

BETWEEN NATIONALISM, SOLIDARITY, LAISSEZ FAIRE AND RESENTMENT

Kemal Kirişci describes a country whose migration policy has long been dominated by the loss of the Ottoman Empire and a new nationalism. Syrian refugees were only accepted on a temporary basis, but were allowed to work informally. Kirişci regrets the political stalemate and would like to see more tolerance for those who are different.



Kemal Kirişci** earned a doctorate in international relations from the City University, London and was Senior Fellow at Brookings in Washington and Director of the Turkey Project. He has intensively published on EU-Turkish relations and immigration. His recent publications include “How the EU and Turkey can promote self-reliance for Syrian refugees through agricultural trade” (February 2020), “The rise and fall of liberal democracy in Turkey: Implications for the West” (2019). Before joining Brookings, Kirişci was a professor of international relations and held the Jean Monnet chair in European integration at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul.

Dirk Bornscheim: Europe was for a long time a continent divided into nation states, and after the Second World War, Western Europe's national consciousness was eclipsed by the idea of Europe. Later, Eastern European states joined in, often shaped by nationalistic ideas. While in the West, the nation state came to be seen as something to be overcome in a global world.

How can Turkey be viewed in this framework?

Kemal Kirişci: This is a huge topic, but part of the ideals in the founding of the Turkish Republic, was to become a part of what the founding fathers called the West. The influence of this perspective persisted until maybe ten to fifteen years ago. Part of this perspective was to eventually become a member of the European Union.

But in the end, this did not happen...

Kirişci: Yes. We came close. At that time, I was a professor in Istanbul, at one of the leading universities in Turkey, which received excellent students. I looked at what was happening from that, call it, if you wish, ivory tower: it was a very short-lived period of maybe less than a decade when it looked like the grip of what you called the nation state was loosening. I wouldn't say weakening. It was loosening.

I was able to see and observe this process everywhere in the society interacting with friends in academia, contacts in the military, in the bureaucracy, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some of the young diplomats or military officers were former students. I also interacted with the media closely and followed public opinion surveys.

Kirişci: So, I had ample social experience to observe that momenta. The nation state was becoming comfortable with its diversity. And I use the term diversity, not just in the ethnic sense of the word, in the sense of Kurds, for example. I use it in the wider sense of diversity: women's place in society, LGBTQ rights, religious and political diversity in all those senses of the word, close to Western believes.

A time period of ten to 15 years...

Kirişci: Yes. It didn't last very long. That is why I call a “fleeting moment.” Turkey had always been a secular nation state with undertones of Sunni Islam. With the end of this “moment” Turkey became transformed into a much more visibly religiously conservative and nationalistically society, very much inwards looking suspicious of the external world. It became especially angry with Europe, but also with the West at large.

Do you think this was in line with people's feelings, the feelings of voters?

Kirişci: Public opinion surveys showed since the 1990s and throughout the 2000s, and even nowadays, that the public wants to be part of the European Union, but never trusted that the European Union would admit Turkey. And I'm afraid on that, and I'm very categorical. I agree with them.

Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy were critical players in making very clear that Europe Union would not be comfortable with Turkey and with Turkey's identity, whether it be nationalistic or whether it be religious. My perspective is that the Europe Union failed to become what it had aspired to be: a union able to overcome cultural and religious differences on the continent.

How do you explain the stance taken by the two politicians?

Kirişci: The way I see the European integration process, is that it started right after the Second World War as a reconciliation between France and Germany and then this process gradually evolved into a reconciliation between the Catholic and the Protestant Europe. For example, when you go back to the media coverage when Denmark joined, you will see there was some reticence on the part of the Danish public because they thought that in the time of the European Economic Community was more of a Catholic gathering than a secular one.

With the expansion into Eastern parts of Europe, in many ways the European integration project reconciled itself with the Orthodox world, with Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania, and then the legacy of communist Eastern Europe. But Europe failed. And I emphasise this word. It failed to reconcile itself and accept Turks into the European fold, if you wish, a bit like in the case of the Ottoman Empire, an empire that was mostly part of Europe for centuries yet generally treated as the “other.” And this was the case despite the intense cultural, diplomatic, economic and social interactions.

Could you please give me some examples for this relationship?

Kirişci: Historians have now documented this close exchange. For example, a historian from Stanford University documents what he calls Euro-Ottomans, Europeans from Austria-Hungary, Germany and other countries that settled in the Ottoman lands. They integrated into the system as engineers, business people, etc... and some of them converted and became high-ranking Ottoman officials, military personnel and diplomats.

There was even a Huguenot from Warsaw, then part of Prussia, who jumped ship in 1812 right next to the Maiden's Tower at the entrance to the Bosphorus and eventually became a full-fledged Ottoman commander, leading the armed forces during the Crimean War and representing the Ottomans at the Berlin Conference after the Ottoman-Russian War of 1878. There were also Ottomans who went in the other direction.

Kirişci: The European integration process after the Second World War dismantled the so called others, for the French, the other was the Boche, for the Germans, the other was the French. A lot more others existed in Europe. And the success of the European integration process is that it dismantled a lot of these divisions and cultural prejudices.

But this didn't happen in the case of Turkey, the division wasn't dismantled?

Kirişci: In the case of Turkey, social democrats across Europe, from Scandinavia down to Italy and East to West, including Schröder, Fischer, and others, had a worldview that wanted to integrate Turks into this European family around shared values and norms. Yet, conservative democrats, as I mentioned the name of Angela Merkel, perpetuated the image of the Turk as the cultural other and defined European identity in more religious terms. Inevitably, especially in the course of the last ten to fifteen years, there was a reaction to these developments in Turkey.

Kirişci: There is, today, a very schizophrenic state of mind in Turkey. On the one hand, Europe, the West is the other, who is trying to hurt Turkey. But at the same time, there is this long-standing aspiration to want to become part of Europe, because Europe still continues, although it's weakening, to represent the rule of law, prosperity, proper democratic accountable rule and transparency. But it's a schizophrenic state of mind, and that's where we find ourselves.

Turkey has a population of more than 85 million people and it currently includes around 3.5 million refugees, most of whom have temporary status, without possibilities to be fully integrated. At the same time, the birth rate is declining, not as radically as the birth rate in Western Europe, but it's declining. So, in the long run, the country could face an aging and a drastically declining population.

What ideas have emerged in recent years to address the possible challenges for social policies, labour market, and others?

Kirişci: None. That really is my opinion. In the late-1990s, a group of Turkish academics wrote a fantastic report on Turkey's demographic future saying that Turkey had a demographic window of opportunity. Its population was young, dynamic, and that the country should make the most out of this window of opportunity through education and macroeconomic policies. Very quickly they warned this window of opportunity would close, which has now happened, and not much has been done about it. The proportion of young people in overall populations has declined significantly since then. What makes it even worse is that over the last ten to fifteen years, there has also been a brain drain from Turkey.

Which kind of emigrations was it?

Kirişci: Traditional emigration from Turkey to Europe was labour emigration, accompanied from the 1970s and 1980s with asylum migration. Some of it for genuine political persecution reasons and some of it abusing the system in search of jobs in Europe. Today's migration is primarily a migration of professionals, very well educated, very experienced, young, some not that young, into their 30s and 40s, migrating to Europe and very quickly finding jobs and adapting to the system. This is a loss for Turkey aggravated by government policies that disregards merit-based employment.

Kirişci: The older system wasn't a perfect regime, but it was a regime that credited merit-based employment. You had to merit a job based on your knowledge and competence. Now what is significant is loyalty. And loyalty does not always go hand in hand with competence. So, I want to come back to your question. So right now, at the governmental level, I don't see much thought going into the demographic questions beyond the Turkish president Erdogan advocating that women should have four, five children in a country facing serious economic problems and deterioration of quality of education at all levels. It is a call utterly divorced from the economic and social realities of the country.

But the brain drain has had an impact on Turkey, isn't it?

Kirişci: The Turkish education system over the last ten to fifteen years has weakened, and there are a lot of questions about the quality of university education, many university graduates are failing to find jobs. Given that picture and given the way in which economies at large are transforming themselves and increasingly using AI, Turkey has a challenge of adapting to these realities and this relates to the demographic question directly.

Could we now include the refugees in Turkey in this bigger picture?

Kirişci: Right now, the official number of Syrian refugees in Turkey is less than 2.5 million. An important part of them is working informally in the Turkish economy, especially in the labour-intensive textile industry. But the textile industry is facing serious challenges and moving to Egypt primarily, or to other countries where the labour cost is lower.

Kirişci: These refugees were initially granted temporary protection and at their peak they numbered more than 3.7 million in 2021 but with the regime change in Syria government policy now is to encourage their return to Syria.

Why has the temporary status of the refugees not changed over the years?

Kirişci: The Turkish naturalisation process does not allow for refugees to become Turkish citizens. The public is very resentful of their presence. In the early days, there was a warm welcome, but the presumption was that it would be a temporary presence. It turned out to be a presence that lasted much longer than expected, and the public sees the presence of Syrians politically uncomfortable because they feel that it will perpetuate the rule of Erdogan, that Erdogan let them into the country with this calculation in mind.

Kirişci: In 2016, Erdogan, at the time as prime minister, toyed with the idea of extending citizenship to Syrian refugees, but there was such a huge backlash from the public that he had to put aside the idea. The naturalization figures are not publicly available, because it's such a sensitive issue the government keeps the statistics under tabs.

But occasionally, a government official will share the numbers, and I understand it's around 260,000 or 280,000 Syrians who've been granted Turkish citizenship, and that's a very small number compared to the overall number of Syrians in Turkey we've mentioned. Amongst them are very young people, Syrians who were born in Turkey, who went through the Turkish education system and became fluent in Turkish and could, in the long run, contribute to Turkey's growing demographic challenges.

Are there any studies about that topic?

Kirişci: Yes, there are some, made by NGOs and civil society groups advocating these ideas, but they are done quietly. These are topics that cannot be openly discussed in Turkey right now.

If somebody wants to understand another country, it is helpful to have information about the general conditions or framework for migration policy. Could you give me a brief overview of a few topics:

Does Turkey have a well-developed social welfare system, and could you describe the situation on the labour market?

Kirişci: One third of the Turkish economy is informal, but the further south-east you go, where most refugees live and work, the higher the proportion of the informal economy becomes. The working week in the formal economy is 42 hours. Another important detail is the retirement age. It is currently a very political issue and stands at around 65. The government in the past has tried to mobilise votes by making it easier to retire. This will become a growing demographic challenge with respect to financing of the social security system.

Kirişci: Unemployment is falling in government statistics in October it was 8,5%, but it depends a lot on how you define unemployment. There are a lot of people who have given up on looking for jobs or are underemployed and don't appear in those statistics. So, I would say, unemployment remains quite high. Actually, the more broadly defined unemployment rate is put at almost a third of the working age population.

And the social security system?

Kirişci: This might come as a surprise to you. But there is a strong, maybe not very generous, but a strong social security system. This does not only include old-age pensions, which are not particularly high, but also relatively generous retirement provisions for civil servants and employees in the private sector.

Kirişci: Turkey also has universal health insurance, which is very important. It is virtually free of charge. Refugees have access to it, which causes discontent, as demand for these services is high and locals complain about a deterioration in the quality of services, causing longer waiting times for examinations and doctor's visits, and surgeries. There are also so-called social assistance programmes for people with disabilities and for people in need.

These programmes do not exist because of a Scandinavian view of social welfare, but to serve primarily populist political considerations. The government expects votes in return, particularly through the social support programmes. They have been around for a long time, but during Erdogan's term in office they have been significantly expanded. I am thinking of most women in Turkey, especially in rural areas, who receive what I would call pocket money.

***And what about immigrants? Does Turkey pursue an integration policy?
Why or why not?***

Kirişci: In 2012 a law was passed in Turkey, called the Foreigners and International Protection Law. Turkey did not have an asylum law previously. And after a very long process, supported by UNHCR, this law was adopted, extending considerable legal protection and social rights to refugees. It does not extend automatically to the prospects of integration the way you understand it, that is integration in the sense of becoming a citizen of the country, naturalization, that part does not exist in this law.

Though you can become a Turkish citizen through marriage or through special dispensation by the government. The law allows the government to take decisions on an individual basis, and, as mentioned earlier, 260,000 or 280,000 Syrians who have reportedly, become citizens of Turkey must have become citizens through these two paths.

And who was responsible to put this law in practice?

Kirişci: The law established an agency to manage migration, and that agency, tried very much to develop what they called uyum politikası. Uyum best translates into English as harmonisation. It's not exactly the same as integration, because the word integration in Turkey is entegrasyon, and it is a word that public officials and governments don't want to use because it is a term that suggests that the refugees are going to stay in Turkey permanently. Instead, the agency very successfully went around it and adopted this term Uyum. Uyum means adopting supporting programs that will increase cohesion, societal cohesion, but also increase the ability for the refugees to adjust to life in Turkey. I think adjust is probably the right word.

So, it was a programme for people who, from the authorities' point of view, were expected to leave the country again sooner or later, and would do so, as was assumed?

Kirişci: Exactly, yes, exactly.

What are the main achievements and shortcomings of this policy?

Kirişci: I think the most important achievement that deserves recognition and praise is that more than three and a half, if not four million people - when non-Syrians included - have been granted protection. They did not have to go through what others in Syria went through during the difficult years. I think the government and Turkey, as well as Turkish society, deserve recognition for this. And the UN system greatly appreciates this and describes these efforts as generous.

A second success is that the government's flexibility has enabled these people to build their own lives by allowing them to participate informally in the Turkish economy. This has many disadvantages, such as exploitation and even more resentment among locals who see wages fall when these workers enter the labour market, but this flexibility also enabled these people to build a life for themselves, and many of them have done so.

Kirişci: Another success is that they closed the camps very early on. This is in contrast to the permanent camps that you see in Africa or Asia, where these camps have always existed. By closing the camps, the government enabled the refugees to integrate into local communities, but integration in a completely different sense, as we have already discussed.

What governmental and societal reflections drive current migration policy in Turkey?

Kirişci: Go home! Go home, basically.

But why?

Kirişci: Go home. We don't want you. We don't want migrants. I have seen several opinion polls. Turkey is amongst countries whose public is most resentful of migrants and refugees. And that's what I mean with just go home. We don't want migrants' sentiments. That is a reflection central to the government's current policies too, which emphasises return, encourages return.

Kirişci: When the Assad regime collapsed, there was great excitement – on the part of the refugees, on the part of the public, but also on the part of the government – that these refugees would finally return home. But in due course realities on the ground prevailed. Erdogan made a very critical statement at the end of last year when he said, in essence, that the regime had changed would give Syrians the opportunity to return, but only when the circumstances were right.

He reiterated this point earlier this year too. This is largely in line with the UNHCR's return slogan: voluntary and sustainable return. So, I think Erdogan was more generous towards refugees on a personal level. I cannot say whether he was generous out of personal conviction or political considerations, but he deserves credit for that. In any event since the collapse of the regime more than half a million Syrians have returned home.

Kirişci: In Western European countries, migration policy is linked to demographic fears, the economic interests of certain sectors of the economy, whether specialised or not, perhaps they need skilled workers, and in other countries they need low-wage workers, and then there is the stance in favour of global human rights and compliance with international laws and conventions.

Which are the reflections and perceptions driving migration policy in Turkey?

Kirişci: The German experience is much more structured and systematic, while the Turkish experience or the Turkish government's approach is much more in line with an Adam Smith's style of governance, i.e. laissez-faire, letting things regulate themselves when it comes to the economy. As a result, most Syrians have ended up in the informal sector.

There is a quote from a former minister from perhaps four or five years ago in which he describes Syrian refugees as a blessing for Turkish industry. He says this quite openly. In many ways, they were saviours because labour was needed, but of course he doesn't say that it was informal and poorly paid work, the kind of work that locals no longer wanted to do. So, the market regulated that, and the government looked the other way in terms of laws and employment standards.

But why do they want to end this now and send the immigrants back?

Kirişci: Public and identity issues. When people in Germany look at the presence of Syrians in Turkey, they see two cultures that are close to each other, Muslims. But that is not how the society looks at it and that is not how society experiences it.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a backlash in Germany against Turkish guest workers because of their cuisine, the size of their families and the noise they made. Similar reactions today can also be found in Turkey towards Syrians. The Syrians Barometer surveys have a wealth of data on this topic, based on questions asked to the local population about whether they feel culturally close to Syrians. Interestingly, the results show that until recently, Syrians felt very close to Turks, but when the same question was asked of locals, they said exactly the opposite. This has a major impact on the government's positions and policies.

And the recent regime change doesn't matter?

Kirişci: Since then, there's been a relaxation of tensions toward Syrian refugees because, in the public eye, the likelihood of Syrians returning has become much more realistic than before. It's a situation that's somewhat easier for the government to manage. But there are sectors—industrial sectors—that aren't publicly discussed yet—where there's panic about Syrians leaving. There's a lot of talk about Turkish textile companies moving their factories to Egypt. I think this is happening partly because Syrian workers are going back to Syria, or because these companies are realizing that cheap labor will soon be less available in Turkey.

Society has different sectors, there is not only the population, the political parties are important, the government, opposition... What role does academia play in the national discussion in general?

Kirişci: In the 1980s and 1990s, there were very few academics researching and publishing on refugee issues in Turkey. However, with the arrival of Syrian refugees—starting a bit earlier—there has been an explosion of academic interest in refugees, asylum, and migration. There is an abundance of academic publications in Turkey on this topic, and some of them are very good, very sophisticated, and very well-informed. The topic is very popular.

Generally, academics are in favour of refugee protection and in favour of international refugee standards. The research tends to aim at improving outcomes, for example, social cohesion, with a lot of work on education and on the kinds of discrimination Syrian refugees experience, especially among young children in high schools. There is substantial work on how to help and sustain the Turkish education system's adaptation to the presence of Syrian refugees, such as programs for teachers to improve their interactions with the refugees, similar to approaches used in Germany.

When academia wants to have influence on the society, they need a direct relationship to the political system or to the media. How is immigration discussed in the media, based on academic research?

Kirişci: That used to be the case. But over the last six to eight years, the mainstream media has come under government control, so that they avoid certain sensitive topics and, secondly, this media has become very selective about who they talk to. That wasn't the case in the past, and I had personally attended several television programmes where these topics were discussed quite openly, in a nuanced, informed and often positive way. When this topic comes up in the media today, however, you see people parroting what they think the government wants to hear and what the government wants to convey to the public. Paradoxically or ironically, however, these media outlets are largely ignored by the public.

In the alternative media, the freer media, the more independent media, these topics do come up. But I have to say that there too they don't come up as much as they used to and their reach is more limited.

What are the deeper roots of how the Turkish government, in terms of Erdogan, defines its migration policy?

Kirişci: That is a very good question, which makes it somewhat difficult to formulate an answer that can be summarised briefly and concisely, like in a nutshell.

The Republic had a long-standing migration policy based on a law from 1934, according to which only people of Turkish descent and culture were allowed to come to Turkey as migrants and refugees and settle, similar to the former Aussiedler policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. Others were only allowed to stay in Turkey temporarily.

But in 1951 Turkey joined the Geneva Convention on refugee rights.

Kirişci: Yes, but they accepted the convention on the condition that there would be restrictions on the people who could remain in Turkey as permanent refugees. This was a so-called geographical restriction, which was enshrined in the convention and applied to refugees who had fled due to events in Europe. But even then, most refugees were encouraged to leave the country. Many of them left of their own accord because they did not want to stay in Turkey, preferring to emigrate mainly to the United States and Canada between the 1950s and 1980s. These were mostly people who fled the Soviet Union or the Soviet bloc.

Kirişci: The reason I mentioned this aspect of Turkey's geographical restriction on accepting the Geneva Convention is related to the 1934 law. As a result, not only Turks in the narrow sense, i.e. ethnic Turks or Turks who speak Turkish, but also Bosnians, Albanians and Circassians who did not speak Turkish immigrated to Turkey or were accepted as migrants.

And then Erdogan takes over the government...

Kirişci: With his arrival, Turkey's identity as a nation state became increasingly conservative and Islamic. Since the arrival of Syrian refugees in particular, a kind of Islamic solidarity has become an important aspect of Erdogan's policy towards Syrians. But having said that, be very careful. Erdogan's governments also built walls along the Iranian border, along the Syrian border to keep effectively irregular migrants out, others would say asylum seekers.

The construction of walls was strongly influenced by the European Union and the agreement concluded between Turkey and the European Union in 2016. In Turkey, some of the hostility towards Syrian refugees and other refugees who are under the protection of the UNHCR and enjoy temporary legal protection is directed at the European Union and Erdogan, as it is argued that Turkey has become a dumping ground for unwanted refugees and migrants from the European Union.

Can we stay a little bit more in the deeper roots of how the Turkish government defines or defined the deeper roots before this migration policy? Doesn't it have to do with the loss of the Ottoman Empire?

Kirişci: Of course. In the early days of the Republic, the people who managed migration and refugee policies were the very officials who dealt with Ottoman Muslim subjects who had been driven out of the Balkans and Caucasus. We discussed the rise of nation-states and nationalism, and the way in which this played a very important role in building an image of Turks and Turkey as the other. That was the period when a large number of Ottomans—who happened to be mostly Turks and/or Muslims, such as Bosnians, Circassians, Tatars and Albanians—ended up fleeing into the shrinking Ottoman Empire.

The officials who played an important role in shaping the migration policies of the early Republican era were those who managed this displacement into the Ottoman Empire after the Balkan Wars, from Bulgaria, Greece, and other parts. Some of these officials themselves were victims of the unfolding displacement as the Empire shrunk.

When you look at events in the United States and Europe, what are the lessons learned from Turkey that your thinking can express for other countries in Europe and the United States? What can we learn from the Turkish example?

Kirişci: At the end of the day, the biggest lesson, in my opinion, is that migration is a universal phenomenon. It happens everywhere. There are many similarities between these experiences. And as a result of forced displacement, there is a lot of suffering, uprooting, upheaval, and then governments and civil society try to deal with this displacement and adapt to it. Displacement becomes part of the history of all these societies, and there are politicians who make good use of this history advocating for inclusive policies, and there are politicians who exploit it for narrow nationalist and exclusivist agendas. That is what I have learned most from three or four decades of studying these migration issues.

Kirişci: Another lesson I learned, at the risk of oversimplification, from studying migration is that imperial orders, empires such as the Ottoman Empire, the Habsburg Empire and the Russian Empire, were much better at dealing with diversity and identities – they didn't care whether you were Turkish or somebody else. Their interest was much more in the longevity of the empire and bringing everyone together. This kind of nationalism undermined this way to live together. Nationalism began to divide societies. You are Turkish, you are the other, get out of here. Or in the case of Turkey: you are Greek, get out of here. In France: you are Huguenot, you are Protestant, get out etc...

Kemal Kirişci, thank you very much for this insightful overview.

* Edited by Dirk Bornscheim and Samuel Church, and designed by Pablo Rincón Ruiz.

** We would like to thank Kemal Kirişci for linking individual passages of the interview to sources as part of his revision.