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## *What is the impact of the Syrian crisis on migration governance of the Republic of Armenia?*

### *Abstract*

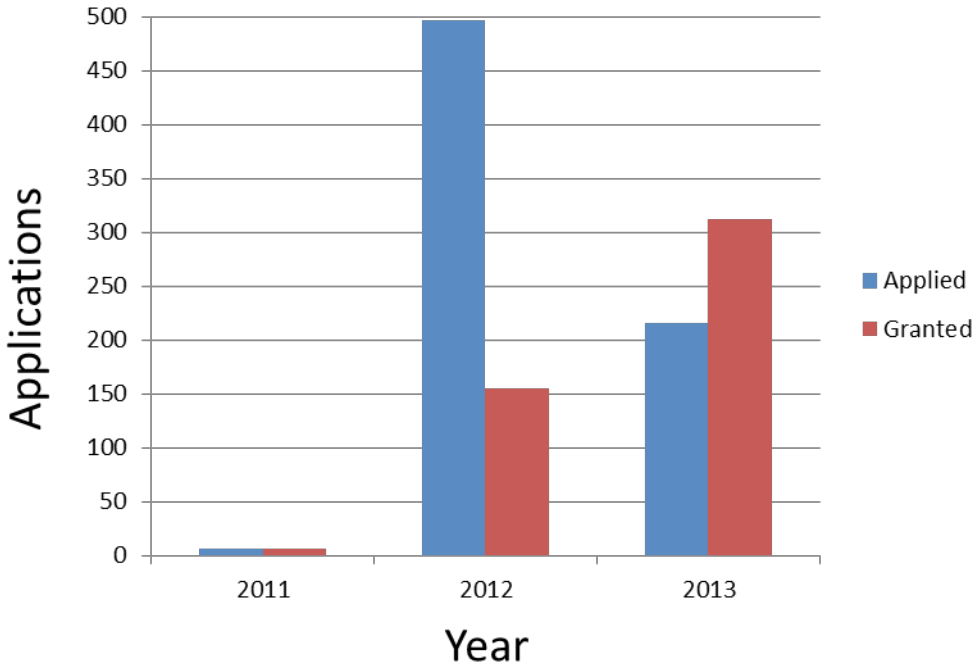
*The war in Syria has had a far-reaching impact beyond its borders. With no signs of peace, many Syrians with ties to Armenia travelled to the country in search of refuge. However, with its overstretched resources and poor economy, Armenia was able to take only some steps to address the needs of those fleeing the conflict. The pressure on the migration services to respond to the influx of refugees also revealed gaps in Armenia's migration data management system. Armenia's inability to provide long-term accommodation for many Syrians may create pressures for them to seek better opportunities elsewhere.*

**CARIM-East**

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**Figure 1: The number of asylum seekers from Syria in the Republic of Armenia<sup>2</sup> has dramatically increased**



Source: Author’s calculations based on data from the Republic of Armenia (the interdepartmental monitoring committee responsible for coordinating issues of Syrian Armenians).

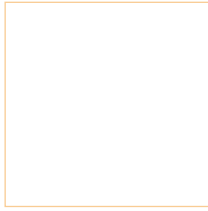
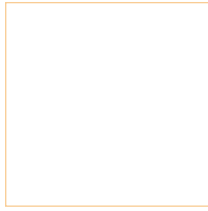
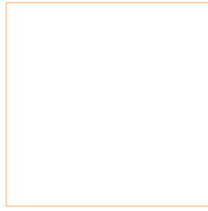
The Syrian Crisis contributed to a mass influx of Syrian Armenians<sup>1</sup> fleeing from the conflict to Armenia. With Syria’s war causing refugee crises in the region, this also creates serious strains on the migration governance of the Republic of Armenia. Before the current socio-political events in Syria, approximately 100,000 Armenians lived in the country. One of the most seriously affected cities in Syria is Aleppo – a city which used to house 60,000 Armenians, making it one of the most dynamic and prosperous components of the Armenian Diaspora. The mass inflow of Syrian Armenians into Armenia started in 2012. Initially, many Syrians fled from their war-torn country to neighbouring states. Many refugees expected that the situation would be

resolved quickly, allowing them to return to their home country. However, after hopes of the situation improving in Syria were dashed, many ethnic Armenians decided to seek secure and stable refuge in their native Armenia.

The influx of refugees to Armenia has not been one-sided. There have been families, especially non-complete ones, which after arriving and living for some time in Armenia, returned to Syria. Due to incomplete data and the lack of government capability to record refugee flows, there are only partial

1 Syrian Armenians are referred to Syrian citizens who are of Armenian origin.

2 Within six months. In the case of Syria, the prevailing number of those “granted” over the number of those “applied” is conditioned by the fact that the decision on granting asylum is made within three months of applying. As a result the number of those “granted” includes those who applied in 2012 but who received a positive decision in 2013



assessments on the number of the Syrians currently residing in Armenia.

Despite this limited data, the Republic of Armenia (RA) made some efforts to estimate how many Syrian Armenians reside on its territory. According to the interdepartmental monitoring committee responsible for coordinating issues of the Syrian Armenians, as of July 2013 there were 9,500-10,000 in the country. Travelling difficulties, especially the suspension of air travel from Syria to Armenia, prevented more refugees fleeing there.

Out of those Syrians who did reach Armenia, only about 7% applied for asylum (see Figure 1). There was a significant backlog of applications in 2013, which meant that the number of those who were granted refugee status superseded those who applied that year (since applications from 2012 were also considered). Why did only 7% applied for asylum? One of the explanations is that Armenia cannot provide significant legal, social and material assistance to its refugees. With Armenia's poor economy and insufficient resources, many Syrians living there rely on family and social support instead of going through the asylum application process. Those who do apply for asylum are driven by other motivations rather than seeking state support. In the past year and a half, 87% (712 people) out of the total number (814 people) of Syrian Armenians who applied for asylum in Armenia have been granted this right.

### Legal acts regulating the Syrian Armenians

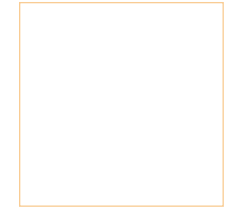
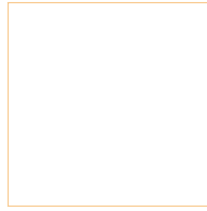
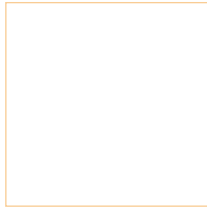
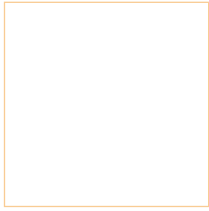
The Armenian government adopted several legal measures to address the challenges posed by the crisis in Syria. However, not all the measures have proven applicable. For instance, according to Article 3 of the Law "On Refugees and Asylum", in case of a crisis where there is a mass inflow of asylum seekers, foreign citizens and stateless persons who arrive as

part of such a mass inflow may be granted temporary protection without following individual procedures. But Article 3 of this law did not prove useful in the case of the mass inflow of Syrians. For one, there are no clear criteria for what 'mass inflow' means and when this article can be invoked. Moreover, temporary protection may be granted only to those groups who have left territories directly bordering the Republic of Armenia (i.e. Georgia, Turkey, Iran, Azerbaijan). The Syrian Armenians did not travel to Armenia through the bordering states. They arrived in Armenia mostly by air from Aleppo and Dubai (when the air connection still operated). Therefore, the Armenian authorities considered asylum applications from Syrians mostly by using the individual asylum procedure, which contributed to the strain on government resources.

Despite the strains placed on Armenia - a country of nearly 3 million people - it is important to stress that the country managed to uphold its obligation of granting Syrian refugees the necessary protection. In particular, Armenia has been mindful of respecting the principle of non-refoulement based on Articles 33 and 32 of the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees.

Several steps taken by the government were aimed to address issues posed by the Syrian Armenians. For instance, 110 families of Syrian citizens who were recognised as refugees were provided with shelter. According to the Government Decree<sup>3</sup> of 26 July 2012, Syrian citizens were able to receive Armenian citizenship at diplomatic representations or consular posts of the Republic of Armenia. On 24 October 2012, the government adopted "On making amendments in the Law of the Republic of Armenia 'On State Duty'", which exempted foreign citizens of Armenian origin who are fleeing from countries that threaten their lives from having to apply for visas and residence permits.

<sup>3</sup> The Decree is N 950-N and N-951-N.



Another legal act that served as a practical tool for helping Syrian refugees to integrate in Armenia was their ability to receive permission to drive<sup>4</sup>. Syrian citizens could replace their existing driving licenses without passing any road test and obtain Armenian driving licenses valid for one year (provided that they pass a road test within this time frame). In addition, Syrian Armenians, who entered the territory of the Republic of Armenia using their own private vehicles, have been given the opportunity to prolong the validity period of their vehicles for up to 11 months without paying any customs fee.

### Remaining challenges

Despite the above-mentioned legal steps aimed to address the manifold challenges raised by Syrian Armenians, serious difficulties still remain. According to the working group dealing with refugees, about 1,000 Syrian Armenians are employed (10% of all those residing in Armenia), mainly in the public sector and primarily in the education and healthcare systems. The majority of these people are Armenian citizens. Nevertheless, due to challenging economic realities in Armenia, many Syrian refugees are unemployed and confront limited opportunities in the labour market. Those who are employed receive low wages (especially, compared to the ones they received in Syria before the war shattered the country).

Another challenge for Syrian Armenians is finding housing. Currently, the majority live either in rented houses (mostly jointly with two or more families) or together with their friends and relatives. Some refugees have property in Syria, but, due to the current instability, they are not able to sell it and purchase housing in Armenia. This situation is unsustainable, especially on a long-term basis.

4 According to the Decree of the Government of the Republic of Armenia N 1106- Armenia N 1106-N of 23 August, 2012 and N334-N of 4 April, 2012.

Unemployment and problems with housing are among the challenges that create pressures for many Syrian Armenians looking for opportunities outside Armenia. In fact, many in Armenia assume that Syrians are living in Armenia only on a temporary basis and may move, potentially seeking opportunities in Western Europe.

### Challenges pertaining to migration statistics

The influx of Syrians into Armenia also magnified another serious challenge that the government confronts – migration data management. Overall, data collected by numerous different agencies/departments is not co-ordinated, centralised and compared. There is no comprehensive archive on migration. This problem has already been noticed by the 2008 study ‘On migration management in the Republic of Armenia’<sup>5</sup>, but insufficient action has been taken to address this issue.

Before further discussing the problems with data management, it is important to note that the Armenian government has taken some steps to address this challenge. On 10 November, 2011 the government approved the “Action Plan for Implementation of Policy Concept for the State Regulation of Migration in the RA” which envisages compliance with EU norms in the way data is collected by state agencies. Further decrees, including the one on 16 March 2013, were adopted to build on the Action Plan in order to streamline statistic indicators with the EU.

Nevertheless, serious gaps remain, which are demonstrated in differences among conflicting data. For instance, the official estimate of the Armenian popu-

5 See the study on migration management in the Republic of Armenia was published by the International Organization for Migration; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Armenia and Swedish Migration Board; available at: [http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/Review\\_MigrationManagementReport2008\\_English.pdf](http://publications.iom.int/bookstore/free/Review_MigrationManagementReport2008_English.pdf)



lation at the beginning of 2012 was 3.339 million people. However, the 2011 census data showed that there were only 3.018,900 million Armenians, 320 thousand people below the official estimate. Serious deviation also exists in the data of people crossing borders recorded, pointing to an inaccuracy in the estimated numbers of arrivals and departures of Armenians.



## Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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