

AFAD PRESIDENT: TURKEY OWES SUCCESS TO ITS EXPERIENCE, SYSTEMATIC WORK AND POLITICAL WILL

An interview with the President of Prime Ministry's Disaster and Emergency Management Agency Dr. Fuat Oktay



Fuat Oktay was born in 1964 in Yozgat-Çekerek. He completed his bachelor's degree in business management in Turkey, and received his MBA and PhD in the United States of America. In addition to his MBA degree, he completed a master's programme on Manufacturing Engineering, and a PhD programme on Industrial Engineering. Throughout his stay in the US, he worked in the automotive industry, with companies such as Ford, General Motors and Chrysler. He lectured in universities in the US and in Turkey. He provided consultancy services to many public and private sector companies. Moreover, he provided consultancy services to small and medium sized enterprises, including KOSGEB. In some of these companies, he served in the capacity of Director General, Deputy Chairman and Board Member. During the economic crisis hitting Turkey in early 2000s, he specialized in enterprise-based crisis management, and worked as Vice-Dean and Head of the Business Management Department at Beykent University. Also working in the field of Aviation and Maintenance & Repair, Dr. Oktay served as Deputy Director General responsible for Strategic Planning and Business Development, Sales and Marketing, Production Planning and Information Technologies, at Türk Hava Yolları Teknik A.Ş. Since January 2012, he has been serving as the President of AFAD.



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ORSAM: When we look at the development of the crisis in Syria, refugees constitute a critical dimension. Although Turkey was caught unprepared and confronted with a massive influx of refugees, it has performed considerably well in dealing with and managing the crisis. We have also observed this in various occasions during our contacts outside Turkey. Can you summarize the strategy that is followed here and what are the factors that lie behind the success of Turkey?

Dr. Fuat Oktay: First of all, I'd like to say welcome to you and state my pleasure for sharing our views with ORSAM. The success is, in fact, the success of all of us. We see it as Turkey's success. We, as AFAD, think that we have mobilized a common power, the common of power of Turkey. The refugee crisis appeared in March-April 2011 and today we are talking about a process of almost three years. By the end of these three years, there are more than 800.000 refugees in Turkey who are provided with temporary protec-

tion status. We call these people refugees, but officially they are not in refugee status, they are our guests to whom we have offered a status of protection. We have implemented an open door policy with the directive of our Prime Minister since the very first day of the refugee influx. In other words, Turkey declared that she would open her doors and offer anything she could. There is an ongoing drama, suppression, atrocity in her neighbor where bombs were raining down on people and their houses. At this very time, when people were looking for a safe place, Turkey opened her doors. AFAD played a leading role in the coordination of the refugee influx since the very first day.

Our work is progressive, feasible and has a logistics dimension based on meticulous planning. Moreover, we implemented them with a strong political will under the open door policy. The full political support of the government has helped us to carry out our logistical activities and services not only financially, but also in every realm. Another important aspect was

our capability to mobilize the common power of all in the institutions while we were providing services. In this respect, we demonstrated the level of preparedness of all our institutions and the advanced level of their capacity and capabilities. The most important of all is the hospitality of the Turkish people for the ones in need. What also facilitated this process for us was the Turkish people who received people in need with not only open arms, but also open doors.

In this respect, there is another factor that I should underline. What we, as AFAD and Turkey, did was to act systematically. This is the main reason behind success. By acting systematically we do not only mean providing shelter and food. We did not consider it like that. What we thought was to establish a system which is sustainable, improvable and modular. In other words, the system could be divided into pieces so that we could extend it or narrow it down. Therefore, we did not confine ourselves just to meeting daily needs. We focused on developing a system that can be improved.

Consequently, I can simply explain the reasons behind our success within this framework.

The Syrians under temporary protection are generally evaluated under two categories: the ones who stay in camps and the ones who stay outside the camps. Turkey's success in terms of the physical infrastructure in the camps is appreciated internationally. How do you evaluate the present situation in the camps in general?

So far, we have refrained from using the term camp or temporary accommodation center and tried to call them as tent city or container city. We did not call these people refugee or people under temporary protection. Instead, we used the term guest and we did it on purpose. This was part of our strategy. These people were living in camps no matter how good they are. Thus, we called these places cities so that the people would think and feel as if they were living in a city. We called these people guests so that our employees would think that people liv-

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ing in these tent cities are their guests and they would treat them as their own guests. Namely, we did not want our employees to serve the Syrian refugees out of political reasons or legal obligations.

When it comes to the system particularly in the camps, we have established a very good infrastructure. For instance, we brought there water, electricity and a communications infrastructure including internet. We built up roads and streets, and there is everything in these cities that you can find in a city with a population of 15 or 20 thousand. For instance, you can find a school campus there. When a kid is enrolled in that school, he/she will forget about the tragedy of the war as well as his/her stress and anxiety. This school campus in the camps is of the same standard and quality of the schools in Turkey. Furthermore, when you look at our hospitals in the camps, you will see that full-fledged ambulatory care services are provided. Almost all of the services provided in Turkish hospitals and health centers are offered to our guests in the camps by our doc-

tors and health personnel in a very sensitive manner. What is more, we have a fully equipped logistics center.

All these works depend on a system in the background. There are 220.000 people staying only in our camps and we have 22 camps. When you look at these camps you will see a common standard regardless of time and space. For example, we have 22 camps in 10 different cities and there are about 63-64 thousand students in the schools in camps. These are students of primary school, secondary school and high school. If I am to share the statistics with you, I should underline that as of today, we have 6.300 pre-school students, almost 31 thousands primary school students, 17.600 secondary school students and about 7.900 high school students. We also have students who are going to university after their graduation from these schools. We have 2.800 teachers, 2.300 of which are Arab or of Arab origin. We have 500 Turkish teachers who are working under the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Therefore, what we are doing here is: we are establishing the in-

frastructure and the schools, but we are not the experts of education. Then, we are turning to the Ministry of National Education for expertise since it is the expert of a system which can define the curriculum, identify the standards and provide a sustainable quality of education. Thus, we invite the Ministry of National Education and assign them the responsibility for education. They are also responsible to the camp management. What we say to the Ministry of National Education is “We (as AFAD) provide the logistics and you provide the service” within the standards of the camp management. Therefore, here continues an incredible co-operation.

As I said, maybe we are offering the most qualified service in the world, here. We apply the same systematic approach to our hospitals. We turn to the Ministry of Health and say: “We are constructing the hospitals, but the standard of health service is your responsibility. You are the experts here.” This time we sat on the table with the Ministry of Health and say: “After the construction of the hospitals, the responsibility of the service quality and sustainability is on your shoulders.” Up to now, we have provided 2.400.000 thousand people with ambulatory care services. This is a substantial number. We also offered services to approximately 300.000 inpatients. There are almost 40.000 operations done and more than 10.000 children delivered.

As far as the food issue is concerned, we say to the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock: “You will be in charge of food security. In case of any food poisoning, you will be directly responsible for that; so you will be sustaining food security.” Turkey has infrastructure and experience. What we are doing is to reflect these on the

camp. We behave in a similar manner towards all other units. Concerning the security, we turn to the Ministry of Interior and say: “You are in charge of the security in the camps. These are the standards and you are to sustain them.” These are all parts of a whole. We cannot limit it to the children and the schools. There are also recreational facilities. There are also mosques and courses for adults. We have almost 160 courses for adults on English, Turkish, Arabic, computer, hairdressing, needlework and carpet weaving. So far, there have been more than 30.000 Syrians who have utilized from these courses and there are 7.000 attendees in these courses at the moment.

In terms of food, we used to offer food inside the camps, but later on, due to the ever-improving nature of our system, we recognized that we can achieve improvement in this realm. There is the fact that people get bored of the routine overtime and these people have been staying in the camps for 3 years. Therefore, we have to make them feel at home. Otherwise, whatever food you offer, what you will note will be the decrease of satisfaction. Consequently, we opened markets. Then, in cooperation with the UN World Food Program and Red Crescent, we delivered cards to the people living in the camps. We loaded a certain amount of money to these cards. We told people that they could buy only their fundamental needs with these cards. We also distributed kitchen sets to the containers and tents so that people could cook. Now, everybody is going to the markets in the camps, cook their own food, wash their dishes and do their cleaning. By this way, people feel themselves at home.

Briefly, there is an integrated system here; there is a qualified system



as a whole. In addition to the daily events, what we do, here, as AFAD is to examine if there are any errors in the system and pursue the continuous development of the system. We have standards both in the construction and management of the camps and we are sensitive in their implementation. In short, success, sustainability and quality do stem from this vision.

The situation in camps is generally regarded as a success. That being so, there is a larger group of people staying outside the camps with their own capabilities or depending on the support from different channels. Sometimes these people pursue their living without any protection framework. Indeed, there are reasons why these people stay outside the camps. Some of them choose to stay outside due to their own will whereas some are compelled to do so because of the lack of capacity in camps. At times, there appears public resentment owing to the living conditions of the people staying outside the camps. What do you think about the general

condition of the people staying outside the camps and what are AFAD, other state institutions and the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) doing in this regard? Do you find these efforts satisfying? If not, what can be done to improve?

Without doubt, the situation outside the camps is another problem. We, as AFAD and Turkey, want to express this problem in the first place and we do say this to the international community. Given the quality of service in the camps, we don't want to spread the illusion that people living outside the camps also get the same service. There are problems outside the camps, which are related to the standards and quality of the services. By now, there are 600.000 Syrians living outside the camps, mostly in the border cities and cities where there are camps. In addition, we may also count some cities westwards like Mersin and Konya. There is also another line in the east to Batman and even Şırnak. There are also Syrians growing in number in İstanbul and even Ankara.

When the needs and requirements are concerned, whatever the person

in the camps needs so does the one outside. We wish we could build up camps for everyone, accommodate everyone in the camps. However, there are two problems in this respect. First, it is not possible to sustain a permanent camp infrastructure that will include more than 800.000 people. Second, not everyone is willing to stay in camps. Whatever service you may provide, however good they may be or however good you say they are, people want to stay outside the camps. There are differences among the people who want to stay outside the camps. During the early years of the crisis, namely 2011-12, the ones who have money and passport, in other words, the ones who came to Turkey via legal means and with their own sources, rented houses in better conditions. After a while, since their income was not sustainable and they experienced sharp decreases, they became needy over time. Then, things changed when the crisis in Syria deepened and people with low or no income began to cross the border into Turkey.

Within this framework, when we asked ourselves what we could do, at the beginning, we started providing

health services as the number of the people increased. We offered emergency health services. We did not want to turn the wounded or emergency patients down. In the end, it was a humanitarian duty. Then we realized that the emergency services were not enough. Thus, with a political decision, all the health services are opened to the Syrians. By now, Syrians in Turkey can benefit from all the health services provided in the public hospitals on the condition that they register. Even if they do not have prior registration, they will be registered if they happened to go to a hospital. In terms of health services, this resulted in relief, but it is not enough.

When we look at the demographics, we see that there are almost 2.5 million refugees outside Syria. More than 800.000 refugees are in Turkey, while the rest reside in Jordan, Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. Three quarters of the refugees in Turkey are women and children. In Turkey, %20 of the population is children, but of the Syrian refugees, the number of children is %25-30 of the total refugee population in Turkey. Now, we have to save these children from the streets. We have to reach

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There is a high level intimate social relationship between the people of the two countries which is unprecedented since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. We assess that if we can make use of this process in a right way, we will be able to build up a future bridge of friendship between the peoples of the two countries.

them before anyone else (with malicious intent) reaches them. Therefore, we have a lot of work to do in terms of schooling and getting these children off the streets. At the moment, we have nearly 15 schools that we are trying to build up for the Syrians, where we work together with UNICEF. However, these are not enough. We have a critical work that we do with the Turkish Ministry of National Education. Together with all the governorships at the local level, we are examining if the state schools can provide evening education to the Syrian children. If we can achieve this, we will be able to meet a significant need. At the very same time, the construction of 10-15 schools is ongoing.

There are people who are self-sufficient in terms of food and shelter among the refugees and there are those who are not. When we look at the people in need, we see that they have a very low level of income. We have another work for identifying poor families. We do not want the state to completely pursue the activities outside the camps. We are willing to execute all our works with the civil society organizations. Furthermore, we are working in cooperation with the international NGOs and the UN. We are saying to them: "Let's do it all together". We, as AFAD, have developed a system and called it "Assistance Distribution System". This is an electronic system. We are registering all the refugees in Turkey biometrically. We have registered all the refugees in the camps and started registering people staying outside the camps. After the completion of the registration, the list of needs and requirements will be completely identified. At the moment, we know about the general needs. Then we turn to the organizations that are going to offer

aid and assistance and say: "We can provide you with the user name, identity and password, and by this way, you can see the requirements. You can make your commitments for what kind of assistance you can provide." We are working intensively on it and so are our NGOs, almost all of which are in the theatre now.

A campaign was launched at the civil society level. After a while, AFAD took part in the coordination of this campaign with a facilitator role. You remember the campaign called "One Bread, One Blanket for Syria." That campaign aimed at encouraging people to stay in Syria and the aid was devoted to people inside Syria. An extension of this campaign has been launched with the name "I Need You." The campaign as a civil society initiative conveys the message of "we need you" from the eyes of a Syrian kid. It still goes on and will continue until the end of March. There is an intensive endeavor taking place in all cities regarding in-kind aid. Our NGOs like Turkish religious foundations and Red Crescent are taking part in these charity collection activities. We are directing all this aid to the regions where they are needed. However, is it enough? No it is not.

By now, Turkey's expenditures with reference to the UN standards have exceeded 2.5 billion dollars. I do mention UN standards on purpose. The UN system includes the wages of the personnel working in the camps as well as the cost of the camps in general. When we reckon the cost accordingly, our expenditures have exceeded 2.5 billion dollars. Our NGOs have contributed into the system with more than 400 million dollars. Although in reality the amount of money that our NGOs stated is more than 400 million dollars, what we can announce is the



amount that is reported. However, we estimate that their contribution is more than that.

Well, at this point, what can you say about the contribution of the international organizations?

Of course, the international assistance is critical, but we do not receive much. As of today, the amount of international assistance is 183 million dollars. And this number does not include what Turkey has spent so far. Out of 183 million dollars, 105 million has come from the UN, namely the UNHCR, UNICEF and UN World Food Program. UNICEF's assistance is 6 million dollars and the others are around 50 million dollars. This is not enough, of course. This is a very low contribution. Therefore, what we express to the world is: "The international community and the NGOs have to take more responsibility outside the camps." We, as AFAD, will play a facilitator role, here. We do mention that we are open to any kind of cooperation, but what we expect is more contribution. We do not only address our local NGOs, but also international NGOs, including the ones operating under the UN. I am not talking about

the expectance of contribution from the developed or developing countries, because we have not received an answer to our calls for assistance from these countries. However, our local NGOs are trying to do their best.

Cross-border assistance is also provided, for sure.

Yes, on the Syrian side, there is a system developed by Turkey in accordance with the international law which is called "zero-point delivery." We have established an aid reception center on the Turkish side of the border. Turkish Red Crescent is in charge of this center. Everyone can donate to this center. People who need aid can come from the Syrian side and take the aid and bring it to the Syrian side. We are also working very cautiously for transferring the aid to the people in need. Therefore, we are providing a substantial amount of aid and assistance to the people across the border.

Overall, we have supplied a total amount of 3.3 billion dollars in aid.

Naturally, there is a social impact of the transition of refugees from one country to another. What do



you think about it? What are your opinions about the social impact on the provinces near the border where Syrians are mostly present? Do you have any works regarding this subject and, lastly, what are the steps taken to decrease the negative effects of this social change?

There are, of course. The impact of the social change is deeply felt in the 12 cities near the border. Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adıyaman and Mardin are the cities which are socially affected at first hand. In some places, we have a large number of Syrian guests. If this was not in Turkey, but somewhere else, it would cause serious problems. Our people's great tolerance, the ability to share his/her bread and home with people in need, precisely the impact of our culture is evident there. At the beginning, we, as AFAD, decided to supply the services from the local sources rather than the center. Therefore, by this way, we tried to ensure that the Syrian population contributes to the local economy rather than causing a burden to the local population so that this would contribute to the social peace. We still abide by this decision. We have observed the benefits, such as the preservation of the

local economic buoyancy and the continuity of the successful integration of our guests to the society with the help of public tolerance.

On the other hand, we also observe that there is a problem of capacity in terms of health services due to the increasing population. For this reason, we still work for the establishment of new health centers that our Syrian guests utilize, and by this way, we are planning to preserve social peace. In short, there is a high level intimate social relationship between the people of the two countries which is unprecedented since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey. We assess that if we can make use of this process in a right way, we will be able to build up a future bridge of friendship between the peoples of the two countries. When the Syrians staying in Turkey go back to their homes, they will have spared a place in their hearts for us. We do want this crisis to be over as soon as possible. There may not seem to be a way out of this crisis at the moment, but sooner or later, it will be over and people will return their homes. Once they are home, we hope that we will be able to pay visit to their houses for a cup of tea in the name of friendship.

At this very point, there is another question that I would like to raise. When we look at the similar examples in history, even though the crisis is resolved, some of the refugees continue to stay in the host country. In the Syrian case, there is the possibility that the crisis may prolong. What are your foresights in terms of the probability of permanent stay of the refugees and do you have any preparations in this regard?

Of course, we wish to see people returning their homes, because even if you promised heaven to people, everyone would like to go back home as it is in the saying about the nightingale and the golden cage. In fact, this is what we expect. At this stage, we do not have any data about how many people will stay, so it will not be sound to make any judgment. That said, let me reiterate that we are prepared for any scenario. That is where the power of our country derives from.

Do you have any plans in terms of a new wave of refugee influx in case the crisis in Syria further deepens? What kind of a policy are you planning to implement in the presence of increasing numbers of refugees?

For sure, we always have plans for the future. Let me give you an example. We had the days where we obtained 10.000 people as refugee at one night. The rest of Turkey even did not notice it. I mean, the mobilization of and settling down of such a large number of people without being noticed is a great achievement, and requires enormous capability of operation. In order to enhance the comprehension of what it means, let me give you another example. There is a process of resettlement between Turkey and Germany. For months, it has been planned to

resettle 10.000 people. The prolongation of this process stems from selectivity. Now think that we are obtaining 10.000 people at one night. Therefore, Turkey has future scenarios. Anyway, we hope that the crisis will be over as soon as possible.

On the other hand, the UN has future scenarios. By now, there are 9 million refugees, 6.5 million of which have abandoned their homes, and become refugees in their home country. About 2.5 million of these refugees are out of their country. The UN expects that by the end of 2014, the refugees outside Syria will exceed 4 millions. In addition, UN expects an increase to 1.5 million regarding the refugees to Turkey. We hope that this scenario will not come true, but as Turkey, we are making preparations and taking precautions accordingly.

What can you say about the activities on Turkey's restructuring of its institutional infrastructure in the realm of humanitarian aid and assistance? Can you give us information about the activities of AFAD and related organizations and the coordination of humanitarian aid, particularly between the state institutions and NGOs?

We assess the crisis in Syria as a test case for managing the disasters in our country. We, as AFAD, elaborated disaster management in two different fields and we are restructuring within this framework. We have critical works in managing disasters. We are working on the most advanced systems that the world can take as a model. By the end of 2014, we will have established these systems with their digital infrastructure. We have critical works on the need for intervention. At the same time, we are working on a transition from crisis

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management to risk management for reducing the damages. We are trying to develop a risk management system. We are focusing on not only natural disasters, but also man-made disasters. There are also technological disasters. We are working on a model to reduce the damages resulting from nuclear and chemical threats and accidents as well as biological and cyber attacks. In this respect, we have projects about the development of integrated hazard maps, and identification and thus reduction of the future risks accordingly. Shortly, we, as the AFAD directorate, have been intensively working on restructuring and developing our own systems. We have considerable works both on the organizational and procedural aspects.

Within this framework, we can elaborate the humanitarian aid as a subset. With the experience we acquired from this process, it is fair to say that we have achieved confidence-building with the NGOs at first hand. In this respect, we have discovered a require-

ment. We are working on how to transfer the identification of the standards in relation to the NGOs to the international arena, and the establishment of an accreditation system -I mean, to upgrade the level of our NGOs. We are executing the works on increasing the standards together with NGOs. We have conducted 12 workshops about it. We hope to finish the system by the end of June and start the accreditation system with intensive education. When we achieve this, we will have upgraded Turkey to a higher league in terms of operating in the international arena. We already have NGOs operating internationally. By the help of this system, the number and the quality of these NGOs will increase. Therefore, by the end of 2014, Turkey will have a structure that can mobilize effectively the mechanisms in disaster and emergency management.

Thank you for this pleasant conversation and we wish you success in your endeavors.

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