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From Hospitality to Dignified Return: Politics of Migration Management in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's current migration management system is largely shaped by the influx of Syrian refugees escaping the civil war, and is centered on the politics of hospitality that diverts from the legalistic logic of global human rights and entitlements. It promotes an alternative cultural and political hegemony, portraying Turkey as a more ethical, benevolent, and explicitly non-Western humanitarian protector. Nevertheless, with its conditional underpinnings and imperial paternalistic associations, hospitality also enables and legitimizes violent bordering practices, as well as exploitative, at times lethal, migrant labor regimes.

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1 From Hospitality to Dignified Return: Politics of Migration Management in Turkey

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INTRO

The International Organization of Migration estimates nearly four million documented refugees and asylum seekers in Turkey: one of the largest such groups in the world for nine consecutive years.[1] Mostly composed of Syrians under temporary protection, this number does not account for the undocumented immigrants from Afghanistan, Congo, Egypt, Somalia, Yemen, among other places. It is estimated that the number of documented and undocumented immigrants reaches nearly five million in total, two and a half million of whom are seeking international protection.

Turkey's current migration management system came into effect in 2014 and is a product of human rights oriented bureaucratic reform programs that were undertaken in the early 2000s, in tandem with the country's now dissipated EU accession process (Babül 2017). This period was marked by an inflation of civil society development and human rights activism in Turkey, both enabled by EU-related accession assistance resources and know-how that poured into the country (Babül 2020). The 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection is one of the significant achievements of this reform era. It was the product of long-lasting international pressure pushing Turkey to

1 https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl1461/files/reports/Türkiye%20—%20Migrant%20Presence%20Monitoring%20-%20Situation%20Report%20%28Mar%202025%29.pdf?iframe=true

reckon with its transit country status by regularizing, systematizing, and civilianizing its migration management system that has been fragmented, ad hoc, and heavily securitized (Kirişçi 2014). The law established the Presidency of Migration Management as a civilian-bureaucratic institution that is subject to judicial oversight, allowing Turkey to be classified as a "safe third country." This in turn cleared the way for the 2016 EU-Turkey readmission agreement, often defined by policy analysts as a burden-shifting, externalization strategy on the part of the EU (Gökalp Aras 2020). With the agreement, the EU promised visa liberalization (which was never realized) and €6 billion to aid migration management efforts; in exchange, Turkey had to accept irregular migrants back, particularly the Syrian refugees.

In addition to signifying the standardization, regularization, and civilianization of migration management, this new system asserted government control, both of the field of migration management, and over the people encapsulated in that field (Norman 2014). This new landscape was criticized by immigrants' rights advocates as the state's monopolization and exertion of total control. Despite such criticism, the UNHCR and the EU praised the new approach as an indicator of government reckoning: with the reality of migration in Turkey and its responsibility for managing it.

Hospitality as Civilizational Heritage and Hierarchies of Belonging

While this new period of governance reorganized Turkey's migration regime to align with international norms and standards, it also helped formulate an alternative rationality of migration management that heavily references civilizational, moral values, posited as key characteristics of Turkish national culture (Sert & Danış 2021). Simply put, these values include tolerance, generosity, compassion, and hospitality, claimed to be inherited from the ancestors, and referencing a particular way of life shaped by Islamic values. In various promotional and public announcement material produced by the Directorate of Migration Management and the speeches delivered by President Erdogan and other government figures Turkey's altruistic approach to migration management is contrasted with Europe's hypocritical and opportunistic policies. For instance, at the opening speech of the Directorate of Migration Management's 2020 International Migrants Day programming, former interior minister Süleyman Soylu claimed that whereas "the West (…) has always (…) labeled the regions of the world that they have seen afar, (…) shown contempt towards the civilization, knowledge (…) and (…) the color of the skin of people in this region [while exploiting] its oil, minerals, and strategic position," Turkey "has fulfilled the requirements of her civilization, morality she has inherited from her ancestors, her understanding of life, and her faith." [2] Migration

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vwr4zylujb8&list=RDCMUCk4p0zl3EyDVF9Oi4oZNrpA&index=22

management thus promotes an alternative cultural hegemony, one which emphasizes Euroscepticism and the glorification of a mythical civilizational heritage, portraying Turkey as an alternative, more ethical, and explicitly non-Western humanitarian protector.

Nevertheless, this benevolent rhetoric of hospitality is coupled with an imperial paternalism and ethno- nationalism that also grounds society-wide anti-immigrant, anti-Syrian sentiments, as well as violent immigration policies. Looking at official promotional material and tracing the hegemonic public discourse through digital platforms and social media, we see that immigrants, particularly Syrians under temporary protection status, are constantly expected to prove themselves worthy of Turkey's hospitality by performing abstinence, deference, and gratitude. For instance, in the same International Migrant's Day programming, immigrants from various countries who are dressed in traditional Turkish regional attire in staged backgrounds of national landscapes pay tribute to their generous host by reciting praises such as: "İyi ki varsın Türkiye" (Thank God you exist, Turkey); "Çok özelsin, çok güzelsin. Seni sevmemek mümkün mü?" (You are so special and beautiful. Is it possible to not love you?); "Türkiye'de yaşadığım için çok mutluyum" (I am so glad I live in Turkey). The same messages describe Turkey as "a piece of heaven, a love in the hearts," "the love of millions," and "the love of the oppressed," "whose bridge of hearts is unlimited," and "taking the one who fell into fire under its wings." Viewed in light of the classical anthropological literature on hospitality, immigrants who lost their homes, and with it the ability to reciprocate their host's generosity, are expected to pay back by helping to build the reputation of their host (Pitt-Rivers 2012 [1977]).

Nevertheless, the success of those performances of gratitude and deservingness are tied to the particular position of the performers within the hierarchical ethno-religious system of belonging in Turkey (Danış & Parla 2009, Parla 2019), as well as how long they are expected to stay in the country and where their intended final destination is. For instance, in a widely circulated 2019 You Tube video featuring a Syrian Turkmen refugee who recounts his devastating experience of war, expresses both his gratitude for Turkey's hospitality and his determination to return to his homeland, the majority of over 700 commentators praise his genuine gratefulness, and consider him deserving of hospitality. The same comments contrast Kurdish and Arab refugees to the interviewee, and accuse them of taking advantage of Turkey as they work to make their way to Europe. Commentators depict these refugees as vile, disingenuous, cunning, and non-deserving.[3] While they are less prominent in the public discourse, other groups, such as Afghan or Pakistani immigrants, who unlike Syrians are mostly undocumented, are situated even lower on the hierarchy of belonging. In the words of an immigration lawyer, these immigrants are valued "less than a handkerchief," which is reflected in their precarious, disposable labor force roles in harsh and hazardous lines of work such as shepherding, mining, construction, waste picking, and recycling (Association for Migration Research (GAR) 2021, Yıldırım 2025).

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Xfb0x6bXfA

On par with the government's paternalistic politics of hospitality, immigrants who speak up about discrimination and humiliation that they experience in Turkey are seen as obnoxious, ungrateful, and unaware of their proper place. This is exemplified by the 2021 "banana controversy" following a viral video featuring a heated debate between a young Syrian woman and a crowd of Turkish nationals, during which a middle-aged Turkish man denounced Syrian refugees who are wealthy enough to buy kilos of bananas while he cannot afford to do so himself.[4] Following this video, numerous Syrians shared banana memes and posted videos of themselves eating bananas on TikTok, as a satirical critique of the xenophobic sentiment in the original video. In the days following the incident, numerous Syrians faced arrest, even deportation, over the banana videos, with the accusation of "provocation and inciting hatred" by "insulting Turkish people."[5] Another recent example is the deportation and revocation of Turkish citizenship of the prominent Syrian refugee rights activist Taha al-Ghazi in 2025, under the pretext that he was "inciting activities against the Turkish state that could pose a national security threat."[6] The incident was widely interpreted as retaliation for his advocacy work raising awareness about the Syrian community's problems, exposing the fundamental rift between rights-based advocacy and Turkey's gratitude-demanding paternalistic politics of hospitality.[7]

Attitudes of paternalism and ethno-nationalism are not recent inventions of Turkish foreign policy. Historians Selim Deringil (2003) and Ussama Makdisi (2002) detail the nineteenth-century Ottoman civilizing mission towards "Arab and Kurdish tribal people," with Makdisi noting how "a long tradition of imperial paternalism [gave] way to genteel racism" (Makdisi 2002: 793). In the early Republican period, Ottoman imperial paternalism transformed into an ethno-nationalist project where minority populations were either expelled or forced to assimilate. The rhetoric of hospitality surfaced at that time, specifically to reprimand the Jewish community that was accused of resisting assimilation (Bali 1999).

For the last twenty years, the framework of hospitality enabled the Turkish government to articulate an alternative rationality of migration management. This rationality diverts from the legalistic logic of global human rights and entitlements, instead referencing a religious-civilizational morality that exceeds legalistic arrangements. The politics of hospitality helped the government claim power and leverage both domestically and internationally, by exerting sovereign control over a post-imperial nation-space,

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[4] https://www.facebook.com/TheNewYoungTurks/videos/ben-muz-yiyemiyorum-diyerek-isyan-eden-türk-vatandaşının-bu-videosu-üzerine-suri/279050817430822/?locale=ms_MY

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59133076

[6] https://syriadirect.org/taha-al-ghazi-deported-a-warning-to-refugee-rights-advocates-in-turkey/

[7] https://t24.com.tr/yazarlar/candan-yildiz/bir-garip-geri-gonderme-hikayesi-gelmezsen-esini-gozaltina-aliriz,49996?_t=1781883795096

performing neo-imperial guardianship over the downtrodden, and asserting itself as a moral, non-colonial, superior alternative to the Western-led international protection system.

From Hospitality to "Dignified" Return?

The latest phase of Turkey's migration management policy is called the "Voluntary, Safe, Dignified, and Orderly Return of Syrians Under Temporary Protection," which aims to facilitate the "voluntary" return of Syrian immigrants in Turkey, following the fall of the Assad regime and the establishment of a new Syrian government under Al Sharaa. On its website, the Presidency of Migration Management cites the international laws and principles guiding the program, asserting that the returns "are conducted in accordance with international law and in line with the principles of voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly return." The Presidency claims: "no foreign national under temporary or international protection in our country is forcibly returned to their country of origin, nor are they subjected to any pressure to return." [8] The promotional video "Same Sky, New Hopes," featured on the Presidency's website, utilizes the same mythical civilizational tropes informing the politics of hospitality. Accompanying the footage of many Syrian families eagerly crossing the border back into Syria, the voiceover announces: "The civil war has ended, the oppressive regime is gone, hope is sprouting again. After 13 years, thousands of Syrians are returning to Syria under Turkey's hospitality. (…) The brotherhood-based approach carried out under President Erdoğan's leadership is bearing fruit today." Reminiscent of Soylu's 2020 speech, current interior minister Ali Yerlikaya cites the ways in which Turkey's ancestral heritage inform its migration management policy, which "never turn(ed) (its) back on those on the brink of oppression, hunger, and war" to provide comfort "to bodies burned by the scorching sun." Many Syrian returnees in the video express their gratitude and affection to Turkey and to President Erdoğan specifically, for hosting them over the years. One man says: "May God be pleased with Turkey. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Turkish state, may you be above my head." Another woman adds: "I am very grateful for hosting us. It was a very nice process. After all, we all look at the same sky. I send my regards to the esteemed President."

It is important to note that this dignified and voluntary return program is being administered amidst historic high numbers of deportations and administrative detentions. The Directorate of Migration Management announced that the number of people who were deported had reached 140,000 in 2024, going up from 130,000 from the previous year.[9] Turkey has been implementing an aggressive "return policy" since the 2023 general elections, with a stated goal of sending one million refugees and

[8] https://www.goc.gov.tr/gonullu-geri-donus
[9] https://www.goc.gov.tr/turkiye-duzensiz-goce-gecit-vermiyor

immigrants back to their country of origin.[10] In addition to undocumented immigrants, it is reported that hundreds of people with status and residency permits are taken into deportation centers across the country and forced to sign “voluntary return” documents before being illegally deported.[11] The latest report of Turkey’s Progressive Lawyers Association points out the increasing utilization of “Temporary Accommodation Centers” for illegal deportations, instead of more clearly regulated deportation centers.[12] As opposed to deportation centers, where terms and duration of administrative arrest are clearly codified, accommodation centers function as non-places, not configured in the existing legal-administrative system. Although many lawyers experience serious obstacles while navigating the legally designated channels of appeal that apply to deportation centers, they still find it preferable to the accommodation centers, which lack even a speck of appearance of the law.

Accompanying this aggressive deportation policy is the violent exploitation of the precarious labor force of mostly undocumented immigrants, who work under dangerous, at times lethal conditions without any protections for considerably below the official minimum wage. One of the most gruesome examples of this exploitation is an Afghan refugee, Vezir Muhammed Nourtani, who in 2023 was burned to death by his bosses to escape penalty, following a workplace accident that knocked him unconscious.[13] Another example is an incident that took place two years before that in Izmir, where three Syrian workers were burned to death in their house, allegedly over labor grievances.[14]

Policy changes on June 30, 2026 brought an exemption to the requirement to attain work permits for Syrians under temporary protection.[15] Although this change was announced as a measure to recognize, regularize, and document the immigrant labor force in the country, the new regulation falls short of improving the job security or

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[10] https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-suriyeli-multecilerin-ulkelerine-donmesini-saglayacagiz/2901446#:~:text=Cumhurbaşkanı%20Erdoğan%2C%20%221%20milyona%20yakın%20mültecinin%20topraklarına,için%20Suriye'de%20konut%20yapımıyla%20ilgili%20projeler%20hazırladık, https://www.goc.gov.tr/icisleri-bakani-ali-yerlikaya-2016-yilindan-itibaren-ulkesine-gonullu-geri-donus-yapan-suriyeli-sayisinin-1-milyona-ulastigini-acikladi

[11] https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/content-temporary-protection/status-and-residence/protection-from-refoulement/, https://istanbulbarosu.org.tr/haber/istanbuldaki-geri-gonderme-merkezleri-2025-yilina-iliskin-gozlem-ve-tespitler

[12] https://cagdashukukcular.org/harran-barinma-merkezi-ziyareti-raporu/

[13] https://stockholmcf.org/6-convicted-in-afghan-refugees-death-but-rights-groups-slam-lenient-sentences/

[14] https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-syrian-workers-burned-death-racist-attack

[15] https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cg53gmn40zvo

workplace safety for migrant workers, especially with the termination of free healthcare services for Syrians under temporary protection as of January 1, 2026.[16]

CONCLUSIONS

The framework of hospitality and dignified return coexists with a securitized border regime and violent migration management practices that increasingly resemble those in Europe and the US. With its conditional underpinnings and imperial paternalistic associations, hospitality not only obscures but enables and legitimizes these accompanying violent bordering practices. Anthropological studies of hospitality and gift giving also show that relations of obligation and reciprocity are always implicated in these practices. Amidst ongoing negotiations about the configuration of power and sovereignty in the post-Assad Syria, especially in the de-facto Turkish controlled territories, it will be important to watch what these obligations of reciprocity will look like on both sides of the border, and what kinds of loyalties may be demanded to reciprocate Turkey's hospitality.

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[16] https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cx2gyeq292ko

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