The Role of Turkey in the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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Turkey's policy towards Syria until February 2011

- Syria arguably Turkey's closest ally
- Erdogan and Assad have good personal relationship, holiday together
- From May 2009 onwards, Erdogan and Davutoglu increasingly dream of neo-Ottoman sphere of Turkish influence in the Middle East, a mosaic of Muslim states looking to Ankara for leadership – Syria to be the first
- 2009 September - abolition of visa requirements
- 2009 October – High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council

From Amity to Enmity: February 2011 onwards

- AKP begins to lose patience with Assad
- 2011 May AKP allows rebel groups to hold conference in Antalya
- 2011 November Erdogan calls on Assad to step down
- 2012-2014 Open door policy
  - Rebel groups (including extremists) allowed to use Turkey as platform for military campaign in Syria
  - Turkey both arms and facilitates arming of rebel groups (including extremists)
  - Foreign recruits (including extremists) allowed to transit Turkey to join war in Syria
  - Extremely lax controls on Turkish-Syrian border
- 2015 January onwards – increasing restrictions on movement of people/weapons through Turkey and across border

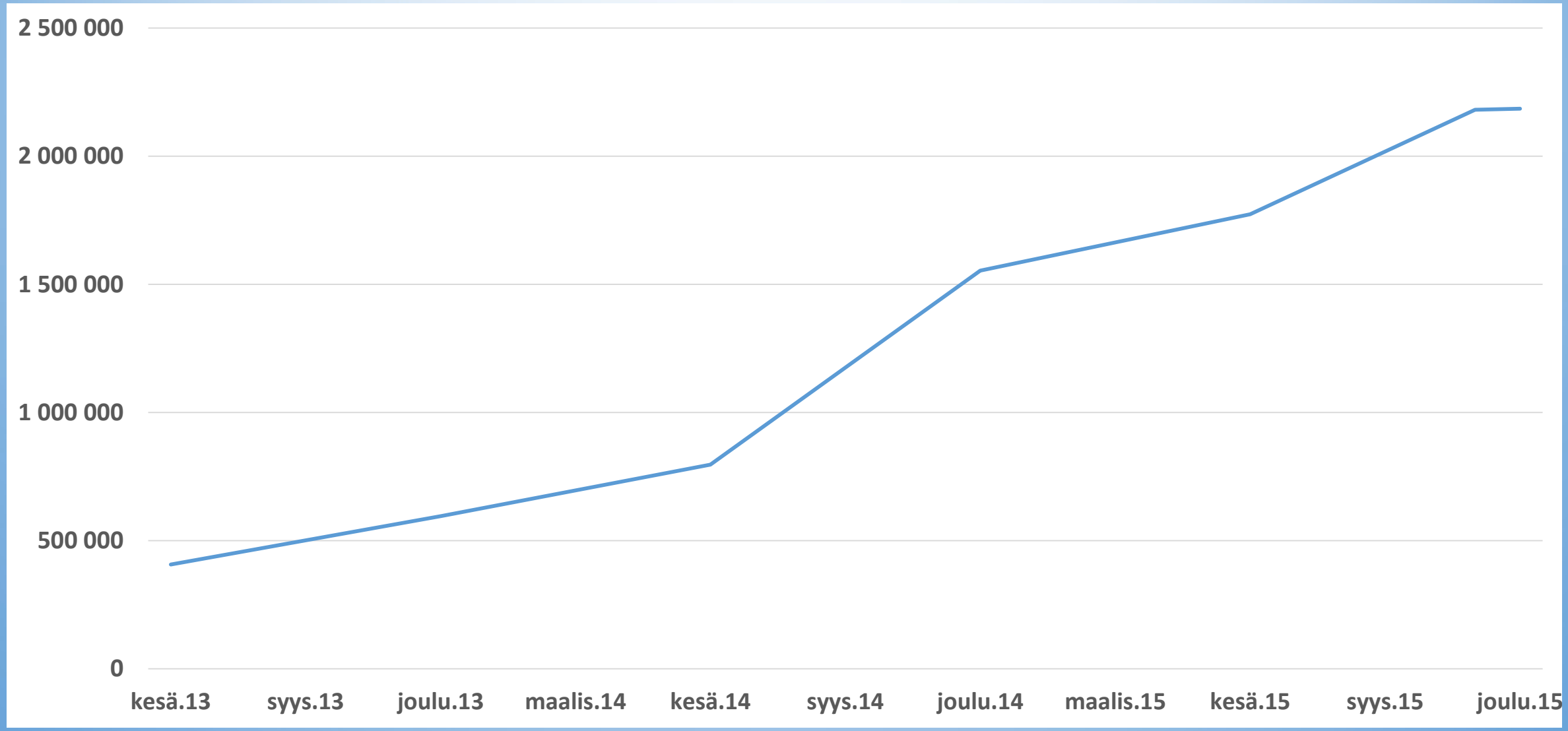
The AKP's miscalculations

- Arab uprisings brought AKP's sectarianism to the surface
- Erdogan/Davutoglu saw another opportunity to realize their neo-Ottoman ambitions
- Believed Assad would be swiftly overthrown

  - Populace would be grateful for the hosting of refugees

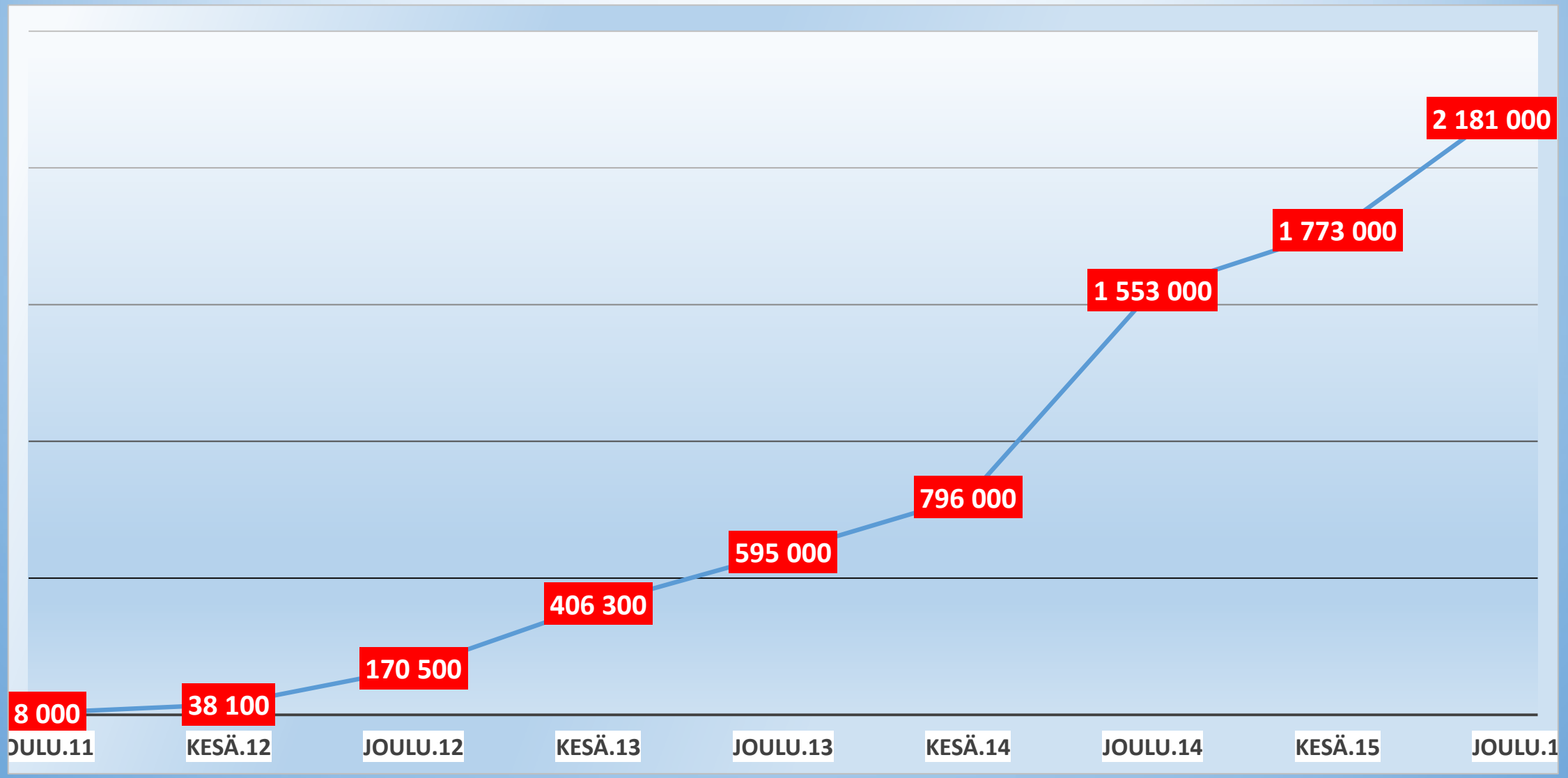
  - Rebel groups would grateful for military/logistical support
- Believed Sunni regime with Muslim Brotherhood sympathies would take power in Damascus, one of a mosaic of such regimes looking to Ankara for leadership
- No strategy for extended Syrian Civil War
- No strategy for extended presence of refugees in Turkey

Increase in Syrian refugees registered in Turkey



Data from UNHCR, GOT

Number of Syrian refugees registered in Turkey

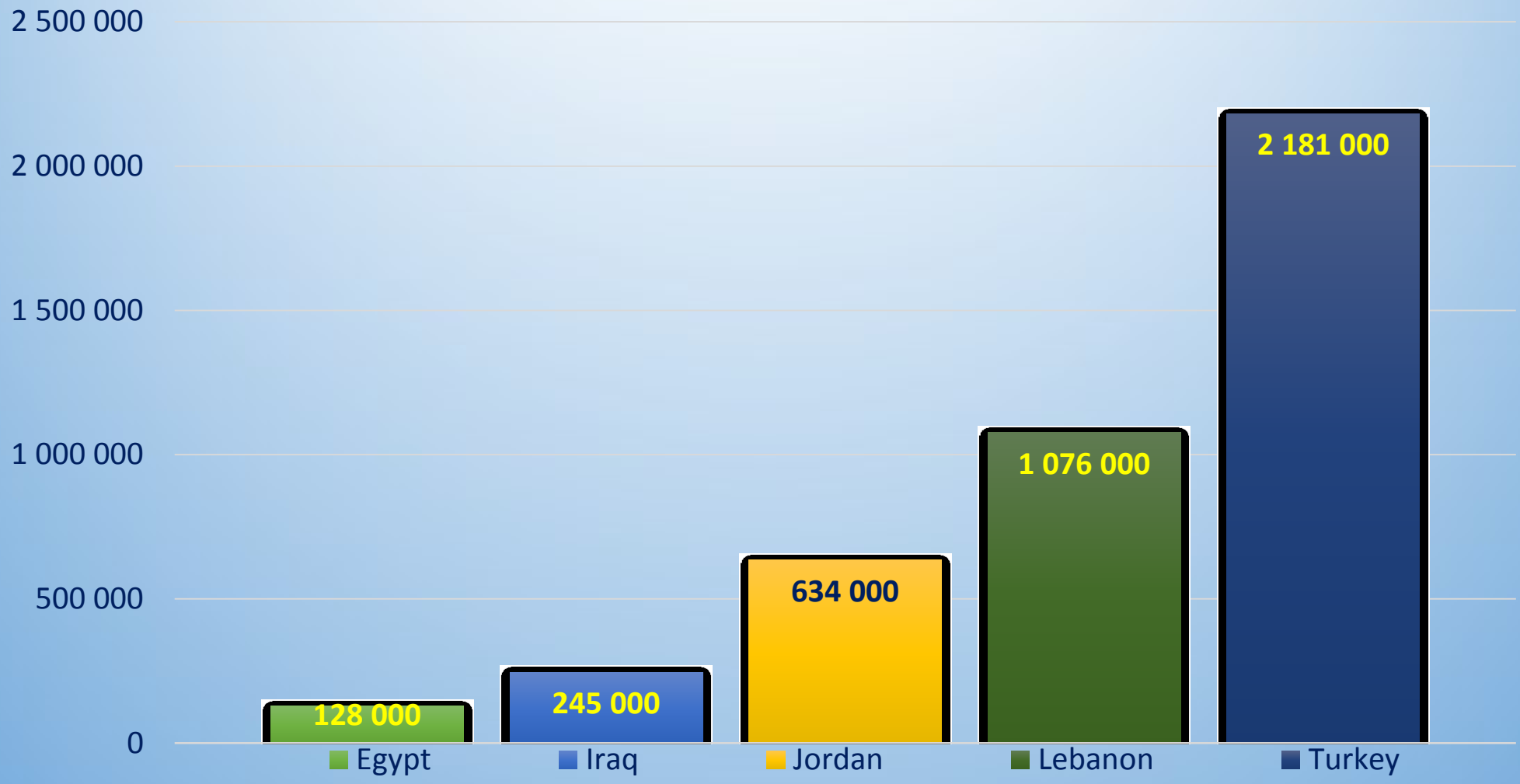


Data from UNHCR, GOT

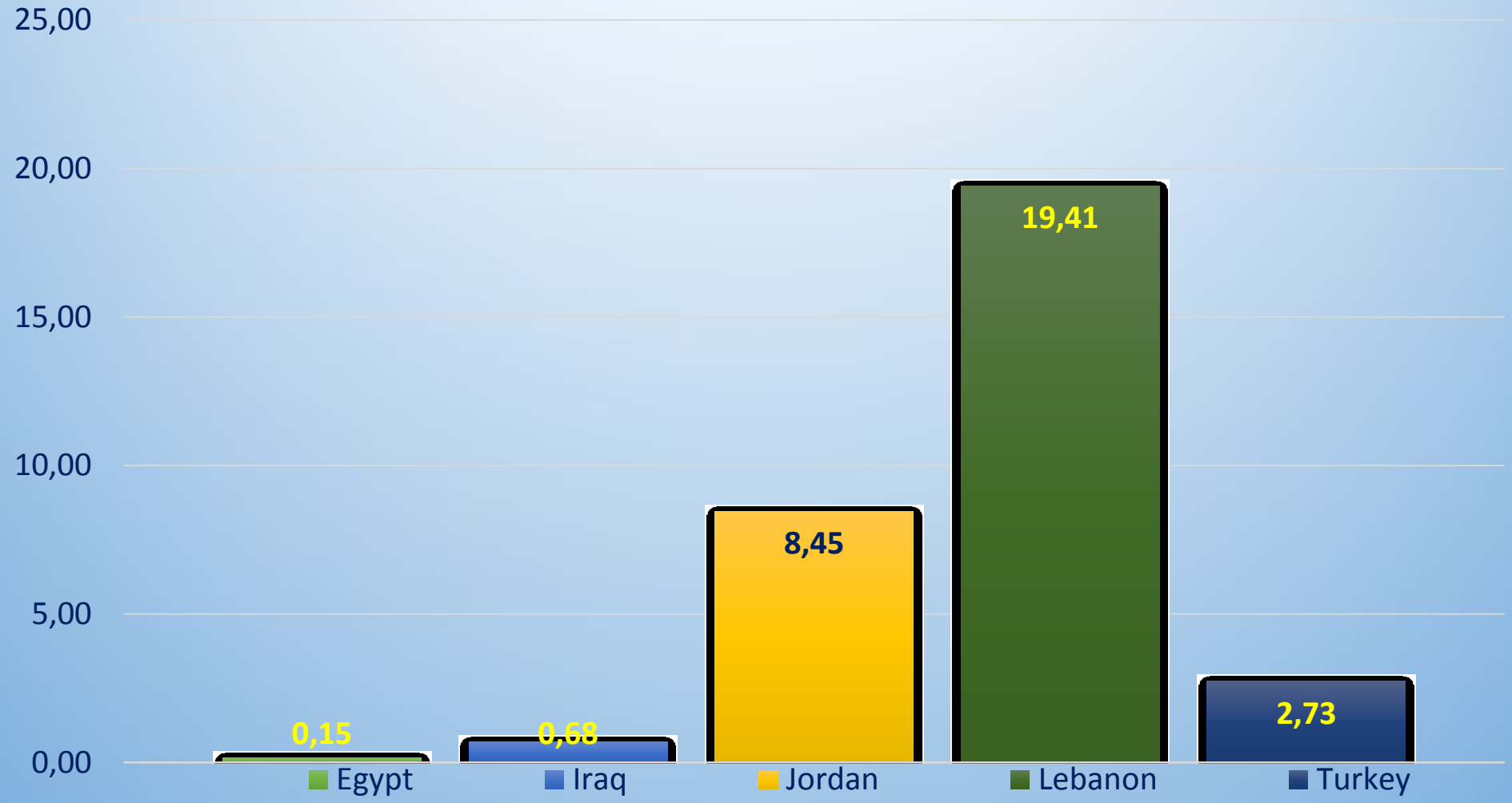
Syrian refugees in Turkey

- Total number registered by the Turkish authorities: 2,181,000
  - 247,000 in 25 tent/container camps in southeastern Turkey (plus 14,500 Iraqis)
  - 1,934,000 registered outside the camps
- Actual figure may be different
  - More than 2.5 million have probably arrived
  - But the Turkish authorities do not “de-register” those who leave
  - Around 400,000 believed to have crossed the Aegean to Greece in 2015 (some will be registered, some unregistered)
- But more Syrian refugees are still arriving in Turkey

Registered Syrian refugees in the region



Syrian refugees as percentage of population



Legal status of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey

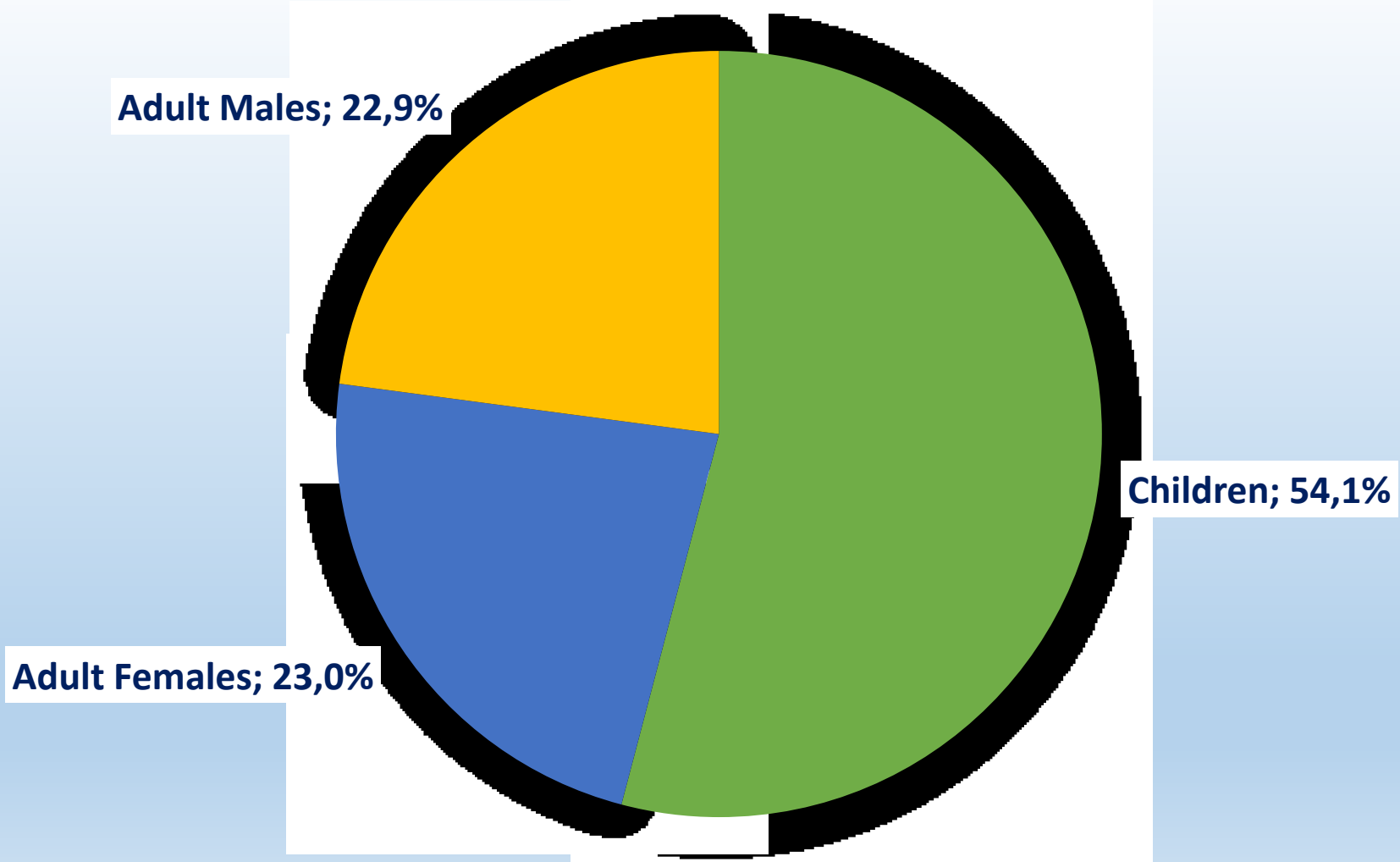
- Turkey is a signatory to 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees but restricts applications for asylum to those arriving in the country from Europe. New law in April 2013 confirmed that those arriving in Turkey "as a result of events from outside European countries" can only receive "conditional refugee" status, consequently:

  - Syrian refugees cannot apply for asylum in Turkey
  - Are officially classed "guests"

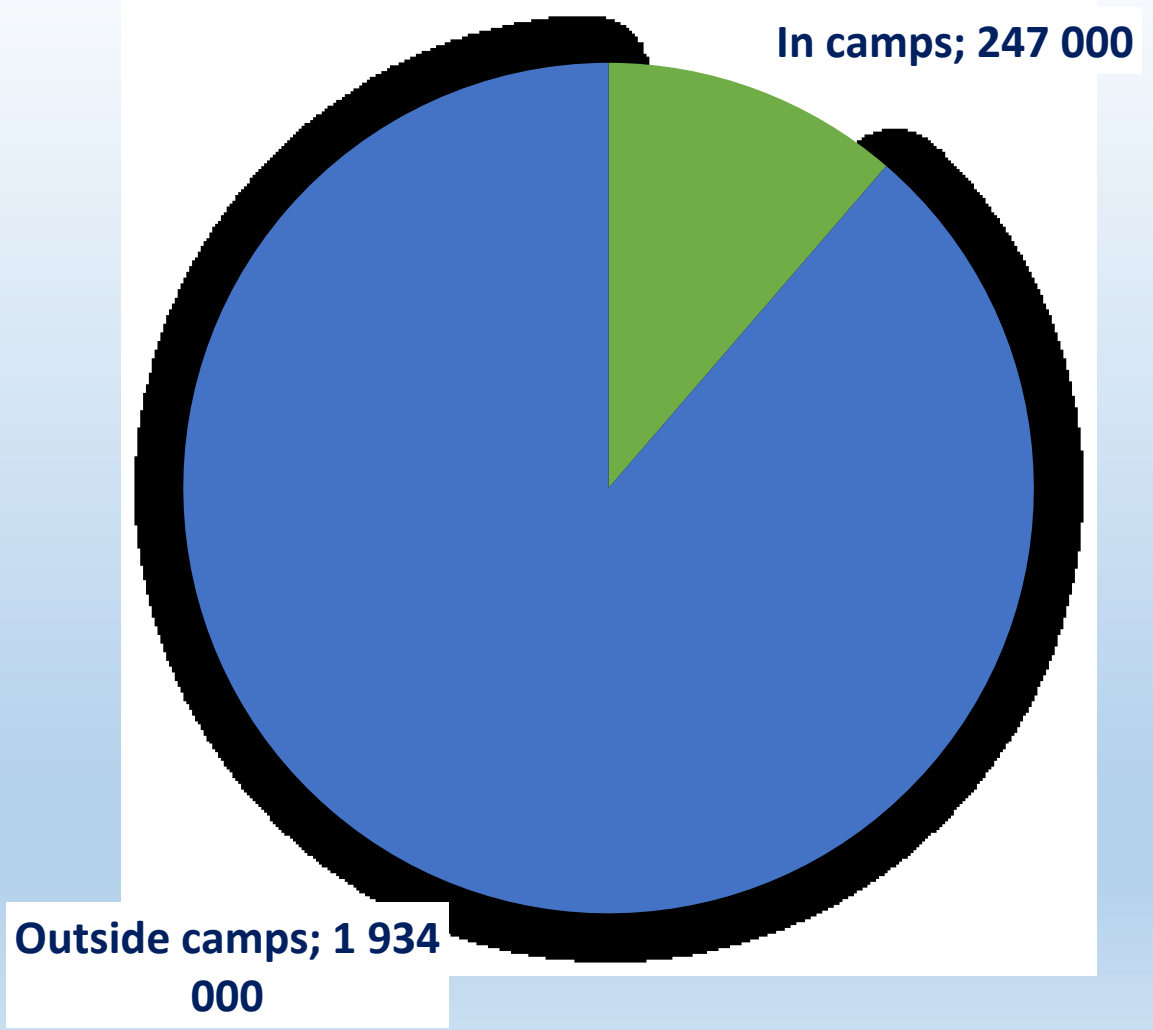
- In 2013, Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) began biometric ID project for Syrian refugees

  - Includes fingerprints, ID and residency information
  - Provides access to healthcare and education services

Registered Syrian refugees in Turkey by age/gender



Number of refugees in camps in Turkey



Syrian refugees in camps in Turkey

Dark Red: 105,000
Pink: 42,000
Dark Green: 34,000

Pale Green: 15,000-18,000
Dark Yellow: 10,000-11,000
Pale Yellow: 8,000-9.000

Problems and challenges faced by refugees

- Lateral (spatial) and vertical (social) movement
  - Breakup of families
- Exploitation (cheap labour, sexual exploitation)
- Discrimination
- Ghettoization
- Social tensions
  - Lynchings, attempted pogroms, particularly since summer 2014
- Bans on entry into specific cities/areas
- Forcible relocations

Why have more tried to enter the EU in 2015?

- Increasingly made to feel unwelcome in Turkey
  - Refugee fatigue in Turkish society, turning to resentment/violence
  - Change in attitude of government, fears of social unrest, unemployment
  - Increase in forcible relocations, bans on settlement
- Desperation
  - Exhaustion of funds
  - Despair of imminent end to Syrian Civil War
- Hope
  - Influence of internet/telephone calls from friends/relatives in EU
- Events in Syria
  - Continued fighting
  - Regime tightening conscription
- Turkey not stopping traffickers
- Physical/psychological impact of resurgence of violence in southeast Turkey

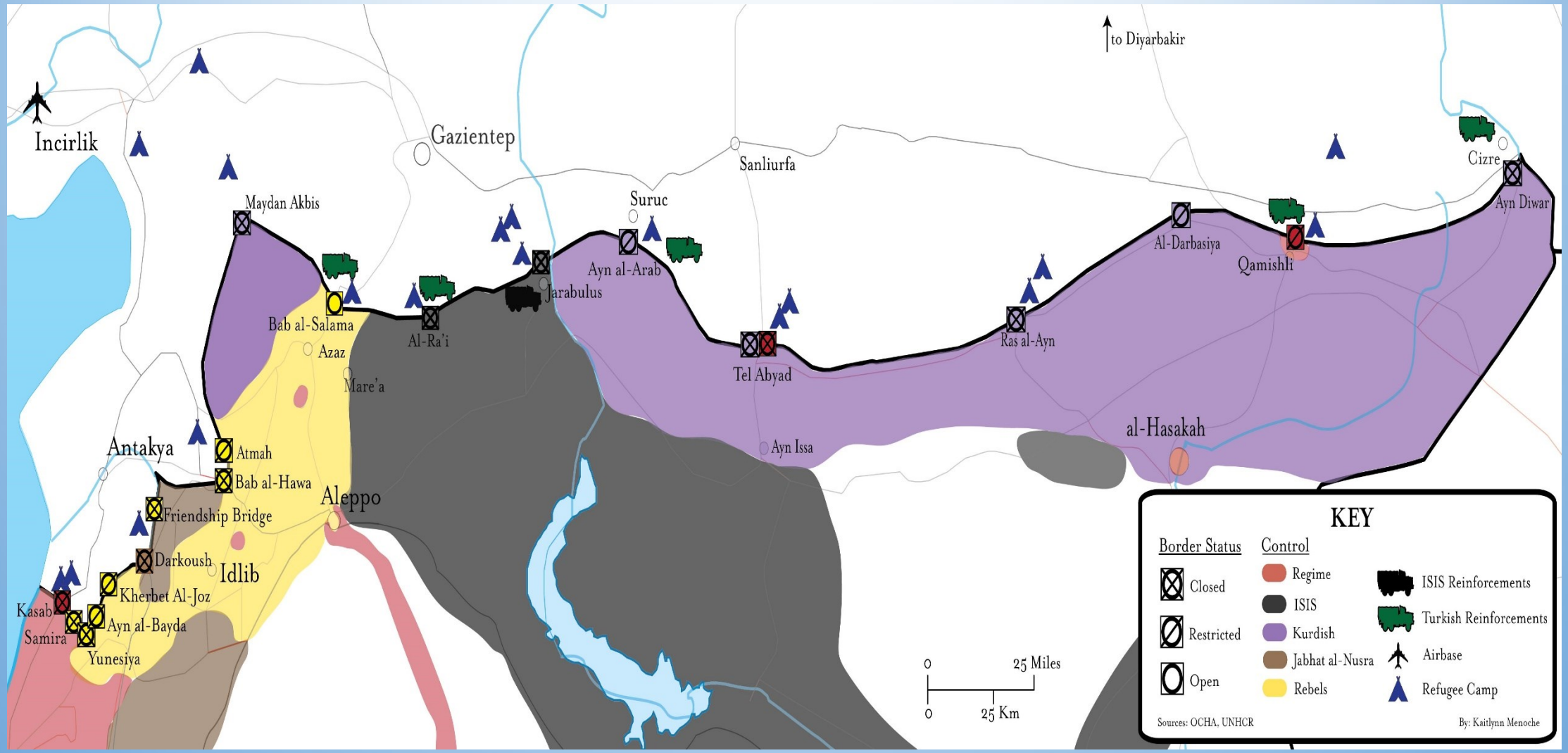
Turkey's publicly stated policy position

- There needs to be a concerted international effort to overthrow President Bashar Assad, which will:
  - Remove the main factor fueling extremist Islamist groups
  - Put an end to the Civil War and enable the refugees to return home

- Until that happens, a safe haven should be created in northern Syria
  - To enable some of the refugees to return
  - To enable the internally displaced to receive humanitarian aid

- Until that happens, the international community, particularly the EU, should
  - Accept more refugees
  - Provide substantial financial support for the refugees Turkey is hosting

Control of territory in Syria by rebels/regime



Map by the Institute for the Study of War

EU/US position on Syria

- No appetite for concerted military effort to overthrow Assad
- No appetite for creation of no-fly zone, deployment of ground troops to create safe haven
- Divergence between Turkey and EU/US over PYD and its role in combating IS
- No clear EU/US strategy on how to end Syrian Civil War

Negotiations with the EU Sep/Oct 2015

- EC drew up Draft Action Plan, foreseeing:
  - EU would accept large number of Syrian refugees from Turkey
  - Provide up to €1 billion in aid per year for those who remain in Turkey
  - Relaxation of visa requirements for Turks visiting Schengen Area
  - Creation of processing centres in Turkey, staffed by EU officials
  - Joint Greek-Turkish naval patrols in Aegean to intercept traffickers
  - Agreement by Turkey to smoothly readmit migrants rejected by EU

- EC also offered:
  - Postponement of critical Progress Report
  - Opening of frozen chapters of accession process

Negotiations with the EU Sep/Oct 2015 cont.

- Erdogan travelled to Brussels 4-6 October
- Feted by officials but no agreement on Draft Action Plan
- EC posted Draft Action Plan on website and said Turkey had agreed
- Turks furious
- Erdogan returned to Turkey, negotiations continued
- EC promised more aid: €3 billion (€500 billion EC, €2.5 billion member states)
- Merkel travelled to Ankara on 18 October, met with Erdogan in his palace, failed to secure agreement
- But EC still withheld critical Progress Report until after 1 November Turkish general election

Main issues currently being discussed

- Number of refugees to be accepted by EU
- Amount of aid to be paid to Ankara to keep remainder in Turkey
- Turkish measures against traffickers, including TR-GR naval patrols
- Processing centres in Turkey
- Readmission into Turkey of migrants rejected by EU
- Changes to visa requirements for Turks visiting EU
- Unfreezing of chapters of Turkey’s accession process

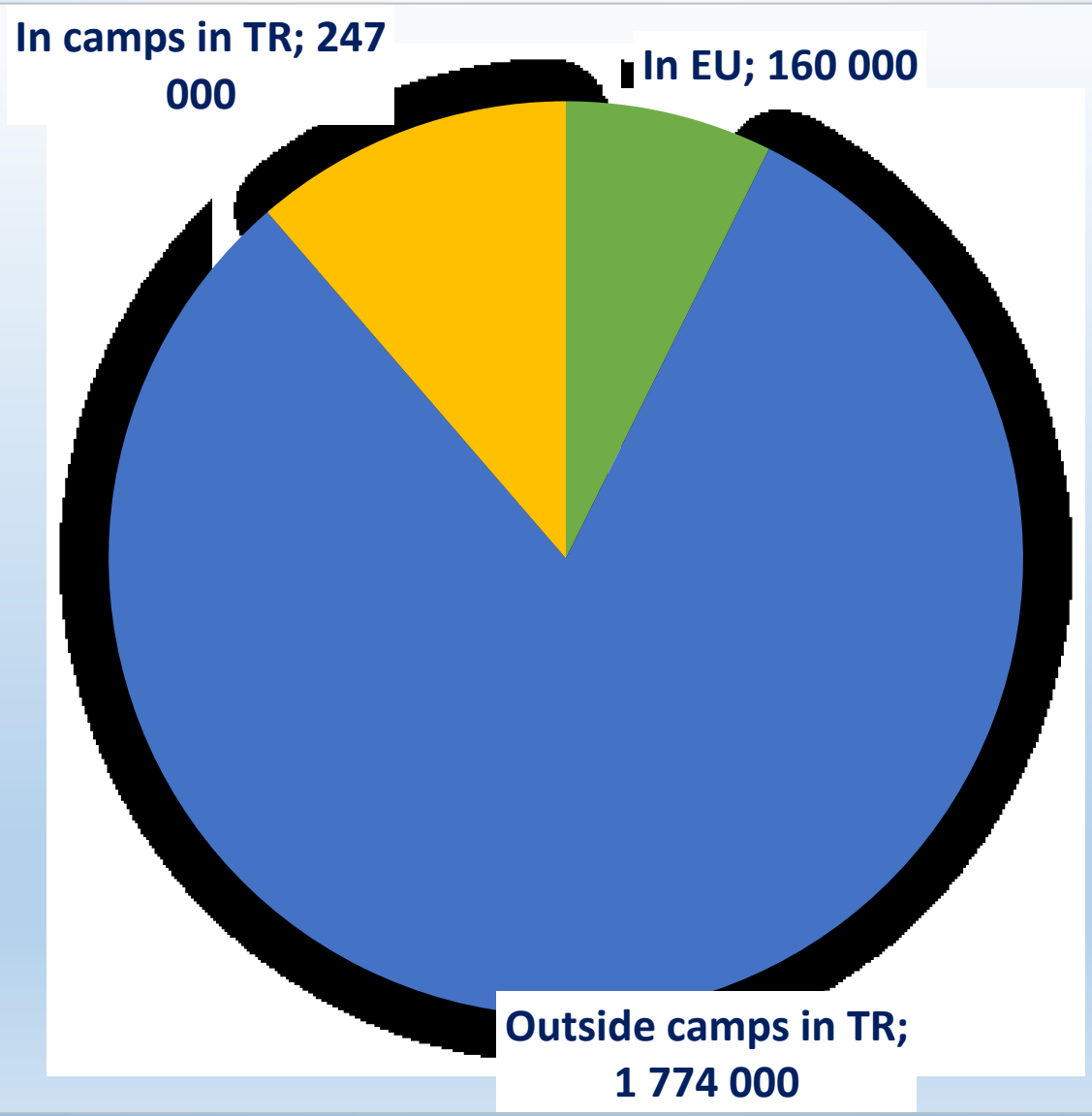
Main obstacles to an agreement

- Some EU members reluctant to accept their designated share of the 160,000 Syrian refugees
- Some EU members reluctant to pay their share of the €3 billion
- Turkey says money insufficient
- Greece refusing to accept joint Greek/Turkish naval patrols
- Visas
  - Turkey wants complete abolition of visas
  - EU members insist abolition impossible but might ease some requirements
- Turkey's EU accession process
  - EC offer to unfreeze chapters blocked by Cyprus although this may change if there is substantive progress in reunification talks
  - Merkel adamant Turkey cannot become EU member even if chapters unfrozen

What happens next?

- EU expected to invite Erdogan to Brussels later this month, probably 29 November
- Agreement on all issues in EC Action Plan appears unlikely
- May be “partial agreement” as face-saving measure

If agreement with EU was signed today



If agreement with EU was signed today cont.

3,000,000,000 ÷ 2,021,000 = 1,484

Amount for each of the currently registered Syrian refugees who would remain in Turkey after the deal: €1,484

Amount per refugee per week over one year: €28.50

Amount per refugee per week over two years: €14.25

Prospects, challenges and questions

- Still no sign of imminent end to Syrian Civil War
- No long-term Turkish strategy for accommodation/absorption of refugees
- Even if the Civil War ends tomorrow, it will be long time before the infrastructure etc is repaired and it is possible for all of the refugees to return – even if they want to
- The social/economic problems associated with the refugees are likely to increase, not decrease – particularly given the expectations of slow economic growth, more political turmoil in Turkey
- Challenge is vertical (social/economic) as well as lateral (spatial) movement
- Will Syrian refugees remaining in Turkey be content to stay?
- Will Turkey attempt to stop them trying to reach the EU?