

ARAB ACADEMICS IN TURKEY: CURRENT SITUATION, PROBLEMS and SOLUTIONS AFTER TEN YEARS May, 2021



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INTRODUCTION

Started in 2011, political crisis in Syria caused a mass migration and a humanitarian crisis, which resulted in Turkey's turning into a country that hosts the highest refugee population around the world. Nearly 3.7 million Syrians were sheltered and taken under temporary protection by the country.¹ "Temporary Protection Regulation" of 2014 introduced "Syrians under temporary protection"² (SuTPs) as legal status of Syrian refugees, and hereby uncertainty regarding their status in Turkey has developed an identity. Syrians' existence in Turkey has turned in "permanent" resettlement in time, which is lately accepted by the host community members and public authorities. However, their legal status still presents problems in respect of responding their actual circumstances, not only for Syrian refugees but also for public actors. The relationship between 3.7 million Syrian refugees and public response has not been identified over a certain legal status yet, which creates a vagueness for public procedures and proceedings. Temporariness is still the dominant character of refugee response in Turkey. However, past 10-year implies that we need to focus on permanent resettlement of Syrian refugees today.

Turkey, on the other hand, has become an important destination country for both legal and irregular immigrants. Beside the Syrian refugees, Turkey also hosts a substantial number of immigrants from Iraq, Palestine, Egypt and Libya. This renders evident migration policies more necessary and urgent for the country. Is Turkey going to embrace migration as an advantage and opportunity with regard to economic development and multi-culturalism or going to make efforts to stop immigrants? Turkey's decision on this, will also affect the future of qualified labour migration and brain drain towards the country.

Brain drain is emigration process of skilled and trained individuals such as academics, doctors, engineers etc., which causes a decrease in total skills of a country.³ As a developing country⁴, whose citizens immigrate mostly to European countries, Turkey's

¹ <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638> , 05.04.2021.

² <https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/21.5.20146883.pdf>, 06.04.2021.

³ Göç Terimleri Sözlüğü, IOM, https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/iml31_turkish_2ndedition.pdf, 06.04.2021.

⁴ Brain drain is process of migration of skilled and trained individuals, generally from developing countries to developed countries. See. Bartram, D.; Poros, M. V.; Monforte, P. (2017). *Göç Meselesinde Temel Kavramlar*.

recovery from brain drain depends on promoting immigration of skilled and trained individuals to the country and thus, gain emigrating “brain power.”

Academics are multi-qualified immigrants that are needed to be considered wisely with regard to brain drain. Promoting their immigration and easing social and economic integration are initiatives that increase the human capital in long-run. Including irregular immigrants, Turkey hosts around 4 million immigrants today. 90% of this population is from Arab countries. Among them are academics, specialized on different fields, who voluntarily or forcedly immigrated to Turkey. Some academic immigrants resettled in third countries a while after their arriving to Turkey and those who settled in Turkey, on the other side, have been encountering challenges regarding their social and economic integration.

Turkey still has chance to increase its human capital through gaining the “brain power” of multi-qualified immigrant academics settled in the country. As such, it becomes significant to raise their problems, discuss and contribute into the solutions. To this end, Istanbul Medipol University, Centre for Mediterranean Studies conducted two workshops in 2016 and 5 years later, in 2021, to analyse and identify current situation and further steps to be taken toward the solution of problems.

The 2021-workshop was organized in cooperation with MigArts and International Association of Arab Academics, and conducted online with 23 participants in 27 February 2021. Immigrant academics from Arab countries, Turkish migration scholars, experts on refugee rights and social and economic integration of immigrants, lawyers, artists, representatives of Higher Education Council etc. participated into the workshop. In the first session, a presentation was given on problems of academics from Arab countries and in the second, recommendations for solutions were discussed. This report intends to identify if any improvement has been made since 2016 regarding challenges and to analyse current situation and solutions that were discusses in the workshop.

A. Problems identified in 2016

11 problems were identified in the workshop⁵, conducted by Istanbul Medipol University Centre for Mediterranean Studies in 28 May 2016. Those problems were residence permits and legal status of immigrant academics, language barrier, passports, travel restrictions, academic degrees, employment out of academy, bureaucratic challenges, lack of Arabic language training and higher education in Arabic.

Majority of immigrant Arab academics (Syrians) in Turkey are under temporary protection. Temporary protection, as a legal status, provides an identification document with some benefits, but not right to reside or residence permit, neither transition period

⁵ Türkiye’de Yaşayan Arap Ülkelerinden Akademisyenlerin Sorunları ve Çözüm Önerileri Çalıştay Raporu, <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/790425>, 07.04.2021.

to long-term residence permit.⁶ Apart from this, Turkey also hosts international protection applicants and those with residence permits. The problem identified in 2016 regarding residence permits was that immigrant academics needed to renew their documents frequently, which was creating financial burden and low motivation for them.

Legal status of immigrants in Turkey, no matter their immigration background is, is one of the most important problems. When the relationship between immigrants and public authorities presents an uncertain character, problems regarding management of migration increase and make existing problems more difficult for all parties. Finalization of international protection applications and third country resettlements take long time. Although, international protection applicants can access to educational and healthcare services and to labour market, there are major challenges.

Syrians under temporary protection encounter the similar challenges. Even though they are better off to access services and assistance than international protection applicants, they still experience multi-dimensional problems about accessing the labour market such as lower wages and informal employment, which is related to their legal status.

Language barrier was identified as another problem in the 2016-workshop. Immigrants' having problem with communicating in Turkish, is one of the common barriers. Much as adults, this presents a major challenge for immigrant children, in their adaptation to Turkish educational system and in class attendance. Language barrier makes it difficult for adults to access labour market and public services.

In 2016, passport validity periods and travel restrictions were raised as other problems of immigrant academics. Extending residence permits depends on presenting valid documents such as valid passports and it is almost impossible for immigrants in Turkey to extend their passport validity, since most of them cannot contact with public authorities back in their countries, such as Syria. This prevents them to travel abroad and participate into academic conferences. Procedural and technical barriers, on the other side, to their domestic travels, make them deprived of activities necessary to advance their academic career.

Academic profession requires expertise, advancement and assuming title throughout the career. In 2016-workshop, most of the immigrant academics in Turkey were identified as working under poor conditions, mostly out of their fields and under their titles. Bureaucratic barriers make their working conditions and assuming titles more complicated. Procedures for certificate of equivalence take long time and they hardly can contact with concerned public institutions.

Turkey provides limited opportunities of Arabic programs in higher education. Those who had to interrupt their learning and teaching life cannot find a way to move on their

⁶ <https://www.goc.gov.tr/duzenlecek-belgelerbelge>, 07.04.2021.

studies because there is no alternative of Arabic training in Turkey. Previous attempts of establishing an Arab university on the other side, remained inconclusive.

B. Current Situation and Problems

Referring to the arguments raised by 23 participants in the online workshop, conducted in cooperation of Istanbul Medipol University Centre for Mediterranean Studies, MigArts and International Association of Arab Academics, in 27 February 2021, following problems were identified as part of the current situation:

Language barrier: language barrier remains as a major challenge. Majority of Arab academics in Turkey are middle or old-aged adults, which makes it more difficult to learn Turkish. This causes a communication challenge with the host community members, as much as finding jobs at universities, since training language in higher education in Turkey is widely Turkish. Accessing suitable Turkish language courses is another challenge for this age group; though they cannot afford the courses even if they find such an opportunity.

Turkish-speaking presents a character of being barrier for immigrant academics to communicate with public institutions over public procedures. In some cases, accessing to translator is possible, but this is undoubtedly limited.

Residence permits: residence permits present another challenge for Arab academics. Vast majority of immigrant academics do not possess permanent residence permits. They need to extend their permits periodically. This leads public procedures to take longer time and to other problems. Immigrant academics cannot occupy permanent teaching or research positions at universities or even permanent jobs in other sectors. This generally causes a mental distress even for those who find an opportunity to work at a university, since all aspects of their lives depend on extension of their residence permits.

Certificates of equivalence: certificate of equivalence is a significant stage for practicing any job that requires a diploma, in another country. In Turkey, certificates of equivalence are provided by Council of Higher Education. The process depends on receiving of documents from the other country that awards diploma and on their approval. Especially immigrants from Syria need to bear a difficult period of paperwork, since it is almost impossible to request documents from Syria. Moreover, checking of diplomas if they are genuine extends the time frame for finalizing the process. In some cases, the process can take a couple of years. This naturally results for applicants including immigrant academics, to wait and meanwhile, work in jobs other than their diplomas qualify. This is an unquestionable disadvantage of integrating skilled labour to the economy and social life, which results in immigration of that multi-skilled labour force to the third countries, especially to Europe.

Higher education in Arabic: Turkey lacks opportunities of higher education services in Arabic, although more than 90% of immigrant population of the country is

Arab. Along with the language barrier, lack of Arabic training in higher education constitutes a major challenge for immigrants who wish to continue their academic career or studies. This naturally results in narrowing of labour market and keeping a part of qualified workforce out of it.

Lack of support to studies: primary conditions of advancing their career for academics and scientists are to conduct studies and ensure funding for them. Immigrant academics in Turkey neither have access to any type of funding for their studies, nor to publications to edit their Arabic works. Limited opportunities to publish Arabic works in Turkey constitute an important challenge to immigrant academics.

Challenges to economic and social integration: challenges to accessing to labour market makes it more difficult for immigrant Arab academics in Turkey to integrate to economic life. This results in interruption of social and cultural adaptation. Therefore, learning of Turkish language becomes more difficult and language barrier remains as a cause and effect of socio-cultural integration.

Legal status: Although vast majority of immigrant population in Turkey is under temporary protection, which provides certain extend of protection services, uncertain character of the regime regarding the future creates a mental distress for immigrants.

Legal status of immigrants, even after several reforms in this field introduced by the government, presents the most important problems regarding immigration context. Regulations related to legal status of legal and irregular immigrants that pave uncertainty regarding the future, have a character that withholds their social and economic contributions, as in the case of immigrant Arab academics in Turkey. Open and clear procedures under the guarantee of a strong legal status, which shall clearly define relationship between immigrants and public authorities plays a critical role in overcoming the challenges of language barrier, bureaucratic and technical problems, as well as accessing the labour market.

Conclusion: recommended solutions

With regard to transforming structure of immigration to the country, Turkey's steps towards taking certain position within its perspective and vision plays a significant role not only on protection of immigrants but also on their efforts to maintain their lives and benefit from their contributions as part of migration management policies. Approaching immigrants as economic, social and political contributors, but not as a burden, shall make immigrants' lives easier and public policies more efficient and effective.

Immigrant academics, as multi-skilled brain power, can present an opportunity for countries in respect to brain drain. Turkey is a developing country that is exporting, as much as importing skilled-labour through migration. Turkey's immigration policies have a character that does not see skilled immigrant labour as an opportunity and do not provide a suitable environment to benefit from it, which rechannels that labour to more attractive destinations like Europe.

More than 90% of immigrant population in Turkey are from Arab countries. Among them is a considerable skilled workforce, including immigrant academics. No matter they voluntarily or forcedly immigrated to Turkey, immigrant academics cannot find a chance to contribute into social and economic lives. While, on one side, this makes their lives more difficult in many senses, on the other, Turkey cannot benefit from their contributions.

For the last 10 years, problems of immigrant Arab academics have not changed much. Legal status, residence permits, certificates of equivalence, language barrier, lack of Arabic training in higher education etc. are presenting a character of being cause and effect in their lives. Those challenges result in interruption of their economic and social integration along with cultural adaptation, which constitutes a barrier before their career advancement.

Some problems of immigrant academics can definitely be solved in the long-run. However, there are several other problems that can be solved in the short term, which could immediately create benefits and opportunities for all sides. In this context, following recommendations are believed to make contributions:

1. For immigrants whose profession requires diploma, certificates of equivalence have critical importance for working and professing. Thus, recognition of diplomas through easier procedures in shorter time shall contribute into the solution. Council of Higher Education in Turkey has recently had steps towards easing the process, such as offering alternative ways to document approves. However, process of providing certificates of equivalence still takes long time. In this context, Council of Higher Education shall include universities to collaborate and contribute into shortening the process.
2. Language barrier is one of the primary challenges for immigrant academics that has multiple effects on accessing the labour market and thus, opportunities to practice their jobs. Considering its impact on economic and social integration, language barrier shall be coped through general language training courses fitting language level of immigrant academics.
3. It is quite apparent that problems regarding legal status of immigrants will not be stabilized in the short run. However, procedures of residence permits can be regulated, so that immigrant academics can obtain long-term residence permits and be freed of its financial and mental burden and focus on their studies. Within this scope, Council of Higher Education and Ministry of Interior Affairs shall coordinate.
4. Lack of undergraduate and graduate programs in Arabic represents another challenge to immigrants who wish to continue their studies or academic career. Establishing an Arab university shall solve this problem to a great extent. Opening Arabic departments or Arabic programs within departments shall be an alternative solution. Alternative teaching and research positions to be opened at universities shall also contribute into the solution.

5. Arab academics can also be employed in other sectors such as public, civil society or private sectors, according to their area of expertise. To this end, projects shall be developed in cooperation of those three sectors.

Conclusions drew from the workshop explain that no considerable progress has been made regarding the solutions of problems since the 2016-workshop. This highlights again the necessity of cooperation and collaboration of policy makers, academy and civil society.

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