

**RSN**

REFUGEE SOLIDARITY NETWORK

# Bridging Refugee Rights in Turkey & Mexico:

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Report on the October 2019 Knowledge-Exchange in Mexico City  
jointly organized by the Refugee Solidarity Network, Refugee  
Rights Turkey and Sin Fronteras IAP

## Introduction

In October 2019 the Refugee Solidarity Network (USA),<sup>1</sup> Refugee Rights Turkey (Turkey),<sup>2</sup> and Sin Fronteras IAP (Mexico)<sup>3</sup> organized two knowledge-sharing exchange events in Mexico City. These events are part of an on-going triangular cooperation dialogue between the three organizations that seeks to improve refugee protection in emerging host countries. This report provides an overview of the two events co-convened by the three organizations, and offers a summary of the lessons learned from the comparative exploration of the Turkish and Mexican contexts. Potential strategies to address common challenges, and other potential ideas for collaboration, as identified by participants, are also included for consideration.

By publishing this field report we hope to shed light on the critical importance of fostering strong civil societies in emerging refugee host states, and creative modalities available to do so, as a principal means to ensuring the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. Strong civil societies outlive shifts in political leadership and allow for an ongoing focus on international, regional, and domestic rights frameworks that ensure accountability. The knowledge-exchange explored in this report revealed that supporting civil society can and should be achieved through various axes of dialogue, including between refugee rights advocates in the Global North and national civil society organizations and advocates in emerging host countries in the Global South as well as through South-South engagement. Fostering cooperation along these lines helps protect human rights at a time when the universal values underpinning them are increasingly at-risk.

## Context

Global figures on forced displacement illuminate a number of concerning realities. As of the end of 2018, there are 25.9 million refugees across the world, with a staggering majority (84%) living in developing countries. While refugee situations affect all parts of the world, certain countries are facing greater and more acute challenges. Turkey hosts some 3.7 million refugees, more than any other country in the world.<sup>4</sup> Mexico has received 48,000 asylum applications in the first 8 months of 2019, an increase of 231% in one year.<sup>5</sup>

The increasing concentration of asylum-seekers, refugees, stateless persons, and others in need of international protection (collectively “protection-seekers”) in emerging host states like Turkey and Mexico is in part due to externalization policies and practices of the major destination zones like the EU and US. Well-known examples of such bilaterally agreed externalization mechanisms include the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal and the 2019 US Remain in Mexico policy, both representing the latest evolution of a consistent sequence of policies that have been projected vis-à-vis Turkey and Mexico by the EU and the

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- 1 Refugee Solidarity Network (RSN), a non-profit organization based in New York, works to protect the rights of people uprooted from their homes and seeks to strengthen the communities where they seek safety. In partnership with advocates and local stakeholders around the world, RSN aims to develop capacities in refugee host countries outside the United States and advance legal frameworks that uphold human rights. RSN was founded upon the belief that the complexity of forced migration requires a flexible, collaborative response focused on achieving sustainable solutions. While RSN’s main focus country and partnership has involved Turkey, RSN is also involved in projects involving other contexts in South and Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe.
  - 2 Refugee Rights Turkey (RRT) is a leading NGO legal assistance provider for refugees, asylum seekers and detained migrants in Turkey. The organization delivers a range of specialized legal information and representation services in connection with asylum and migration procedures and access to rights issues under Turkish law. RRT also offers various trainings and other expertise support services to lawyers and CSO legal practitioners across Turkey, and advocates for improvements in Turkey’s legislation and policies affecting refugees and migrants, in line with international standards.
  - 3 Sin Fronteras IAP is a secular, non-governmental, nonprofit Mexican civil society organization, whose mission is to contribute to the promotion, protection and defense of the human rights of migrants and subjects of international protection, in order to dignify their living conditions through direct attention and advocacy in the public agenda.
  - 4 UNHCR Global Trends 2018 report, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html>
  - 5 UN Refugee Chief praises Mexico’s support for refugees, UNHCR, 1 Oct. 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2019/10/5d930d684/un-refugee-chief-praises-mexicos-support-refugees.html>

US respectively over many years.<sup>6</sup>

Ensuring legal protection in the face of increasing numbers has been a shared challenge in Mexico and Turkey. One important means to achieving such ends is through strengthening of national civil society and national institutions in both countries. Recognizing this common need, and the shortage of opportunities for advocates working in parallel spaces to engage with one another, RSN sets out to make knowledge and experience in critical national settings around the world accessible and available to rights advocates and other stakeholders working to improve legal protections for refugees.

Recognizing the limitations of and concerns regarding traditional capacity-building programs that rely on trainings and top-down methodologies, RSN has prioritized the facilitation and convening of “peer-to-peer” knowledge-sharing opportunities, particularly among civil society actors working in the Global South. Such activities, like those outlined in the report, place the experience and efforts of host countries like Mexico and Turkey at the center of the discussion, acknowledging that their contexts are informed by larger regional dynamics, priorities and political processes that are critical components of the discussion.

## October 2019 Knowledge-Exchange in Mexico

Against this backdrop, the Refugee Solidarity Network (RSN) facilitated a study visit to Mexico for senior staff of long-standing partner Refugee Rights Turkey (RRT). The week-long study visit, included among other activities and engagements, two events organized and held in partnership with Sin Fronteras IAP (SF), a leading Mexican civil society organization working to support legal protection of refugees and migrants: A workshop targeting civil society and an unofficial hearing before the Mexican Senate. Both events aimed to create opportunities for the comparative discussion of the Turkish and Mexican migration contexts as well as the governmental cooperation dynamics on migration matters across the EU/Turkey and US/Mexico borders respectively.

### Civil Society Workshop

On October 8th, Sin Fronteras, Refugee Rights Turkey, and the Refugee Solidarity Network hosted a full-day civil society workshop at the University of California in Mexico City. The full-day event brought together RSN and RRT delegations with approximately 30 Mexican civil society actors, international organization representatives and Mexican academics to discuss the most important migration-related topics for civil society actors in both countries. Through panel presentations and round-table discussions, the workshop focused on the issues of immigration detention, xenophobia and integration, how civil society navigate bureaucratic and governmental structures, and other challenges and opportunities faced by civil society in both contexts.

### Senate Presentation

On October 10th, building off of the civil society discussions, SF organized, in collaboration with Senator Nancy de la Sierra, an informal hearing to channel to Mexican lawmakers RRT’s observations on the Turkish experience of coping with historic refugee arrivals and the Government of Turkey’s development of national asylum infrastructure and its relationship with the EU. Through this event, the convening organizations sought to provide comparative experience as additional consideration for the ongoing discussion on the implications of the so-called “Safe Third Country Agreement” the US had recently

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<sup>6</sup> Frelick, Ian M. Kysel, and Jennifer Podkul, *The Impact of Externalization of Migration Controls on the Rights of Asylum Seekers and Other Migrants*, Journal on Migration and Human Security, 2016, <https://cmsny.org/publications/jmhs-impact-of-externalization/>

proposed to Mexico. As during the workshop, the presentation and discussion included themes of human rights in detention, xenophobia and social cohesion, governmental capacity and civil society-government collaboration.

### Analysis of the Similarities and Differences between the Mexican and Turkish Contexts

These two events illuminated a number of similarities and differences between the Mexican and Turkish context. Although a number of different points of analysis exist and in fact have been considered, this version of the report focuses on the similarities and differences that help situate the lessons learned by the convening organizations across the two contexts, and the opportunities identified to improve protection in one or both of the contexts.

#### Similarities

- In the course of these activities, a number of key similarities and differences between the contexts were illuminated by both presenters and participants, including that both states:
- Function as gateway states within their respective regions – they border on major receiving zones, and thus experience high levels of migration, and are heavily influenced by the policies of those traditional receiving states/zones that they border.
- Are facing increasing externalization forces from those neighboring receiving zones.
- Have experienced mass-influx of protection seekers from neighboring countries in recent years.
- Were previously countries of origin, which have now been transformed into not only countries of transit, but also increasingly, destination.
- Have taken steps to address and manage the increased wave of migration into their territories, but in many cases, those efforts have not always been adequate in observing the rights and protection needs of refugees and migrants.
- Have seen an increase in detention of migrant populations.
- Struggle with under-capacitated or nascent institutions with limited budgets to serve dramatically increasing protection-seeking populations.
- Have a gap between the protections guaranteed under the laws on paper, and their implementation in practice, leading to further vulnerabilities among protection-seeking populations.
- Have been managing migration cooperation issues with their US and EU counterparts, respectively, in the context of broader economic and political cooperation dynamics.

However, equally relevant are two key distinctions between the two contexts:

#### Differences

- The political balance of negotiations with each state's neighbor has been fundamentally different.
- The context, space, and environment for civil society engagement on migration policy matters is quite different in the two countries.

## The Way Forward

In comparing and contrasting the migration management frameworks in these two national contexts and the regional policies influencing them, the discussions illuminated a number of critical gaps and needs, as well as concrete strategies to be considered to improve protection of refugees and migrants. While most of the focus of discussions held during these activities was on the potential opportunities at the national level (of emerging host states), opportunities were also identified for action at the regional level (US-Mexico and EU-Turkey) and the global level.

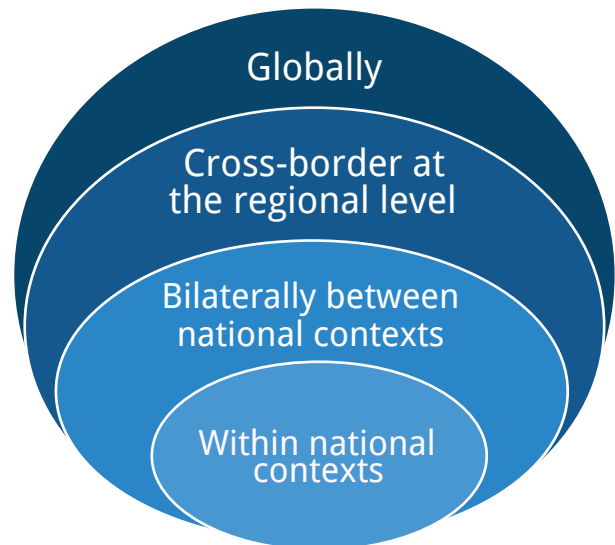
### The most important needs identified by all actors:

- Strengthening government compliance with international human rights obligations and international legal norms.
- Ensuring space for advocacy on the part of civil society organizations and governments.
- Expanding the availability of direct legal services for protection-seekers, with the primary and ultimate goal of ensuring legal identity for all.
- Making connections between legal service providers and efforts by other actors focused on integration and reducing xenophobia among host communities.

Awareness-raising and coordination were identified as critical for pursuing the improvement of protection for refugees, and opportunities were identified across various contexts:

#### Within national contexts:

Within each national context, whether in the hosting states (in this case Mexico or Turkey) or in the receiving states (in this case the US or the EU), there are silos of knowledge and collaboration among refugee rights activists. These gaps exist due to geographical distance (commonly between border areas which face the brunt of migratory movements and the more centralized capitals where migration policy are made) or subject matter differences. While different actors are needed to play different roles in these various contexts, the minimization of these gaps in communication and coordination can increase the efficacy of each actor's work.



**Bilaterally between national contexts:** Creating space for national refugee-rights actors in parallel contexts (in this case, Mexico and Turkey) to learn from each other has the potential to significantly impact the work these actors engage in. Repeatedly during the civil society workshop, participants noted the relevance of learning from other actors similarly situated in other contexts. There is also the potential for coordinated advocacy across these parallel contexts.

**Cross-border cooperation at the regional level:** In both the US-Mexico and the EU-Turkey contexts, there are advocates working on both sides of the relevant borders with aligned interests and goals to protect refugee rights and ensure government compliance with human rights norms. However, those actors are not always coordinated, and increased coordination and collaboration could increase the potential and efficacy of the services provided on both sides of these borders and also strengthen the advocacy efforts undertaken by these and other actors. Civil society in Turkey and Mexico have experienced differing levels of access and ability for this type of cross-border coordination, though actors in both countries have expressed interest in and recognized the value of increased cross-border collaboration.

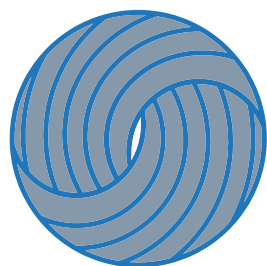
**Recognizing regional similarities and engaging at the global level:** While bilateral support and coordination between actors was highlighted as one of the most important opportunities, there exists further potential benefit in cases where refugee-rights advocates from all the contexts impacted by such migration flows can come together for critical dialogue about the challenges they are facing. One critical element of this level of work is the collaborative and coordinated use of regional and international forums among national and international refugee rights activists.

## Conclusions

Turkey and Mexico share many similarities in terms of migration and asylum, yet refugee rights advocates from these critical contexts have not had many opportunities to directly engage with one another to explore them. According to many participants, this was the first time there was an environment where dialogue and exchange highlighted how advocates in their respective contexts are handling very similar situations.

Initial feedback from the civil society workshop indicates that participants found the workshop incredibly enriching and worth repeating. Survey responses reflected that the dialogue and activities expanded the participants' knowledge and awareness of other relevant migratory contexts, and that it was crucial to the success of the activity that organizations from other countries/migratory contexts participated to provide a continuous exchange of experiences. Participants also expressed their intention to share information gained regarding the situation in both countries internally within their organizations, and to use the advocacy strategies discussed. Participants also plan to disseminate the results of the meeting within their networks, discuss the workshop experience, and continue contact with liaisons from RSN/RRT. Attendees of the senate event highlighted that the exchange provided an opportunity to shed a comparative light on the Mexican migration and asylum context and helped provide perspective on the ongoing negotiations on migration management between the United States, Mexico and Central American countries – political dialogue that Mexican lawmakers identified as critical to follow more closely and gain access to.

Participant feedback reinforced the viewpoint of the convening organizations that such exchange is not only fruitful but impactful, as it directly enhances the work of advocates and policymakers. Feedback also highlighted the appetite for further collaboration and programming in this regard. Given the importance of migration and asylum in both contexts and around the world, and the positive experience of RSN-RRT-SF, the events made clear that bridging refugee rights efforts in Mexico and Turkey was not only valuable in October 2019 but will continue to be going forward.



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