

# Xenophobia sweeping through Turkey's cities

*Stoked and exploited by politicians, this sentiment has grave implications for some of the world's most vulnerable people*

KAREEN SHAHEEN

The rumours spread like wildfire, fanned by social media. In June, a Turkish crowd burned down Syrian storefronts in Istanbul's Kucukcekmece district, following an apparent fake news incident in which a local woman was said to have been harassed by Syrian refugees.

In July, after the secular opposition – which is friendlier towards the Assad regime than President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) – won the Istanbul mayoral elections, viral hashtags on social media demanded that "Syrians get out".

For the most generous of Syria's neighbours in terms of hosting refugees, patience is wearing thin – the result of politicians fuelling and exploiting flames of communal hatred and an economic downturn that has hit ordinary Turks hard.

Turkey hosts the highest total number of refugees in the world. Very few experience the kind of destitution seen in Lebanon, where most refugees are forced to live in crowded tent settlements that flood every winter. Nevertheless, anti-Syrian xenophobia is growing. This sentiment is more dangerous than the kind of prejudice seen in the West, because its aim is the forced return of dispossessed civilians to a barbaric regime.

The idea of sending refugees back home emerged as a mainstream political position in Turkey in 2018, as a pillar of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) candidate Muharrem Ince's general election



A Syrian refugee family from Aleppo feed seagulls while crossing the Bosphorus from Uskudar to the European side of Istanbul.

campaign. Mr Ince, a dynamic figure whose rallies drew thousands of people fed up with Mr Erdogan's authoritarian rule, ultimately lost the election. But one of his key pledges was to re-establish relations with Damascus within 100 days and begin the process of sending refugees back home. This went largely unnoticed in western election

coverage, which instead focused on Mr Erdogan's steady assault on democratic values.

Mr Erdogan was returned to the presidency, but the AKP underperformed at the polls. One possible explanation was that the party was not in tune with ordinary voters on the refugee issue. Polls show that an overwhelming majority of Turks,

regardless of affiliation, are wary about the presence of refugees.

The AKP belatedly picked the electoral potential of the refugee sentiment, with the party's presidential candidate in the recent elections vowing to send Syrians who cause trouble. The Good Party set up posters

## Peace offers the only pathway to a political

AJMAL SHAMS

Peace was and remains the top priority for Afghans. No economic and development agenda can be achieved without sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan. According to Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, an amount exceeding \$100 billion has been invested in the country's rehabilitation and development during the past 17 years.

However, foreign aid has significantly diminished since 2014, when most of the international security forces left the country as part of transitioning to Afghan ownership. Afghanistan's hopes for its economic growth and development lie in its vast mineral resources, investment by Afghan as well as foreign companies, and Afghanistan acting as a transit and energy corridor between the central and South Asia. Yet, these ambitious economic objectives cannot be achieved unless peace and security are restored across the country.

Leaders of the National Unity Government in Afghanistan were voted to power, based on promises of bringing peace and stability to a nation that has suffered from continuing war and conflict for the past four decades. Although the Afghan leadership tried its best, reaching out to Pakistan as well as the Taliban, these efforts did not result in any meaningful outcome. When the US President Donald Trump announced his new strategy for Afghanistan and South Asia in 2017, a peaceful settlement of the Afghan conflict was an essen-

tial element of the strategy. On the other hand, the Taliban consistently declined the Afghan government's offer for direct talks. It was in the wake of these circumstances that the US had to start direct negotiations with the Taliban through its special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American who is the best fit for the task.

The Taliban and the US delegations have held seven rounds of talks in Doha, the capital of Qatar. According to Mr Khalilzad, the talks focused on four main points, including complete withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, guarantees by the Taliban not to use Afghan soil against the US, an enduring ceasefire and intra-Afghan dialogue that will lay out the roadmap for a political settlement. The latest round of talks ended on July 7 with both sides expressing optimism and speaking of genuine progress.

Another important development was the two-day intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha just a week ago, in which the Taliban delegation held discussions with Afghan representatives. Regardless of the fact that delegates from Afghanistan did not officially represent the Afghan government, the conference was a positive step forward in building confidence and paving the way for future direct talks between the Afghan Government and the Taliban.

Regional consensus on the Afghan peace process is of crucial importance. The ongoing armed insurgency in Afghanistan is a threat for regional stability and adversely



An Afghan security personnel investigates the site of a Taliban car bomb attack in Kabul.

impacts economic co-operation among countries of the region and beyond. It is encouraging that the US, Russia and China have all supported and called for immediate intra-Afghan dialogue to determine the way forward for the political

settlement of the conflict. Any roadmap for peace must ensure that all parties to the conflict agree on an inclusive future set up for Afghanistan that guarantees to maintain the achievements of the past 17 years in democracy, development, women's

empowerment and human rights. Afghanistan is in a conundrum. The country will see identical polls in September. The timing is pivotal. The peace process and election synchronised is a major

*Without a drastic reduction in violence, the long-term future of this war-ravaged nation will remain in the balance*