Anglo-Turkish Society online lecture, 7 April 2022, 6.00 pm (UK time)

Speaker: Kemal Kirişci

Platform: Zoom with link provided to those who register

Title: 'Turkey as a country of refuge 1923-2023'

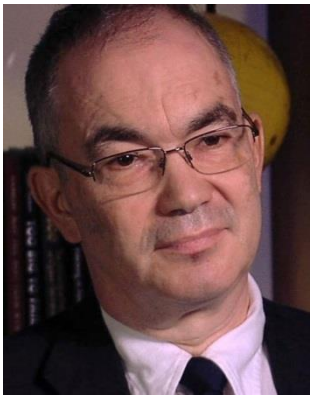
It is with the arrival of Syrian refugees that Turkey's image from an emigration to an immigration country changed dramatically. Since 2014, the UNHCR lists Turkey as the country with the largest refugee population in the world. Yet, from its early existence Turkey was always a country of refuge. Initially mostly for Muslims arriving from Greece as part of the population exchange between the two countries, then, based on the terms of the Settlement Law (İskan Kanunu) of 1934, individuals and families regarded as being of "Turkish descent and culture" (Türk soyu ve kültürü), accompanied, with the onset of the Cold War, refugees from the Soviet Bloc countries. There was also, from the mid-1980s, an ever-increasing number of asylum seekers arriving in Turkey that caught the Turkish asylum system unprepared triggering first a period in the mid-1990s marked by growing criticisms of Turkey's practices for violating the rights of refugees to a long period of reform spearheaded first by the UNHCR and then reinforced by Turkey's ill-fated EU accession process. By the time Syrian refugees began to arrive in great numbers Turkey had a fully-fledged administrative and legal refugee system in place. This presentation will discuss the evolution of Turkey's refugee practice and policies during a century and its current unique position in the global refugee regime as the host for the largest number of refugees in the world while being the only major country that continues to maintain a "geographical limitation" to the implementation of the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to Status of Refugees, the main international instrument governing the protection of refugees.

Booking essential: https://kemal-kirisci-lecture.eventbrite.co.uk

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The signing of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, the person on the right should be Talat Miras, a little known diplomat who actually was one of the two VPs of the conference that drafted the Convention.



My late mum was a Swiss national but only of second generation. Her grandfather had fled to Canton de Neuchatel, that had been accorded to Switzerland during the Vienna Congress, with his parents as refugees in the second half of the 19th century. They were fleeing religious persecution in Schwäbisch Gmünd near Stuttgart in not yet unified Germany. They belonged to a protestant sect that did not baptize and did not go to church. As a kid listening to family stories around dinner tables in Biel/Bienne their life story of fleeing from one country and coming to settle in another country fascinated me. As my dad every summer in the 1960s drove us from Ankara to Switzerland, I also heard stories involving other people fleeing Bulgaria for Turkey, East Germany for West Germany, Yugoslavia for Austria and Italy. But I cannot recollect if at the time I had heard terms like "asylum seekers and refugees" even if the anxiety and fear of displacement had clearly taken shape in my conscience.

My academic exposure to the term did not take place until soon after I started my PhD at City University in London in 1980, actually just as a wave of asylum seekers would soon be starting to stream out of Turkey for Britain, Sweden, Switzerland, West Germany etc… With my supervisor, Peter Willetts, we decided that I was going to write a thesis analyzing how the Palestinian question once

defined as a refugee problem in the 1950s and 60s became redefined as a political problem of self-determination by the 1970s. However, even then the focus of the thesis rather than "refugees" was the question of how the international community, studied through UN General Assembly resolutions and voting patterns, changed their perception/definition of an issue on the global agenda and the role that a non-state entity, the PLO, played in this transformation. This story was subsequently told in the first book of my academic career, "The PLO and World Politics."

It was my first academic posting at the Geneva campus of Webster University and my participation in, then exceptionally unique, their Refugees Studies Program that exposed me to the issue of refugees and refugee law in the mid-1980s. I had an opportunity, as part of a field visit, to study how Hungary was managing the arrival of members of the Hungarian minority fleeing mass persecution in Rumania. Then just as I got started my first full-time academic posting at Boğaziçi University this time it was Bulgarian Pomaks and Turks who were streaming into Turkey on foot, on trains and the more fortune in their Trabants.

These experiences then led me to select, after having surveyed the "Türkiye Makaleler Bibliyografyası" for the whole of 1980s and discovered that there had been only 2 or 3 academic articles published on refugees in Turkey, the topic of refugees as an area of specialization for myself. This in due course enabled me to specialize in a relatively unstudied area and developed a publication record of Turkey's refugee policies but also get to know the national bureaucracy dealing with these issues as well as the office of the UNHCR in Ankara. The latter helped me to observe firsthand, from mid-1990s well into early 2000s, how an international organization played a critical role in nudging a country to reform its policies and contributed to the gradual emergence of civil society focusing on the rights of asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey.

Finally, this academic and policy-oriented research agenda together with the growing importance of asylum and immigration, the so called "Justice and Home Affairs" matters, in EU politics must have played a role in the European Commission's decision to extend to me the first Jean Monnet Chair title in Turkey. This re-oriented me to focus my research increasingly on the impact that the EU accession process (often referred to as "Europeanization or EU-ization") was having on Turkey's asylum and refugee as well the broader immigration and border control policies. My research and growing interest in actual policy making gave me the possibility to participate, often informally, in the consultations preceding reforms as well as Turkey's adoption of the EU acquis. It is against this background that the Law on Foreigners and International Protection was adopted in 2013 and the General Directorate for Migration Management established in 2014 responsible for implementing the new law. Ironically, these developments occurred just as EU-Turkish relations were taking a turn to the worse, and Syrian displacement crisis erupted.

Since my retirement from Boğaziçi University early in 2013 at Brookings Institution, first as a senior fellow until February 2020 and since then as a non-resident scholar, my research and publications have been policy focused with respect to the management of 3.7 million Syrian and then another close to half a million refugees in Turkey. Since the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, I have produced a series of reports and commentaries (all of them and other publications can be reached from my Brookings scholar page here) advocating and suggesting ways of extending trade facilitations to countries hosting large number of refugees in return for allowing refugees to be formally employed. The most recent co-authored report was for the World Refugee and Migration Council entitled "Improving Syrian Refugee Inclusion in the Turkish Economy: How Can the International Community Help?" and can be accessed here. I have recently found out that the idea has finally gained some policy traction as some donors have approached the UNDP to study the viability of this policy idea.

Selected publications:

The Consequences of Chaos: Syria's Humanitarian Crisis and the Failure to Protect (co-authored with Elizabeth Ferris) (Brookings Press, 2016).

"With or Without the EU: Europeanisation of Asylum and Competition Policies in Turkey" (with Umut Aydın) South European Society and Politics, Vol. 18, No. 3 (June 2013), pp. 375-395.

"Turkey's New Draft Law on Asylum: What to Make of it?" in S. Paçacı Elitok and T. Straubhaar (eds.) Turkey, Migration and the EU: Potentials, Challenges and Opportunities (Hamburg, Hamburg University Press, 2012).

"Turkish asylum policy and human rights: Adjusting to international norms and EU accession requirements" in Z. Kabasakal-Arat (ed.) Human Rights Policies and Prospects in Turkey (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 170-183.

"Turkey: A country of transition from Emigration to Immigration" Mediterranean Politics Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 2007).

Turkey in the European Area of Freedom, Security and Justice (Co-authored with J. Apap and S. Carrera) (EU-Turkey Working Papers, No: 3, August 2004, CEPS, Brussels, 2004).

"Immigration and Asylum Issues in EU-Turkish Relations: Assessing EU's Impact on Turkish Policy and Practice" in S. Lavenex and E. Uçarer (eds.) Migration and the Externalities of European Integration (Lexington Books, 2002).

"Disaggregating Turkish citizenship and immigration practices" Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 36, No. 3, July 2000.

"`Coerced Immigrants': Refugees of Turkish Origins since 1945" International Migration Vol. 34, No. 3 (1996).

"Is Turkey lifting the "geographical limitation"?: The November 1994 Regulation on Asylum in Turkey" International Journal of Refugee Law Vol. 8, No. 3, (1996).

"Refugee vs. State Security: The Case of Operation Provide Comfort" Refuge: Canada's Periodical on Refugees Vol. 15, No. 3, (1996).

"The Legal Status of Asylum Seekers in Turkey: Problems and Prospects" International Journal of Refugee Law Vol. 3, No. 3, (1991).