few voluntary repatriations, and resettlement quotas are very limited.”

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In 2016, around 10,000 refugees of all nationalities (including Syrians) departed from Turkey to third countries for resettlement. More than 90 percent of non-Syrian



refugees who are resettled from Turkey are settled in the United States. Yet in 2016, less than 7,000 refugees of all nationalities (including Syrians) traveled to the United States as part of that scheme. Those who do benefit, do so typically only after a period of uncertainty that can take years, and struggle to integrate and cope in the meantime.

The situation is complicated by the fact that expectations are often much higher than reality. As a UN official in Turkey said to RI, “the expectations of persons of concern in terms of resettlement are very high, especially as traditionally everyone was resettled.” Despite the fact that only a small fraction of refugees will be resettled, resettlement was a leading expectation for nearly all of the refugees with whom RI spoke.

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**“When the process is long, there are psychological problems... We have observed sleeplessness, depression, eating disorders, nervous behavior. All these problems sometimes end in domestic violence.”**

— *Social worker assisting refugees and asylum-seekers*

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The lack of durable solutions and the uncertainty inherent in the process even for those few who are successfully resettled leads to great amounts of stress and hopelessness. Indeed, the most frequently cited challenge mentioned to RI during the course of interviews, and one that pervaded and exacerbated each of the other main challenges was the overall uncertainty about each individual’s status and future.

Somaya, a 38-year-old Iranian refugee, who has been in Istanbul for four years told RI, “We are waiting here, and we are suffering... I feel terrible and uncomfortable about our situation because we are undecided by the United Nations and don’t know how long we will be here.” This was echoed by Ali, a 48-year-old Afghan asylum-seeker, living with his wife, four sons, daughter-in-law, and grandson, who told RI, “The biggest challenge is not having a clear situation, not knowing what will happen to

you. Financial problems can be solved, something figured out, but not having a clear future really is worrying for us.” Ahmad, a 58-year-old Afghan refugee and a torture survivor put it in yet starker terms saying, “This situation, when your future is in the hands of others, it makes you depressed. Lots of mental and physical pressure. Being in Turkey is another torture for me.”

The stress and uncertainty contributes to many further problems ranging from mental health issues to physical abuse. One social worker in an organization assisting refugees and asylum-seekers told RI that for people hoping to be resettled to another country, “When the process is long, there are psychological problems...We have observed sleeplessness, depression, eating disorders, nervous behavior. All these problems sometimes end in domestic violence.” Others recounted cases of hopeless refugees resorting to prostitution or succumbing to depression and committing suicide.

These challenges are exacerbated by feelings of discrimination when refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities compare the (real or perceived) treatment of Syrian refugees and the services they receive. This perception applies both to prospects for resettlement and to financial and other types of humanitarian assistance provided by UNHCR, the Turkish government and other actors.

“When we approach UNHCR, the only answer is ‘you have to wait. Now is the turn of Syrians and other nationalities. You have to wait because Afghans are not accepted for resettlement,’” Khaled, an Afghan refugee in Aksaray told RI. “They said ‘it’s not our fault (that) the other countries don’t accept you.’ The only answer is ‘you have to wait.’ I’ve been waiting since 2007,” he said. “We don’t have any future. We’re under pressure without the right to work and without any answers.”

Similarly, the distinction that the Turkish government makes on the national level between Syrian refugees and non-Syrian “conditional refugees” plays out at the local level. One refugee rights activist told RI that while the governor of the city of Kayseri regularly meets with organizations representing the Syrian refugee community, the Afghan Refugees Association in Turkey has been

requesting to be included in such meetings for three years without success.

The lack of certainty and durable solutions leads refugees and asylum-seekers to seek solutions of their own. In some cases, this means seeking work illegally in the informal sector or living without authorization in cities like Istanbul where there is greater access to jobs, community support networks, and churches for those who are Christian. In more extreme cases, it means risking their lives to cross borders to countries perceived to be more welcoming. Though the EU-Turkey agreement has largely stemmed the flow of refugees from Turkey to Europe, people continue to risk their lives across the Mediterranean and Turkey's land border with Greece.

“Once you register as a refugee, it's a long process. That's why people take boats to Greece,” Judith, the Nigerian refugee living in Istanbul, told RI.

All three of UNHCR's paths to durable solutions for refugees remain elusive in Turkey today. While the first path requires a much more complex and long term geo-political effort to address the root causes of displacement from Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, and many other countries, there is much that can be done to support the other two durable solutions in the short term. Resettlement numbers remain extremely low for refugees in Turkey in general, but especially so for non-Syrian refugees. It will be crucial to maintain, if not increase the opportunities for resettlement to third countries.

Maintaining and increasing resettlement opportunities will be important not only to the refugees themselves, but also for the credibility of other governments discussing the issue of refugees in Turkey. As one UN official told RI, the current numbers being resettled, despite their small contribution to durable solutions, are more than symbolic. They carry value in the example of willingness to keep borders open for the most vulnerable that provides leverage when asking more of the countries at the front lines of the refugee crisis. Further, the consequences of cutting off resettlement are not just symbolic. The numbers of refugees, whether from Syria or other nations, being resettled from Turkey may be miniscule in comparison to the overall numbers. But those who are resettled

are among the most vulnerable, meaning that failing to resettle them would be a disproportionately large strain on Turkey's ability to protect others, not to mention the individual effects of taking away one of the remaining granules of hope held by many refugees who are willing to do their best to work within the system in hopes of the possibility of resettlement.

The other durable solution, local integration, should be a goal for Turkey. President Erdogan has already stated his intention to open a path to citizenship for some Syrians and Iraqis. Such a path should be advanced and expanded to refugees and asylum-seekers from all nations. The situation in Turkey has changed since its laws pertaining to refugees and asylum-seekers were drafted. Turkey needs to, with assistance from the international community, acknowledge that fact and address the changes by enabling people to integrate into Turkish society. In the interim, steps should be taken by both the Turkish government and UNHCR to promote better reception and consequently better resilience among the population of refugees and asylum-seekers. This could include initial housing and cultural orientation programs to better onboard refugees into satellite cities. It could also include expanded language programs for children and adults to better navigate their new environment. It should also include hiring more interpreters, particularly to help with accessing healthcare, and psychosocial support professionals.

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**Services should be provided based on particular need and vulnerability rather than from where an individual has fled.**

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Given the scope of the challenge, prioritizing even among the vulnerable will be an unavoidable necessity. Those facing particular vulnerabilities – whether because of race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, or past sexual abuse or torture – should be provided with appropriate services and considerations, including access to specialized psychosocial professionals, support networks, and shelters.

Finally, the distinction between Syrian and non-Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers should be dismantled. This is true both within the Turkish asylum system and among the international donor community. Services should be provided based on particular need and vulnerability rather than from where an individual has fled.

## Conclusion

As conflicts that have pushed most of the more than three million refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey from their homes show no signs of being solved in the immediate future, Turkish laws and policies must reflect this reality. The Turkish government should enable refugees and asylum-seekers of all nationalities to support themselves through legal and safe employment and ensure that their children receive an education. While Turkey's asylum system was created recently and needs more time to be fully functional, the needs of the men, women, and children seeking safety in Turkey are urgent and must be addressed by Turkey with the support of humanitarian actors operating in the country. The latter should include refugees and asylum-seekers of all nationalities in their programs as well as specific protection measures for those facing particular vulnerabilities.

For the conditions of refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey to improve, it is vital that the international community do its part. Other countries, including EU member states and the United States, should maintain and expand their resettlement programs and continue to provide



funding to help Turkey address the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers there, while requiring transparency for the way the funds are spent. In all likelihood, Turkey will continue to be the world's largest host of refugees and asylum-seekers in 2017. Solidarity by countries hosting a fraction of the numbers Turkey is facing will be key.

*Izza Leghtas and Daniel Sullivan traveled to Turkey in December 2016. RI extends a special thanks to the refugees and asylum-seekers who shared their stories with us.*

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## Endnotes



1. Article 62 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.
2. At the time of RI's visit to Turkey in December 2016, the "open" satellite cities were: Adıyaman, Ağrı, Ardahan, Artvin, Bayburt, Elazığ, Erzurum, Giresun, Gümüşhane, Iğdır, Karabük, Kars, Ordu, Tokat, and Van. Yozgat and Aksaray were "open" for the reception of asylum-seekers from Iraq and Iran but not Afghanistan.
3. Article 89(4) of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.
4. Articles 75 and 78 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.
5. Article 95(1) of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.
6. Article 95(2) of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection.
7. "Turkey 2016/2017 Winter Assistance Update, Cash Based Interventions," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), December 9, 2016, <https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=12600>.

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