



# A critical evaluation of the education policies on Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan

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## Abstract

As of the beginning of the Syrian war, many Syrian citizens had to relocate and migrate to other countries, which have borders with Syria. Turkey and Jordan are countries, which hosted very high numbers of Syrian refugees. The majority of Syrian refugees are children and they have not been able to integrate into the education system properly in the countries they sought refuge. This study aims to examine education policies of Turkey and Jordan to identify the problems associated with the existing systems and to provide an appropriate framework for the governments about the necessary educational measures to be taken for the refugees. In the scope of this study, it can be observed that refugees in both Jordan and Turkey have had difficulty in accessing basic education and therefore, the governments had to reconsider and make some changes in their refugee education policies to solve the problems encountered. The data of this research were collected through document analysis.

**Keywords:** Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Educational Policies, Refugee Education

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## 1. Introduction

The Syrian civil war created one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time. Since the beginning of the civil war from September 2011 to September 2015, more than half of the population in Syria (13.5 million) has relocated (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). As of December 2014, bordering countries Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have hosted nearly 95% of the total number of refugee population. “With few exceptions, such as Sweden and Germany, EU member states have generally adopted a policy of providing

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assistance to countries hosting Syria and reinforcing the borders of Europe” (Achili, 2015, p. 15).

With the outbreak of the crisis in Syria, countries surrounding Syria gave different reactions to this crisis. Turkey, established emergency camps, but also supported the Syrian civil society involvement in settlements in the south; Lebanon has refused to allow the international humanitarian organizations to establish official refugee camps and depended on both Syrian and Lebanese civil society to support the refugees; Jordan accepted the vast entry of Syrian refugees at the beginning. However, later Jordan insisted on the establishment of a large United Nations refugee camp in July 2012 in order to keep migrants close to the border and away from major centers (Chatty, 2017). As can be seen, hosting countries adopted several approaches in providing the basic needs of the refugees. One of the most important areas that refugees need urgent assistance is the education of the youth. Demographic characteristics of the Syrian population in the hosting countries indicate that the number of Syrians in the compulsory education age is noteworthy. These children have the right to receive proper education to build their future. On that note, the aim of this study is to compare the education policies of Turkey and Jordan, which received great numbers of Syrian refugees in order to inform the governments about the current situation of the refugee education so that the content of refugee education could get better and more effective for the children.

To reach this goal, following questions were addressed:

- 1- What are the educational policies being applied for Syrian refugee children in the age of compulsory education in Turkey and Jordan?
- 2- Have the education policies implemented for Syrian refugees changed since their arrival?
- 3- What can be done to improve the quality of education for the refugee children in Turkey?

## **2. Method**

This research is structured using qualitative research methods and techniques. Data in the study were collected through document analysis. Document analysis is the systematic review of existing records or documents, as a data source that includes the analysis of written materials containing information about the topics to be researched. The basic condition for a successful document analysis is to find and examine the documents on the subject and to make the necessary arrangements in order to reach a synthesis that will reveal certain situations or opinions (Karasar, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006). In the process of evaluating the articles in document analysis, the following steps were carried out:

1. Determining the articles on education policies on Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan in ULAKBIM and other websites.
2. Accessing the articles and reviewing them.
3. Evaluations on the themes previously determined by the researchers.
4. Descriptive analysis of research data obtained through document analysis.

The numerical data was gathered from the current relevant literature and the relevant statistics of the General Directorate of Migration Management, the Ministry of National Education, and UNHCR. The websites of the General Directorate of Migration Management and UNHCR are regularly updated for hosting countries.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Education policies on Syrian refugees in Turkey and Jordan

##### 3.1.1. Turkey's Policies

Syrians escaping from the war were able to cross Turkish borders without any problems because Turkey and Syria changed the visa policies in 2009 and as a result visa requirement was lifted for the citizens of Syria. Kirişçi (2014) reports that the government adopted the same policy to accept Syrians even without their passports. This means that Turkey opened its doors to all Syrians escaping from crisis in their country. In 2011, the first group of Syrian refugees arrived and Turkish government adopted an “open door” policy which resulted in a higher number of refugees coming to Turkey as violence increased in Syria (Alkurt, 2016, p.9). In fact, currently about 3.7 million Syrians who fled their country are living in Turkey (General Directorate of Immigration Management, 2021).

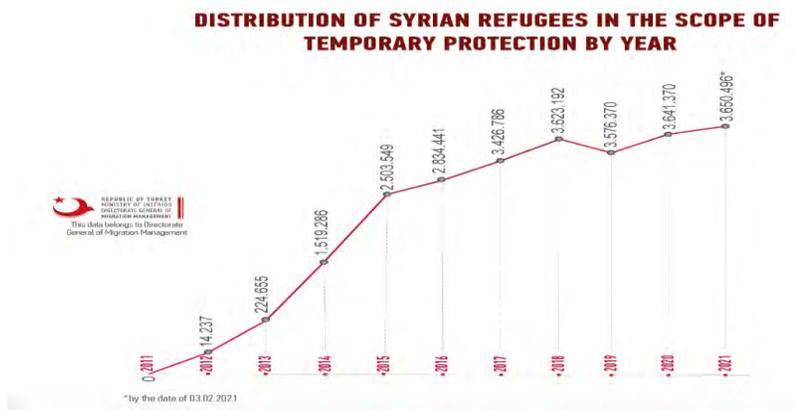


Figure 1. Distribution of Refugees in Scope of Temporary Protection by Year

Source: General Directorate of Immigration Management, 2021.

At the beginning of the crisis, tents were set up in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep and Şanlıurfa and Syrians refugees were referred to as “guests” which refers to a “temporary and short stay” (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 60). In other words, they don’t have a legally identified refugee status (Emin & Coşkun, 2016). As the number of Syrian refugees reached more than 1.7 million as of March 2015, Turkey adopted a more developed refugee policy by expanding their formal status and providing them with access to urban settings (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016). With this policy change, it was aimed to reregulate the temporary protection for the Syrian refugees and reduce the overload in the camps. In April 2014, “the Law on Foreigners and International Protection was adopted by the government, in which procedures for foreigners, refugees and people in need of international protection were specified” (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 61).

Throughout this process, modifications in Turkey’s policy regarding Syrian refugees can also be observed in the changes in the policy for education of Syrian refugees (Mirici, 2020). This was primarily due to the idea that civil war would end soon and that refugees would return to their country. However, as the duration of war and hospitality prolonged, educational policies changed as well. The first statement of the Minister of National Education, Ömer Dinçer on the training of the Syrian refugees on 31<sup>st</sup> July 2012 was as follows:

*Courses will be given in Arabic according to our own curriculum. The education will be conducted in a manner not to encourage the stay of the families in Turkey but the children’s education is not neglected. Only at schools opened by the embassies within themselves the curricula of other countries are followed. We follow our own curriculum in all schools (Seydi, 2014, p.275).*

The Minister’s statement on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2012 also states that Syrians are expected to return to their countries soon:

*We did not try to teach Turkish to Syrian children. We see them as guests in our country and we expect that they will return to their home country after the situation in Syria is improved. They are being trained as guest students. When they return to their country, we think that it is not going to be a problem for them to adapt to the education of their country (Seydi, 2014, p.275).*

Turkey, from 2013 onwards has begun to accept the fact that Syrian refugees’ stay in Turkey will last longer than expected and started a series of regulations and laws. The first legal arrangement of the Ministry of National Education regarding the education of

the Syrians living outside the Temporary Refugee Centers (TECs) was the circular on the “Measures for Syrian Citizens who live outside the camps in Our Country” (MoNE, 2013a). With this circular, the Ministry has requested to find out whether the places opened by the local authorities, non-governmental organizations and Syrian citizens, which are active in order to meet the educational and social activity needs of the Syrian children living outside the camps are healthy, safe and adequately equipped (MoNE, 2013a). On 26<sup>th</sup> September 2013, a more comprehensive circular was issued on “Education Services for Syrian Citizens Under Temporary Protection in Turkey” (MoNE, 2013b). The main aim of the circular was to provide a standard in the education services provided to school-age children of Syrian citizens living in camps or cities. According to this circular, Syrian children would continue their education to prevent the loss of years at school in case they would return to their home country or go to another country. Teachers with Arabic language skills were to be assigned to the education of Syrians. Moreover, Syrian refugees with teaching certificates and the ones who were capable of teaching but not holding any teaching certificate among Syrians were requested for employment on a voluntary basis without payment (MoNE, 2013b).

In April 2013, Law No.6458 “Law on Foreigners and International Protection” was implemented by granting Syrians Temporary Protection Status. This law gave them legal rights to access healthcare, education and social aid. On the other hand, on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014, Ministry of Education prepared a circular named “Educational Services for Foreigners”, which provided access to education for Syrian children inside and outside the camps. With this circular, Ministry of Education tried to guide the way in terms of educational services being offered (Taştan & Çelik, 2017).

Following the aforementioned legal arrangements, the Ministry of National Education added to the “2015-2019 Strategic Plan” the statements regarding the education of refugees for the first time. According to this strategic plan, studies will be carried out to ensure the integration of these students into the education system in order to guarantee that refugees or foreigners under temporary protection or any people living in our country in need of international protection will be trained throughout their stay in Turkey (MEB, 2015).

As is reflected in the data obtained from the General Directorate of Immigration Management in Table 1, almost half of the Syrian population in Turkey is under the age of 18. According to the table, there are 1.729.199 Syrians in the 0-18 age range. This corresponds to almost 47% of registered Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey.

Table 1. Distribution by Age and Gender of Registered Syrian Refugees Recorded by Taking Biometric Data

<b>AGE</b>	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	1.963.593	1.686.903	<b>3.650.496</b>
<b>0-4</b>	257.286	240.146	<b>497.432</b>
<b>5-9</b>	287.976	270.489	<b>558.465</b>
<b>10-14</b>	216.415	203.304	<b>419.719</b>
<b>15-18</b>	136.578	117.005	<b>253.583</b>
<b>19-24</b>	280.419	211.325	<b>491.744</b>
<b>25-29</b>	218.857	158.805	<b>377.662</b>
<b>30-34</b>	165.027	119.778	<b>284.805</b>
<b>35-39</b>	123.857	96.992	<b>220.837</b>
<b>40-44</b>	84.632	73.772	<b>158.404</b>
<b>45-49</b>	57.353	56.065	<b>113.418</b>
<b>50-54</b>	45.514	44.371	<b>89.885</b>
<b>55-59</b>	34.610	34.672	<b>69.282</b>
<b>60-64</b>	22.826	23.562	<b>46.388</b>
<b>65-69</b>	14.874	15.688	<b>30.562</b>
<b>70-74</b>	8.791	9.678	<b>18.469</b>
<b>75-79</b>	4.325	5.358	<b>9.683</b>
<b>80-84</b>	2.366	3.161	<b>5.527</b>
<b>85-89</b>	1.128	1.665	<b>2.793</b>
<b>90+</b>	771	1.067	<b>1.838</b>

Source: General Directorate of Immigration Management, 2021.

As indicated in Figure 2, as of February 2021, the number of Syrians staying in temporary refugee centers was 58.481. The number of Syrians in the cities was 3.592.015. At the moment, only the new Syrian records are being received in Adana, Çanakkale, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Gaziantep, Hatay, Kayseri, Kocaeli, Mardin, Tekirdağ, Şanlıurfa and Kilis.

### SHELTERED AND UNSHELTERED SYRIAN REFUGEES BY TEMPORARY SHELTER CENTERS



Figure 2. Sheltered and Unsheltered Syrian Refugees by Temporary Refugee Centers

Source: General Directorate of Immigration Management, 2021.

At the beginning of the 2017-2018 academic year, “there were 280,602 Syrian students in 370 TECs and 243,396 Syrian students in 14,742 public schools in Turkey. Out of 976,200 school-aged Syrian children, 532,469 are registered in schools. Among the Syrian school-age children in Turkey, 54.55% are schooled” (Taştan & Çelik, 2017, p.12). The presence of such a high number of young Syrians living in Turkey demonstrates the importance of providing quality education to these people.

In this regard, there are three education models offered to the refugees in Turkey: (1) Syrian private schools, (2) temporary education centers, and (3) public schools (Emin & Coşkun, 2016). One of the options for Syrian refugees to get education in Turkey is in the Temporary Educational Centers (TECs) established in camps and in private schools opened by Syrians. TECs follow a modified Syrian curriculum and are taught in Arabic. In fact, the reason why there is a need for such a means of education is the language barriers the children face in public schools. “These centers are controlled by Provincial Commissions in order to take the measures necessary to implement certain courses and trainings such as teaching Turkish, providing extensive vocational training, and arranging social and cultural activities” (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 67). Syrian families prefer enrolling their children in TECs because the students attending these centers share the same culture and language. “However, the most important problem with these centers is that the Turkish government does not accredit some TECs due to the low quality of teaching. Besides, the travel costs to these centers seem to be a problem for urban refugees as well” (İçduygu & Şimşek, 2016, p. 67).

The Ministry of National Education design and implement Turkish language programs as suggested by Human Rights Watch Organization in order to overcome the problem of language difference in access to education. At the end of 2016, within the scope of the Project for Integration of Syrian Students into the Turkish Education

System, “Turkish Education” and “Turkish Language and Literature” teachers were recruited for teaching Turkish to Syrians (MEB, 2016). Some international organizations also support Turkey in producing sustainable policies about the education of the refugees that will facilitate the enrollment of the Syrian refugees in schools and their staying at school.

As has been shown, both Ministry of Education and international organizations give priority to language programs for Syrian children, as the prerequisite of many educational measures is language. The fact that the Syrian refugees or Syrians who have become Turkish citizens and Turkish society will live together makes such long-term policies compulsory. Science, Education, Culture Research Center (BEKAM), in the study related to the curriculum applied to the Syrian refugees, stated that it is important for a better education and the integration of the Syrians to the Turkish education system especially those who have started school recently should be registered to the schools of the Ministry of Education as long as they can protect their own language and culture (BEKAM, 2015). Thus, it is emphasized that after a while there will be no need for other education forms.

### ***3.1.2. Jordan’s Policies***

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled to the Kingdom of Jordan since March 2011 due to political violence. As of June 2019, there were 662,569 registered Syrian refugees, 123,375 of whom resided in camps in Jordan (UNHCR, 2019). The vast majority – 539,194 – are living in urban areas, outside of the refugee camps, primarily in Jordan’s cities and towns. Of these, nearly 84 percent live in host communities (UNHCR, 2019).

At the beginning, the Jordanian government benefited politically from the entry of refugees, as the Syrians who were depressed and fed up with the war suppressed the Jordan citizens’ wish for political change. However, as the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan increased, the Jordanian government began to get affected by it negatively. A high number of Syrian refugees entering Jordan caused a big increase in Jordan’s population, thus it made Jordan’s fragile political and economic infrastructure more apparent. Numerous reports pointed at the fact that Syrian refugees overloaded Jordan’s low resources, infrastructure and challenged health and education services. However, the challenges caused by refugees only increased the existing common challenges that could affect “future imbalance” (Francis, 2015, p.3). Due to these problems encountered in social services, Jordan citizens began to react negatively towards Syrian refugees. Accordingly, Jordanian government’s ability to respond to the refugee crisis was affected by the negative attitude of the citizens towards Syrians. Jordanian citizens insisted that the government should limit the number of Syrian refugees, as the tensions in the host community increased. Since 2014, the Jordanian government has restricted its

hospitality against Syrian refugees, in order to respond to the increasing discontent of the citizens and increasing regional security risks (Francis, 2015). The government limited the number of Syrians who could enter Jordan, closed borders and restricted more refugees in camps. In 2014, Syrian refugees were faced with a limitation of Jordanian services such as limited access to health services outside camps, and the citizens became less tolerant to the presence of refugees in urban areas (Francis, 2015).

As is apparent, there has been a change in the policy Jordan government as well, which also affected their education policies for the Syrian refugees. Although enrolling Syrian refugees in formal schools has been a priority in education policy for the Jordanian government, there have been several problems as indicated by researchers. First, the low numbers of school attendance is emphasized. As of March 2019, approximately 134,121 Syrian refugees were in the Jordanian school system, but at least 90,000 were not in school (JIF, 2019). In order to meet growing demand for schooling, the Jordanian government has hired more teachers and asked for help from the international communities for funding to improve schools in Jordan (Krafft et al., 2018). Basic and secondary school education are offered free both in camps and host communities in Jordan. However, both the number of schools and the teachers are not enough for the education of both Jordanian and Syrian children. The majority of the Syrian students have been integrated into Jordanian classrooms outside of camps. “For the integrated classrooms, priority in enrollment is given for Jordanian students and register Syrian children until the school reaches the highest capacity” (Krafft et al., 2018, p. 21).

One policy developed by the Jordan government to overcome this problem in education is the “double shift” system in education. However, as stated by Deane (2016), the “double shift” system in education brings together some problems with it. Public schools in refugee camps operate a double-shift system, and Syrian teaching assistants are hired to help Jordanian teachers (Deane, 2016). In the big cities, the double-shift process increases tension between Jordanian students attending the morning shift and Syrian refugees attending the second shift in the afternoon. “Teachers are present in the shift transitioning to resolve tensions between the Jordanian host community and refugee pupils” (Deane, 2016, p.40).

Another disadvantage is the difficulty of meeting the demands of a double shift. As, double shift requires shorter lessons in the evening shifts, which require teachers to work longer hours, and consequently it increases the pressure on teachers (Deane, 2016). In order to improve teaching quality in second shifts, existing schools and training centers need to be restored. Moreover, “teacher salaries should be improved and more resources should be allocated for teacher development in order to maintain the quality of teaching in Jordan” (Chatty, et al., 2014, p. 2). As is shown, the double shift policy minimized the interaction between Syrian and Jordanian youth and caused

discrimination. This situation triggered some Syrians to return to Syria rather than to continue to live what they consider “inhuman conditions” (Chatty, 2017, p. 29).

Figure 3 shows that the number of Syrian refugees who were enrolled in school between the ages of 6 and 22 is remarkably less than Jordanians. This portion increased noticeably by the age of eight and the gender gap reduced. “However, enrollment rose sharply around ages 9-10 at 80-90% of Syrian refugee children and declined for those at older ages” (Krafft, et al., 2018, p. 21). Considering all age groups, Syrian refugees have inferior enrollment rates than Jordanians. The enrollment gap expanded noticeably and continued for those older than 10 years (Krafft, et al., 2018).

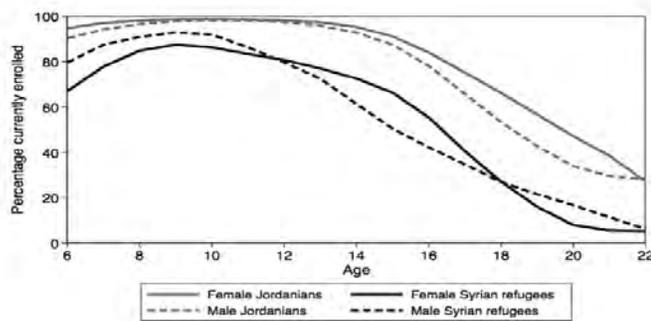


Figure 3. Current Enrolment in school (percentage enrolled), by sex and age, Jordanians and Syrian refugees aged 6-22, 2016

Figure 4 indicates that among those who left school in 2011 or after, only 8% of Syrian refugees reported they left because they completed all stages of their education, compared to 42% of Jordanians (Krafft et al., 2018). Violence, conflict, or security (60% for both male and female refugees) is the most common reason for leaving school among Syrian refugees. If the post-war reasons for Syrians dropout were to be compared with the reasons why they drop out at present, the results would be very different from each other. “The most common reasons for dropout among 6-14 year-olds were lack of interest in school (48%) and poor academic performance (17%) in Syria before the war” (Krafft et al., 2018, p.21).

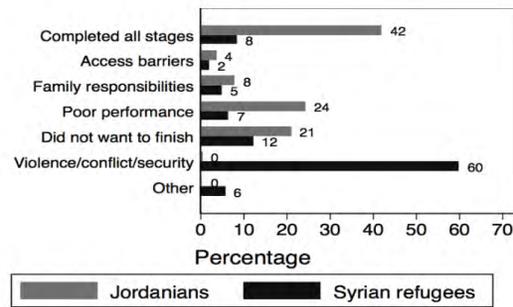


Figure 4. Reason for leaving school (percentage), by sex, left school in 2011 or later and out of school in 2016, Jordanians and Syrian refugees, 2016

(Krafft et al., 2018, p. 23)

As indicated, although Jordan wanted to improve the quality of education for the Syrian refugees, as can be noted violence in and around school, lack of basic educational equipment, overcrowded and inadequately maintained school environment, and inadequate training of teachers emerge as a big problem and contribute immensely to the increase in the dropout rates of the Syrian students (JIF, 2019).

#### 4. Conclusions

As can be observed, both Jordan and Turkey had to reconsider education policies that they adopted for the Syrian refugees. Jordan preferred to employ an integrated education system at the beginning. However, eventually a separate education system for Syrian children is preferred. It may be considered that in the short run this system is more preferable for the host country as refugee children need to adapt to the new circumstances, curriculum and language. Moreover, it could better serve the needs of Syrian children, and psychological and social needs of the population in distress. However, as exemplified in the experience of Jordan there may be some risks of this system as well. When compared to the education provided to the citizens of Jordan, Syrian children in the double shift program complain that they receive lower quality education because the quality in the additional shifts and schools is not regulated. This perception of lower quality education for Syrians resulted in an increasing tension between Syrians and Jordanians. This situation may also lead to a traumatized minority isolated from the rest of the society in the future.

Turkey shifted the education policy for the Syrian children from a more separate to a more integrated education for the refugees. As mentioned above, separate education has numerous advantages for the host countries as it gives the refugee children space and time for adaptation to the new circumstances, curriculum and language. It is also

politically practical for the governments to claim that refugees will leave soon. Therefore, they can keep their native language proficiency and make their return to Syria easier. However, as the time for the return of the refugees to Syria prolonged, the risks of providing them a separate education, which is difficult to control, emerge. Thus, it is more advantageous to provide an integrated education for the Syrian refugees. An integrated education system could definitely burden schools because of large class sizes, difficulty of finding and training qualified teachers, variety of student needs, and especially for Turkey, dealing with language challenges. It could also cause conflicts between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens who complain about crowded classes. However, in the long run it may be more sustainable to offer an integrated education for the Syrians, which is managed and financed by international organizations. Not encouraging an identity-based education also reduces the risk of future instability and provides a sense of fairness to Syrian refugees. In the future it may promote solidity in the society and integrated identities.

However, there are two major differences between Turkey and Syria that the Turkish government needs to address immediately: (1) native language, and (2) the education system. Syrian children who receive education in Turkey have difficulties in communicating with administrators, teachers and other students in public schools due to the language problem they experience. There are also problems such as academic failure due to the difficulty of following the courses. This problem causes them to be unable to communicate with other children and teachers, to have problems of integration and adaptation, and consequently being excluded and marginalized by their peers. This situation causes the children to become alienated from school and leave school or go to temporary education centers (Emin & Coşkun, 2016).

The most important problem in Syrian children's education and adaptation process is learning Turkish. As a matter of fact, Turkish courses given to Syrian children in both public schools and temporary education centers are not qualified enough due to lack of qualified educators, materials and methodologies in teaching Turkish as a foreign language. The basic element of this problem is that the teachers appointed by the Ministry of National Education do not have sufficient formation in teaching Turkish to foreigners (Emin & Coşkun, 2016). In such a situation, expecting an academic achievement from the refugee children is impossible. When all these are evaluated in terms of children who are desperate and in need of attention, it is understood that the problems experienced will be stronger in the future. Therefore, in order to ensure that they learn Turkish as soon as possible and to help refugee children express themselves and to survive the difficult process they are in, attention should be paid to raising the number of teachers and academicians in teaching Turkish to foreigners and creating the necessary materials and methodology. In order to solve the problem of teaching Turkish to foreigners in the short and medium term, "Teaching Turkish to foreigners" courses can be offered in both Turkish and English philology departments of universities. Thus, it

will be possible to train teachers of Turkish as a foreign language to teach Turkish. In the long run, opening the department of “Teaching Turkish as a foreign language” department at universities will ensure providing a more qualified education for the refugees.

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