A wide-angle, high-angle photograph of a sprawling refugee camp. The camp is filled with rows of white, peaked tents arranged in neat, parallel lines. The ground is dusty and light-colored. In the foreground, a white wall with a corrugated metal roof runs across the bottom. Several people are visible walking between the tents. The background shows a flat landscape with some distant buildings and utility poles under a sky with soft, orange and pink hues from a setting or rising sun.

# SEEFAR

## Return, Stay, or Migrate?

Understanding the Aspirations of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

ABOUT US

*Our vision is for a world in which  
vulnerable people have more  
opportunities to advance themselves.*

*The purpose of our social enterprise  
is to work with those people to build  
a better future.*

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## KEY FINDINGS

As the Syrian conflict enters a new phase, understanding the needs and long-term aspirations of Syrian refugees is more critical than ever. With upwards of 3.4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey at the end of 2017, their future is a key political, economic, and social concern to regional governments and the international community.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Seefar commissioned a qualitative study of Syrian refugees living in Istanbul and Gaziantep. The research aimed to gain insight into the experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey and their perceptions of onward migration, local integration, and return to Syria. Key findings from the study included:

### Long-term aspirations reflected a complex view of return and local integration

**A majority of respondents expressed desire to return to Syria in the future.** Respondents that had family living in Syria or who owned land or property in Syria were more likely to be interested in return.

**The conditions necessary for return varied significantly among respondents.** Respondents discussed Syria's security context, quality of life, and reconstruction as conditions affecting return. The diversity of factors described as facilitating or limiting return revealed a highly individualized approach to evaluating the viability of return.

**Respondents defined 'security' in the context of return in three markedly different ways.** Most noted a general need for 'safety' and an end to fighting. A second group of respondents defined 'security' as the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. A smaller third group held an individualized fear of persecution by Assad's security forces, which informed their desire for regime change.

**Respondents largely held negative perceptions of both regular and irregular migration.** They cited the danger of the journey and difficulty adapting to a new environment. Few expressed serious interest in onward migration through either legal or irregular channels, including refugee resettlement.

### Respondents faced steep challenges in Turkey in accessing livelihoods and education

**The availability and quality of livelihoods in Turkey were pressing concerns of respondents.** Unemployment among respondents (particularly female respondents) was high, posing a significant barrier to integration and payment for goods and housing. Respondents overwhelmingly viewed livelihoods as their most important immediate and long-term need.

**As respondents struggled to achieve financial self-sufficiency, they frequently turned to child labor as a coping mechanism.** The difficulties adult refugees faced in finding work put pressure on children to earn income on behalf of the family. When coupled with the indirect costs of education (e.g. transportation costs), a lack of income often prevented respondents' children from attending school.

**Several respondents highlighted the need for access to psychological services, particularly for refugee children.** When discussing their children's needs, some respondents referred to severe mental health symptoms related to trauma including aggression, outbursts of violence, and developmental disabilities.

**While most respondents reported adequate healthcare, education, and housing, many cited discrimination, social exclusion, and legal barriers constraining access to services.** Almost no respondents

<sup>1</sup> See UNCHR, *Global Trends*, May 2017 and UNHCR, "Syria Refugee Response Data Portal", accessed January 2018

were familiar with civil society or non-government organizations that might offer them support.

At the policy level, this evidence can inform initiatives supporting the safe and voluntary return of Syrian refugees from Turkey. For Syrian refugees who are informed and comfortable with immediate return, efforts should target removing financial or legal barriers to return. For others, providing accurate and updated information on the security environment may motivate return if hostilities decline or cease in the future. However, interventions must recognize that many Syrians may not be willing or able to safely return while the Assad regime remains in power.

These findings also hold practical implications for donors, host countries, humanitarians, and development actors in improving the quality of life for Syrian refugees. The data indicate that Syrian refugees need further support in accessing livelihoods and reducing barriers to education. Programs designed to address irregular migration should explore the finding that irregular migration was largely unpopular among respondents. Last, the study highlights several areas in need of further research, including refugee perceptions of “regime change”, child labor, and questions on return and reintegration in the context of post-conflict transition.

## INTRODUCTION

### Background

The Syrian conflict is characterized by widespread displacement and acute humanitarian need. There are roughly 12 million Syrians living in displacement today due to conflict and violence. Over 6 million are internally displaced persons (IDPs), while about 5.5 million Syrians have sought refuge in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and other countries. Turkey hosts about 3.4 million Syrian refugees today, making it the largest host of refugees in the world. About 250,000 live in camps operated by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority of Turkey (AFAD).<sup>2</sup> However, over 90% of Syrian refugees live outside of camps, mostly near the Syrian border and the outskirts of Istanbul, Izmir and Ankara. Refugees live in challenging circumstances with limited access to livelihoods and services.<sup>3</sup>

Forced to leave their livelihoods behind, Syrian refugees must navigate an unfamiliar landscape and government system in a language unfamiliar to most. Despite efforts of the Turkish government and international organizations, Syrian refugees often struggle to access to the formal labor market, housing and education. Although Syrians have legal access to these services under the Turkey's temporary protection regime (see Box 1 below), Syrian refugees have reported challenges in registering with local authorities and completing Turkish bureaucratic procedures.<sup>4</sup>

Further, TPS does not offer a path to long-term residency or citizenship. This reality leaves many Syrian refugees in Turkey unable to safely return home, but also unable to integrate into Turkish society due to legal and social barriers. Those who seek to migrate to Europe face new policy challenges—most notably, the EU-Turkey deal

that permits the return of irregular migrants, including asylum seekers and prima facie refugees, to Turkey. Syrian refugees are consequently faced with a difficult choice: continue to live as outsiders in Turkey, pursue irregular onward migration, or consider return to Syria.

### Research need

The conditions surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis have markedly changed in recent months. In Syria, the conflict has entered a new stage and some global leaders are now beginning to discuss the possibility of an end to hostilities

#### Box 1: What is temporary protection status?

While Turkey is a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, its ratification of the treaty includes a 'geographical limitation' that excludes refugees fleeing from non-Council of Europe countries. Syrians are eligible for 'temporary protection status' (TPS), a legal immigration category established by the 'Temporary Protection Regulation' of October 2014. This regulation is drawn from Article 91 of the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection.

Under TPS, registered Syrians are provided legal access to basic rights and services, including a limited right to work, but no path to permanent residency or citizenship. While living in Turkey under TPS, Syrian refugees may access health care services, education, social assistance and may legally apply for family reunification for their spouse and/or dependent children.

<sup>2</sup> European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Assistance (ECHO), Factsheet on refugee crisis in Turkey: [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey\\_syrian\\_crisis\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf). The 3.4 million statistic is reported by the Government of Turkey and available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>, though returning refugees may have lowered this figure over the last year.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/integrating-syrian-refugees-turkey>

<sup>4</sup> European Commission, European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Assistance (ECHO), Factsheet on refugee crisis in Turkey: [http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey\\_syrian\\_crisis\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/echo/files/aid/countries/factsheets/turkey_syrian_crisis_en.pdf)

## 1 NEEDS

**Understand the needs** of displaced Syrians in Turkey. In their own words, what are their most pressing short and long-term needs? What are the barriers preventing Syrian refugees from attaining self-sufficiency?

## 2 INSIGHT

**Gaining insight** into Syrian perceptions of onward migration, local integration, and return to Syria. What are the conditions necessary for return, particularly concerning the security context? How do Syrians in Turkey view the risks and rewards of migration (both via regular and irregular channels)? Do refugees hope to stay long-term in Turkey?

in certain regions.<sup>5</sup> Some policymakers in Europe and the Middle East believe changes on the ground in Syria may allow for refugee-hosting states to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees.<sup>6</sup> The return of hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs to their homes in 2017 would appear to support these calls.<sup>7</sup> However, human rights groups have called attention to “difficult living conditions” confronting returnees and argue that such returns may be coerced, involuntary, or premature.<sup>8</sup> Internationally, while Syrians continue to represent the top nationality of asylum-seekers in Europe, total arrivals from Syria began to decline in 2016. Preliminary data from 2017 suggests that asylum applications from Syrian nationals will continue to decrease over time.<sup>9</sup>

The evolving circumstances facing Syrian refugees in Turkey requires new insight into the living conditions and future aspirations of refugees. How do Syrian refugees view the possibility of return? What conditions will facilitate or impede return? How have perceptions of onward irregular migration to Europe changed? What are the needs of Syrian refugees who have lived in Turkey for years on end?

### Objectives and methodology

Seefar commissioned this study based on the following objectives:

Large-scale sectoral needs assessments of Syrian refugees in Turkey are plentiful, and this study does not

<sup>5</sup> The overall state of the Syrian conflict is beyond the scope of this research, which makes no claims about potential resolutions to the conflict. Recent violence in eastern Ghouta further calls into question the future of the conflict. This statement simply recognizes remarks from political leaders on the conflict. See: Reuters, “Putin declares “complete victory” on both banks of Euphrates in Syria”, December 2017; Spyer, Jonathan, “Welcome to Syria 2.0”, *Foreign Policy*, January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Traub, “Germany Is Preparing to Send Refugees Back to Syria”, December 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/12/06/germany-is-preparing-to-send-refugees-back-to-syria/>

<sup>7</sup> BBC, “Syria war: Almost 500,000 refugees return in 2017 - UN”, 2017. <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40460126>

<sup>8</sup> Sewell, “Syrian Refugees Return From Lebanon Only to Flee War Yet Again”, October 2017. <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2017/10/11/syrian-refugees-return-from-lebanon-only-to-flee-war-yet-again>

<sup>9</sup> Eurostat, “Asylum statistics”, January 2018. [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_statistics](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_statistics)

seek to replicate their work.<sup>10</sup> Instead, this study adopted a qualitative methodology to better understand refugee *aspirations* for their future and *perceptions* of their current environment. In other words, this approach aims to bring refugee voices into the program and policy conversations that concern their future.

Seefar conducted six Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) in April 2017 with Syrian refugees. Each FGD had between six to eight participants. Three FGDs were held in Istanbul, while three FGDs were held in Gaziantep. Half of the FGDs were held with female-only groups and half were male-only. All respondents were between 18-50 years old. The Annex provides a detailed overview of participant profiles.

The study adopted a non-random sampling strategy to ensure that a broad spectrum of refugee voices was represented. The research team sought diverse perspectives and backgrounds, recruiting respondents of varying age, gender, skill, city of origin, and displacement narrative using a purposive snowball sampling technique. Findings from these FGDs should not be considered statistically representative of the population of interest or generalizable to all Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

Seefar's research methods always follow a "do no harm" approach. The research team obtained each respondent's voluntary participation and informed consent, ensured the confidentiality of personal identifying information, and used a conflict-sensitive discussion guide.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example: UNICEF, "Turkey 2017 Humanitarian Results", January 2018, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/unicef-turkey-2017-humanitarian-results>; CARE, "Turkey - Gaziantep (Islahiye & Nizip districts) Shelter & WASH Assessment Report", November 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/turkey-gaziantep-islahiye-nizip-districts-shelter-wash-assessment-report-october-2017>; WFP, FAO, UNHCR, "Inter-Agency Coordination Turkey Food Security & Agriculture Sector", August 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/turkey/inter-agency-coordination-turkey-food-security-agriculture-sector-mid-year-2017>.



## DESIRE TO RETURN

Desire to return appeared related to gender, refugee location, family ties in Syria, land or property in Syria, and employment status in Turkey.



## CONDITIONS NECESSARY FOR RETURN

Respondents identified a number of conditions that may be necessary for return, including Syria's security context (defined in several different ways), living conditions, national identity, and other factors.

## FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

Respondents were asked specific questions about their perceptions of the three durable solutions for refugees: return to Syria, resettlement (or, if resettlement is unavailable, their view of onward migration), and local integration in Turkey.

Most respondents were interested in return or local integration. Few considered irregular migration or resettlement to be desirable options for themselves or their families, a sentiment at odds with much of the reporting in Europe that assumes broad Syrian interest in migration. These sentiments provide important context for some of the spontaneous refugee returns from Turkey. They also shed light on how refugees define the conditions necessary for their return in significantly different ways.

### Return to Syria

**More than half of respondents said that they hoped to return to Syria if conditions allowed.** This section will review the characteristics that may relate to desire to return, as well as the conditions respondents identified as necessary to permit return:

#### What influences desire to return?

**Gender and location played a role in perceptions of return.** Female respondents were more likely to want to return to Syria than male respondents. Similarly,

respondents in Gaziantep were more interested in return than respondents in Istanbul.<sup>11</sup>

**Desire to return was closely linked with family ties in Syria.** A majority of respondents had family members still living in Syria—typically older relatives, such as parents, or siblings. Respondents that had family in Syria were substantially more likely to want to return than respondents that did not report family still living in Syria. In addition, some respondents said that they were unwilling to return without bringing their family with them. One respondent said, “Here, we are fifty families and if I go back I will not return by myself only” (male, Turkman, Istanbul).

**Respondents that had undamaged land or houses in Syria appeared highly motivated to return to their country.** Three respondents specifically noted that they owned land or property in Syria, and each of these respondents aspired to return to their property. Other respondents said that their property or land in Syria had been lost or destroyed—one refugee even said that he still carried the key from his destroyed house in Syria.

“My family is in Syria and that is why I want to go back. If my family were here, I wouldn't think of going back to Syria.”

Female, Turkman, Gaziantep

<sup>11</sup> The respondents did not provide an explanation for why gender and location might relate to the desire to return to Syria.

Some respondents said that destroyed property was an impediment to return, while others did not view this as an obstacle. Respondents often discussed land, property, and family collectively when describing their interest in returning to Syria. For example, one respondent said: "I don't need anything else, my land [or] house, my relatives are all there" (male, Arab, Gaziantep). **Employment in Turkey may also influence the desire to return, as respondents that were currently working were less likely to want to return than unemployed participants.** It is unclear whether employment related to the desire to return as a 'push factor' from Turkey (i.e. unemployed refugees may be dissatisfied with their living situation in displacement), a 'pull factor' to stay in Turkey (i.e. employed refugees have an incentive to remain in Turkey), or a combination of the two.

### What conditions are necessary for return?

Respondents who hoped to return to Syria identified many prerequisites for return. Many of these conditions related to Syria's security context, but respondents also highlighted living conditions in Syria, national identity, and other factors as influences on their perceptions of return.

"I have no hope of returning. My house is demolished. My home address is near the Al-Zahra area, and it was one of the first bombed houses... Nothing remains for me there."

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

**Security:** Nearly all respondents said that the 'end of war', safety, stability, security, or peace were preconditions for return. For many, security was a simple concept, divorced from specific actors and threats. One respondent espoused this view, saying: "I have hope that we will return to Syria, if the war ends; there will be peace and I will return" (female, Istanbul). However, others pointed to specific changes in Syria's security context as necessary conditions for them to return home.

**Regime Change:** Many respondents said that they would not return if President Bashar al-Assad remained in power. These respondents associated Assad with fighting and

"The political solution alone is not enough. If Assad remains, there will be a problem. I need security to return to Syria."

Male, Turkman, Istanbul

violence, and consequently viewed regime change as a necessary condition for return. Some refugees stressed that a political resolution to the conflict that left the Assad regime in power would not be enough to allow them to return: "If Bashar remains, aerial bombing will continue" (female, Gaziantep). Two participants mentioned efforts to establish 'safe zones' in Syria during their responses. They communicated their skepticism that the creation of 'safe zones' would lead to safety for returnees.

**End to Persecution:** For several respondents, the Assad regime represented a specific threat to themselves or their families. As such, regime change was a precondition for return not due to a general association of Assad with conflict, but rather due to a fear of persecution. One respondent said that his brother was a soldier with an opposition group, so he could not return to Syria or else they "will charge" him. Another respondent said that her husband was tortured by the Assad regime and would face a similar threat if he went back to Syria.

**Removal of Non-State Armed Actors:** Not all respondents viewed the Assad regime as solely responsible for insecurity in Syria. Several respondents also highlighted the removal of non-state parties to the conflict as a necessary condition to achieve security and facilitate return. Two respondents specifically mentioned ISIS as an armed group of concern, while 'rebels' and 'Shia militia' were also discussed.

**Improved Living Conditions:** In addition to safety, some respondents pointed to the destruction of key infrastructure in Syria as well as broader damage from

"I have hope that I'll go back to Syria. My husband doesn't want to return to Syria because he got arrested in Syria and they tortured him... We can't return to Syria [now], but if the regime changes we will go back there, only if Assad falls."

Female, Turkman, Istanbul

“My dreams are all in Manbij, but there is no water and no electricity now and the living conditions there are difficult.”

Male, Turkman, Istanbul

fighting as factors affecting their ability to return to Syria. Some respondents communicated their belief that rebuilding Syria would take years or even decades. Others said that improved services—including water and electricity—are necessary for them to return home. One respondent expressed her concerns about living conditions in Syria saying: “I do not want to go back to primitive life” (female, Arab, Gaziantep).

**National Identity:** Several respondents mentioned loyalty to Syria as an influence on their desire to return. While not outweighing the need for safety and security, national pride was a noticeable part of the rhetoric used by respondents in describing their future aspirations. Respondents used language including “homeland” and “love” when describing Syria. While many respondents were unwilling to consider return, it is worth noting that many of those who did not want to return to Syria hoped to visit the country in the future. The desire to visit Syria may be based on a similar sense of national identity.

**Other Factors:** Several respondents noted a desire to return to Syria immediately, but did not explain why they could not currently return. This sentiment may suggest that logistical barriers to return—perhaps the cost of the trip, legal obstacles, or lack of identification documents—may dissuade some from returning now, though they hope to return soon.

Last, the lack of discussion about key living conditions in Syria was striking. While respondents were quick to highlight barriers to livelihoods in Turkey as a key challenge to life in displacement, no respondents mentioned the lack of jobs in Syria in the context of return. Other major humanitarian vulnerabilities—e.g. food insecurity, lack of healthcare, and lack of education—were similarly absent from the remarks of Syrian refugees when discussing return.

## Onward migration

Very few Syrian refugees interviewed for this study were interested in pursuing onward migration or resettlement. Most respondents gave some variation of ‘I haven’t

thought about immigration’. Only five respondents were interested in migration or resettlement, with Canada and Germany mentioned as preferred destinations. There were no noticeable trends in respondent sex, current location, or ethnicity among those who hoped to migrate. Out of employed respondents, only one refugee was interested in migration abroad.

“We will return no matter what. We need security. Our homeland is dear to our heart no matter what happens.”

Female, Turkman, Istanbul

## What factors influence perceptions of migration?

Key considerations related to migration include family abroad, prospects of economic well-being, fears of the risks of migration, concerns about adjusting to a new country, and the decreased possibility of return.

**Friends and Family Abroad:** Some respondents had family or friends living in Canada, Europe, and the United States. However, the presence of family (particularly siblings) or friends abroad was by itself often insufficient to motivate a desire to migrate. Instead, these connections appeared to relate more to the choice of potential destination than to the overall desire to pursue migration.

“I thought about immigrating to Germany. My brothers, my sisters and my friends are in Germany. The economic and educational conditions in Europe are better. However, I want to immigrate legally.”

Male, Kurdish, Istanbul

**Economic Conditions:** Economic factors were important to respondents considering migration. Several respondents said that “economic conditions are better” in other countries, or that the “economies” of desired destinations were strong. One refugee said that “job opportunities” were the main appeal of migration. In



one case, though, economic context served to dissuade a Syrian refugee from choosing to migrate. One respondent said that “economic opportunities are not very different from Turkey” in other countries (male, Arab, Istanbul).

“I have friends who traveled through [a] very difficult way to Europe and gave us advice that we shouldn’t travel... some of them passed away on the road. That’s why I stopped thinking about immigration.”

Female, Turkman, Istanbul

**Migration Dangers:** Many respondents shared stories that they had heard about the risks of irregular migration. These negative sentiments conveyed a sense of fear from refugees. For many, the pull of opportunities abroad was significantly outweighed by the danger of the journey. Refugees pointed to stories of trauma, injury, and even death as evidence informing their aversion to migration. Another respondent explained that, while she is considering migration to Germany, she does “not know the way to emigrate”, making her hesitate to undertake the journey (female, Turkman, Gaziantep).

**Life in Destination:** The most common explanation for views on migration and resettlement related to the quality

“My brother traveled to Norway and told me that I’ll lose my children there because they have a different religion.”

Female, Istanbul

of life in potential destination countries. Respondents were aware of key language, cultural, and religious differences in other countries. They communicated a fear of being a ‘stranger’ or ‘suffering’ in a foreign land, as well as the general risk that conditions could be worse in a new country. One respondent said: “I haven’t thought about immigration, it might be worse than Turkey” (female, Turkman, Istanbul).

**Possibility of Return:** Respondents often presented migration and resettlement in tension with desire to return to Syria. The broad sentiment was that leaving Turkey—traveling farther away from Syria—would reduce the possibility of eventual return. Respondents were reluctant to build a new life in a foreign country (e.g. learn a new language) when they maintained hope of returning home in the future. Instead, many wanted to remain geographically close to Syria.

“[Syrians who] migrate to Germany, for example, won’t return back to Syria. But [those] who are in Turkey can return easily to Syria.”

Male, Turkman, Gaziantep

## Local integration

About two-thirds of respondents wished to remain in Turkey long-term, highlighting a strong desire for local integration among Syrian refugees.<sup>12</sup> For many respondents, staying long-term meant receiving Turkish citizenship (and corresponding permission to work in the country). Male respondents were slightly more likely to prefer staying in Turkey than female respondents.

<sup>12</sup> Several respondents expressed desire for either return or local integration as their long-term displacement solution; consequently, figures on desire for migration, return, and integration are not mutually exclusive.

Respondents who identified as Arab appeared more likely to want to locally integrate than respondents of other ethnicities, but the small number of Arab respondents in the sample (9) suggests that this finding is likely the result of random chance rather than indicative of broader ethnic trends.

On the other hand, respondent location appeared to have a stronger relationship with desire for local integration. Nearly all respondents in Istanbul wished to stay in Turkey, while just over half of respondents in Gaziantep hoped to locally integrate. Given that several respondents highlighted more difficult living conditions in Gaziantep than in Istanbul, it could be possible that desire to leave Gaziantep is a factor in this disparity, rather than perceptions of Turkey as a whole.

Current employment status in Turkey did not appear to impact desire to stay in the country. About two-thirds of both employed and unemployed respondents hoped to remain in Turkey. Those without family in Syria were slightly more likely to want to continue living in Turkey than those with family in Syria.

Respondents who hoped to integrate long-term in Turkey highlighted economic and social factors as key influences on their decision. Specifically, livelihoods and economic conditions, social inclusion, and access to education were considerations for refugees with the aspiration of building new lives in Turkey.

“I want to stay in Turkey, but I want to get out of Gaziantep. There is discrimination between the Turks and the Syrians.”

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

**Livelihoods and Economic Conditions:** Jobs and financial well-being were factors that influenced Syrians’ willingness to remain in Turkey. There was substantial variance in whether Syrian respondents described Turkey’s economic context as ‘good’ or ‘difficult.’ Those who said that they had a hard time finding employment in Turkey often did not want to stay, while those with a more

positive view hoped to stay. For example, one respondent said: “I want to stay in Turkey. The life is easy and beautiful here... The economic conditions are good. I want to be a Turkish citizen” (male, Turkman, Istanbul).

**Social Inclusion:** As noted earlier, perceptions of discrimination have a powerful impact on how respondents describe their quality of life in Turkey. Respondents who perceived strong levels of discrimination towards Syrian refugees were less likely to want to stay in Turkey long-term. Discrimination in the economic realm was frequently cited by respondents, highlighting the role of livelihood quality and availability as an influence on desire for local integration.

“I do not want to stay in Turkey. There is discrimination here and this is normal. Living here is difficult. Our life in Syria were easier and simpler.”

Female, Turkman, Gaziantep

However, other respondents conveyed a strong sense of social inclusion in Turkey, which informed their optimistic view of their future in the country. These respondents communicated a desire for Turkish citizenship out of a sense of long-term stability, in addition to the implications of citizenship on access to livelihoods. Interestingly, this sentiment was found particularly among refugees who had studied or were currently studying in Turkish schools. Respondents with a sense of social inclusion and loyalty to Turkey said that economic conditions were difficult not only for Syrian refugees, but also for Turkish citizens.

**Education:** Similarly, respondents who were interested in completing their education in Turkey highlighted a desire to remain in Turkey long-term. This aspiration was not generally expressed by older respondents when describing their children’s education, but rather by individuals in discussing their personal education aspirations. One respondent said that economic conditions vary in Turkey depending on the region, but he had the “ambition to complete my studies” (male, Arab, Istanbul).

## LIFE IN TURKEY

### Impressions of Turkey

The vast majority of respondents used positive language when describing Turkey, with a clear sentiment of gratitude. Refugees used words such as “good”, “better”, or “helping” in discussing their experiences in Turkey. Other key words related to impressions of Turkey included “merciful”, “thankful”, and “lenient”.

“The Turkish government gave protection to the Syrians and, Erdogan does not allow anyone to expose the Syrians. I feel safe here because I have been very scared in Syria.”

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

Respondents generally specified their gratitude towards the Turkish *government*, rather than towards Turkish citizens. For example, one respondent said:

*I have good relations with my neighbours... God bless the Turkish government and I pray to God to not deprive the Turkish state from Erdogan. They opened the door for us but, the Arabic countries didn't. (female, Gaziantep)*

The FGDs reveal similarly positive language in how participants describe their living conditions. The majority of respondents described their living circumstances using neutral or positive terms: ‘good’, ‘average’, ‘normal’, and ‘not bad’ appear frequently in transcripts. There were only five instances in the FGDs where respondents described their circumstances as ‘difficult’ or ‘very difficult’.

Gratitude towards the Turkish government was accompanied by a corresponding reluctance to discuss evident challenges and needs in Turkey. For example, most respondents characterized their relationships with Turkish citizens as “good”, but with further prompting

“We thank the Turkish government very much for their hospitality, so how can I tell anything else?”

Male, Turkman, Istanbul

they acknowledged experiences of discrimination and marginalization.

One respondent was effusive in his praise for the Turkish government, although he later noted his family suffers from food insecurity. Another respondent said living conditions were difficult, requiring his disabled child to work to help support the family, before going on to thank the Turkish government. **Consequently, it is likely that adverse living conditions and humanitarian needs—covered in the next sections—may be underreported.**

### Living conditions and challenges

**Safety: While respondents living in Istanbul largely felt safe, some of those in Gaziantep felt unsafe and vulnerable to crime.** Most respondents said that they felt safe, an affirmation of their perception that Turkey is a safe country. For example, a female respondent who said she was traumatized by air strikes in Syria said that she now feels safe in Turkey. However, respondents emphasizing the safety of their environment tended to live in Istanbul. Respondents in Gaziantep were more likely to communicate that they do not feel safe in Turkey, largely due to crime and theft. One respondent said that her sister was robbed and had her identification stolen. Though not a widespread sentiment, several respondents noted a desire to leave Gaziantep or expressed that their circumstances in Istanbul are better than in Gaziantep. One respondent who now lived in Istanbul said: “I was in Gaziantep and I was under very bad conditions, I had a debt of 300,000 Turkish Liras... the Turks in Istanbul are treating us good, but in Gaziantep they treated us bad” (female, Istanbul).

“I do not feel safe here, everything is strange to me.”

Female, Turkman, Gaziantep

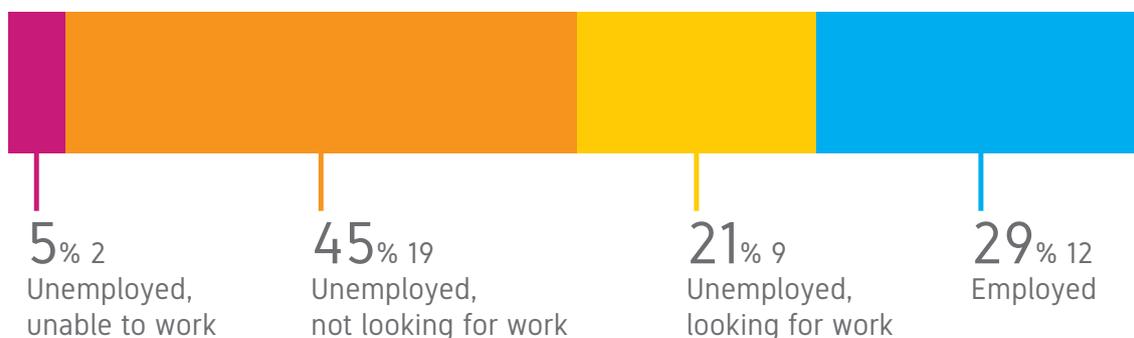
**Economic well-being: In a context where Syrian refugees struggle to establish livelihoods, many respondents noted that life in Turkey was expensive.**

The cost of housing was perceived as a burden for many refugees. One respondent said that he struggles to buy food due to his inability to find employment. Challenges in the economic well-being of Syrian

Figure 1: Employment (#, %)

## EMPLOYMENT

Base size 42



refugees living in Turkey is clearly linked with the broader difficulties in accessing livelihoods and achieving self-sufficiency. Less than one third of respondents are currently working (Figure 1). While data employment of Syrian refugees is extremely limited, one assessment found that about 80% of refugees in Turkey work in the informal sector; the current sample's high unemployment level stands out starkly in comparison.<sup>13</sup>

"The most important need is citizenship. Without nationality, there is no possibility of obtaining jobs... because the wages between the Turkish and Syrian is not equal where the Syrian works at lower wages."

Male, Arab, Istanbul

Occupations cited by respondents that were currently working included teachers, shopkeepers, trade, translation, and hospitality. Yet among those who were currently working, many highlighted low or insufficient wages—particularly in relation to Turkish counterparts. There was a broad perception that Syrian refugees earned less than Turkish employees. One man, who was the headmaster of a high school in Syria, said that he was unable to obtain a teaching job in Turkey; at the time of the research, he was taking teacher training courses in Turkey with the hope of finding such a job. Another

respondent said that Syrian teachers earn 39,000 Syrian Lira per month (approximately USD 75), while Turkish teachers earn a minimum of 1,440 Turkish Lira (TRY) per month (approximately USD 375).

Many of those who are unemployed are younger refugees who are currently completing their secondary or post-secondary education. Just three female respondents had jobs; all employed female respondents were living in Gaziantep. Other respondents were unable to work due to illness or disability. Participants widely attributed their difficulty obtaining a livelihood to their lack of a work permit (see Box 2 below). Consequently, many expressed a desire for Turkish citizenship in order to attain employment or earn higher wages.

**Housing: overall, respondents did not mention housing as a protection challenge, though several pointed to the cost of housing as a burden.** All Syrian refugees interviewed for this research lived with family members in either family-owned property or rented homes—no

"The living situation is very difficult in Turkey. Rent, electricity and water bills are expensive, and the salary is limited. The salaries are from 1300 Turkish liras to 1500 Turkish liras, the minimum rate for rental is 500 Turkish liras."

Male, Turkman, Gaziantep

<sup>13</sup> Refugees International, "I am only Looking for my Rights: Legal Employment Still Inaccessible for Refugees in Turkey", December 2017. <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/refugeesemploymentinturkey>

## Box 2: Syrian right to work in Turkey: Options and Challenges

Syrian refugees frequently encounter legal barriers in obtaining work permits. These difficulties are major obstacles to self-sufficiency and arguably pose one of the largest impediments to integration. Legislation granting refugees (living under temporary protected status) access to work permits was adopted with the January 2016 Regulation on Work Permit of Refugees under Temporary Protection.

By October 2017, only 14,000 work permits had been issued for Syrian refugees in Turkey (Refugees International, 2017). To put this figure in perspective, with over 3 million refugees living in Turkey at the end of 2017, just 0.4% of the displaced population in Turkey was issued a work permit.

The employer's role is a significant challenge in the work permit application process. The employer — not the refugee — must apply for the work permit and pay a fee of TRY 537 (about USD 138), though recent legislation has reduced that fee to TRY 200 (about USD 53). Respondents noted that employers are often unwilling to apply for work permits on behalf of refugee employees, choosing instead to employ Syrians informally or not hire Syrians at all.

Consequently, most Syrian refugees who can find jobs while living in displacement are informal workers performing tasks for low wages; children are often irregular workers as well. These positions lack access to social security, insurance, and leave workers vulnerable to exploitation. On a broader level, the influx of low-paid Syrian workers into Turkey's workforce is often negatively perceived by Turkish citizens, who may believe that Syrians workers depress wages. Tensions over employment and wages was widely cited by respondents to this study.

respondents lived alone. A 22-year-old male respondent reported living with his brother; a 34-year-old female respondent moved into her uncle's house with her mother and sister. Family separation within Turkey was rare (i.e. all family members living in Turkey lived in a common home), but respondents frequently mentioned separation from family members in Syria and other countries, including European states and Lebanon. Overall, respondents did not mention housing as a protection challenge, though several pointed to the cost of housing as a burden, while one respondent described her housing in Gaziantep as sub-standard.

**Education: Syrian refugees highly prioritized education, but access to education for children varied significantly.** Financial hurdles, in particular, were seen by many as obstacles preventing educational access for children. For some, the direct costs of education, such as tuition and fees, were seen as a heavy burden, despite schooling in Turkey being nominally free for Syrian children under TPS. For example, one respondent said that they were required to pay TRY 150 (USD 40) as a fee each semester, and that students who did not pay the fee were

expelled from their studies. This finding provides context for the high number of Syrian children in Turkey that are out of school, despite Turkish efforts to accommodate Syrian students in their educational system—a figure estimated at 41% in October 2017.<sup>14</sup>

For others, indirect expenses including transportation and clothes prevented access to education. One respondent said, "The education is for free but they ask for the school rental and transportation fees" (female, Turkman, Istanbul). Another refugee pointed to the lack of school supplies, including uniforms, as barriers that prevented Syrian children from being "equal with Turkish children" (female, Kurdish, Gaziantep). On the other hand, respondents enrolled in secondary and post-secondary education did not report educational costs as prohibitive.

"Education is an essential need, especially my daughters are in the age of 11-12 years old."

Female, Istanbul

<sup>14</sup> Refugees International, "I am only Looking for my Rights".

Figure 2: Over 90% of Syrian refugees in Turkey live outside of refugee camps.



**While barriers to education are problematic of their own accord, the link between lack of education and child work poses a major protection challenge for policymakers.** Several respondents cited child labor as a coping mechanism in light of poor livelihood opportunities and the costs of education. This finding reflects existing literature that finds high rates of child labor among Syrian refugees, particularly in the textile industry.<sup>15</sup>

“The most important thing is that my children complete their education. My husband is sick, my daughters and my son—he’s 13 years old—are working.”

Female, Istanbul

One respondent said that due to “expensive” educational fees, her 11-year-old son worked for TRY 250. Respondents noted that lower costs to education would make Syrian

refugees better able to send their children to school instead of relying on them for work.

**Access to other services - the majority of respondents were confident in accessing services, but some highlighted specific needs, including improved access to healthcare, psychological care, and other basic services.**

Some respondents did not know how to access services, with one refugee stating: “I don’t have any information [on] how to reach services” (female, Turkman, Istanbul). This discrepancy highlights a potential information gap on services for refugees living in Turkey—refugees have legal access to services, but face practical or bureaucratic obstacles. Barriers included:

“Currently I do not have an urgent need... I do not know [how to] access the services, only that I can go to the police station.”

Male, Kurdish, Istanbul

<sup>15</sup> Refugees International, “I am only Looking for my Rights”

Figure 3: Many female participants said education for their children was their greatest need



- **Language** - Several respondents cited this as an issue, as one respondent explained: "I contact the service centre but the problem is in language and the communication is difficult". (female, Istanbul)
- **Knowledge of access points** - Most respondents did not know, practically speaking, where to access services, with one respondent attempting to access information about services via the local police station.<sup>16</sup> Several respondents relied on local contacts (e.g. friends in the area) to guide them.
- **Procedural barriers** - One respondent said that "fixing an appointment with the doctors is difficult", leading him to ask his friends for help navigating the healthcare system (male, Turkman, Istanbul).

- **Lack of identification documents** - Refugees reported challenges in accessing identification documents, particularly in Gaziantep. Respondents linked documentation with access to services and

"It is important to provide psychological counselling courses for women [and children], especially those who have been exposed to trauma and fear in Syria... As an example; my son is [an] introvert and he is beating his friends, that means he is aggressive. But I do not know how to register to access to the services."

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

<sup>16</sup> The respondent did not specify which services he sought to learn about at the police station.

particularly healthcare. Yet some reported that local officials were overwhelmed and periodically stopped giving documentation to refugees. One respondent said that officials took documentation from refugees leaving Turkey for Syria, and they refused to re-issue documentation if refugees came back to Turkey (female, Turkman, Gaziantep).

- **Costs** - For some, the cost of healthcare was untenable. One respondent said: “My wife is sick in her heart, and ... medicine is expensive” (male, Turkman, Istanbul). On the other hand, several respondents describe health service as “good” and “free”. One respondent highlighted access to child healthcare as particularly strong.

“Currently I want to stay in Turkey, as a country and system is good. It does not discriminate but there is some of its people who do.”

Female, Kurdish, Gaziantep

Two refugees stressed **psychological services as a pressing need**, especially for their children. One respondent said: “My son, who is seven-years-old, is disabled. He is in need of mental health services” (male, Arab, Istanbul). Another respondent said that her son had been traumatized and needed ongoing counselling for aggressive behavior. Respondents all lacked access to psychological services.

**Social integration: respondents were divided on their relationship with Turkish people (positive or ambivalent), but few were negative.** While most respondents said that they had “good relations” with Turkish people as well as their positive impressions of the Turkish government, many nonetheless highlighted Turkish discrimination towards Syrians. On the positive end of responses, some refugees highlighted Turkish friends and connections. One respondent even said, “I think that there is no discrimination here. In every country, there is a good person and a bad person” (female, Gaziantep). Other respondents were quick to say that they had strong connections with Turkish people. For example, one respondent said: “Our living conditions are good. My relations with the Turkish people is better than with the

Syrians. Most of my friends are Turkish. I feel safe here” (female, Arab, Gaziantep). Another refugee said: “I have Turkish neighbours who love us learning Turkish” (female, Arab, Gaziantep).

“I have no relations with civil society organizations. But I took a card from the Turkish Red Crescent and they give me TRY 75 monthly.”

Male, Turkman, Istanbul

Other respondents did not have an opinion of Turkish people or held more negative perceptions. Some said that they did not have connections with Turkish people. There was a perception among some respondents that “treatment” towards Syrians was different than towards Turks. Another said: “When [Turks] know that we are Syrian, they deal with us with arrogance” (female, Turkman, Gaziantep).

## Sources of support

**Respondent were aware of few actors who could support them.** Throughout the data, respondents frequently mentioned that “no one helped us”. This sentiment was particularly common when describing the journey to Turkey from Syria. Instead, a handful of refugees noted assistance from the Red Crescent, while some respondents pointed to family—children, specifically, for female respondents—as their only source of support. Respondents did not cite other Syrian refugees as sources of support.

Thus, international organizations aiming to improve their response to Syrian refugees should consider the positive reputation of the Government of Turkey, which maybe a good vehicle for direct contact with beneficiaries regarding return and existing support. Similarly, other actors may be less effective partners. Specifically examining each actor:

**Turkish Government:** As previously described, respondents had near-universally positive perceptions of the Turkish Government. More specifically, they exhibited a strong loyalty to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, mentioning him by name several times. Aside from

“protection” and legal permission to stay in Turkey during displacement, few described specific support received from the Turkish Government.

**The United Nations and International Organizations:**

The United Nations and international organizations were infrequently mentioned in the data. One respondent discussed the UN in the context of migration, while another mentioned UNHCR in the context of international protection. However, no respondents said that they had registered with UNHCR or applied for resettlement.

**The Turkish Red Crescent:** The Red Crescent was the refugee response actor mentioned most frequently by respondents. Several refugees described receiving “help” or “aids” from the Red Crescent, though one respondent said that her request for aid was “refused”. One participant said that the Red Crescent would pay her family a salary for one year. However, the Red Crescent was only mentioned by respondents in Istanbul. Refugees in Gaziantep did not mention receiving assistance from the Red Crescent.

**Civil society:** Nearly all respondents either said that they had “no relations” with NGOs and CSOs or said that they did not receive assistance from them. Few organizations were mentioned by name: Just one respondent named specific NGOs that he was familiar with (Baytna and Al Harmoon).

NGOs and CSOs were not seen as a source of support or assistance by Syrians interviewed in both Istanbul and Gaziantep. Refugees instead said that they received assistance from AFAD and “UNHCR partners”.

“I don’t deal with the NGO’s because they are supported by specific groups which have special agendas and to be honest we don’t know them.”

Male, Turkman, Gaziantep

**Police:** Three respondents mentioned the Turkish police in their responses. One respondent viewed the police station as a place where he could go to get information; two other respondents said that the police were indifferent to the needs of Syrians. For example, one refugee said: “There is no protection for Syrian properties and there is looting and theft of Syrian funds... the Turkish police are only spectators” (male, Turkman, Istanbul). This data indicates that while Turkish police are not an active threat to the Syrian refugees in this study, they may not be a source of support or provide law enforcement services.

## DEPARTURE FROM SYRIA

### Reasons for leaving

**Nearly all respondents attributed their departure from Syria to conflict, violence, and war.** Many spoke in general terms about leaving due to “war” and “problems”. Some stayed in Syria until daily life became untenable, and even then expressed sadness or reluctance about leaving. Other respondents highlighted specific hazards related to armed conflict, including air strikes, bombings, snipers, and shooting. Several respondents pointed to the destruction of their homes as factors influencing their decision to leave.

“We had to leave Aleppo to the countryside because of the air strikes and bombing. Life was difficult in the village and I couldn’t go to my work as transportation services had stopped....I went to Aleppo and I got a passport. There were snipers shooting at people in the Aleppo bus station.”

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

**Several parties to the conflict influenced decisions to flee.** Many stressed that ISIS attacks forced Syrians to leave, or that their arrival in villages made “living conditions... very difficult”. Several respondents in both Istanbul and Gaziantep also pointed to the Syrian Armed Forces (under President Assad) as perpetrators. One respondent said that “shelling by Assad” in residential areas forced them to leave. Another respondent highlighted the Free Syrian Army as a perpetrator influencing their decision to leave.

In addition to conflict and violence, education incentivized many younger respondents to leave, as access to education had diminished in Syria. Others pointed to family reunion as their main objective, as they left Syria in order to rejoin siblings, parents, children, and other relatives.

### Journey to Turkey

Respondents fled in a variety of circumstances and used different—regular and irregular—transportation methods

“I left because of the war between ISIS and the Free Syria Army. I left illegally to the mountains and paid USD 600 per person for the smuggler. The people that we met on the road, treated us very well.”

Female, Turkman, Gaziantep

to reach Turkey. Many arrived regularly, using their passports or travel documents to enter Turkey. These refugees generally traveled overland (cars or buses), or in the case of one respondent, traveled via ship (from Tartous to Mersin). Some intended to come only for a short visit to see family, but found that they could not return home due to the conflict or a road closure.

Other respondents arrived through irregular means, often hiring smugglers to facilitate irregular entry into Turkey. The means of transportation varied for those entering Turkey irregularly: some respondents said that they drove or were driven across the border, while others crossed the border on foot. Most respondents said that the cost of smuggling was USD 500-600 per person. One respondent said that the price paid to smugglers was the same regardless of destination choice: Turkey, Lebanon, or Jordan. Some of those who arrived in Turkey with smugglers described the road as “difficult” and “dangerous”.

Regardless of how they arrived in Turkey, most refugees said that few people—if any—helped them along the way. One participant said that the Turkish Jandarma aided her family in crossing the border.<sup>17</sup> Yet other participants

“I came illegally through Idlib by foot. We were forced to walk for eight hours. One of my nephews was a baby. No one helped us, we were a large group and there was no one on the road. The first time, the Turkish Jandarma caught us and we went back to Syria. In the second attempt, we were able to enter without getting caught by the Jandarma.”

Female, Turkman, Gaziantep

<sup>17</sup> The Jandarma are an armed law enforcement organization in Turkey with military status. See: <http://www.fiep.org/member-forces/turkish-gendarmerie/>

described the Jandarma as a barrier to entry, with some saying that the Jandarma turned them away from the border. Families forced to turn around later successfully entered Turkey irregularly at a different location.

## Influences on destination choice

The decision to flee to Turkey was influenced by many factors, including:

- Turkey's geographic proximity to Syria;
- presence of family members already settled in Turkey;
- existing knowledge of Turkey (including job opportunities) from previous migration experience or family and friends;
- cultural, linguistic, and religious ties;
- perceived friendliness of policies and host society;
- perceived education opportunities.

Many Syrian refugees chose to flee to Turkey in order to **ensure a convenient return home in the future**. Refugees that conveyed this message repeatedly said that they had the opportunity to travel further from Syria, but chose to remain in Turkey so that it would be easier to return home one day. One respondent even expressed surprise that Syrian refugees would want to travel to Europe due to the “difficulties” that they would experience returning to Syria.

“Turkey is close, if we want to go back it’ll be easy to go back. The people who go to Europe will have difficulties going back to Syria.”

Female, Istanbul

Many respondents said that they were drawn to Turkey by **family already living there**. For some respondents, this meant an uncle or even more distant relative; others sought to rejoin their spouse or children. **Some respondents had previously lived in Turkey, or had family members with work experience in Turkey**. Respondents who chose to come to Turkey to reunite with family members expressed that they “did not think

to go to other areas”, a sentiment that underscores the importance of family to refugee decision-making.

Another powerful consideration for many Syrian refugees was **common linguistic, ethnic, cultural, or religious ties with Turkey**. Respondents frequently pointed to Turkey's Muslim identity as a pull factor, often using positive language in association with the phrase “Muslim country”.

Two-thirds of FGD participants were ethnically Turkmen, and these respondents frequently highlighted their common ethnic ties with Turkey—one respondent even described Turkey as “the motherland”. Some respondents said that their ability to speak Turkish drew them to Turkey. One respondent emphasized that shared “habits and traditions” with Turkish people influenced his decision. Conversely, the role cultural ties play in attracting Syrian refugees to Turkey dissuades many from migrating to European countries, which were perceived to hold foreign linguistic, cultural, or religious traditions.

“I came to Turkey because my children were working in Turkey and I was alone in Syria. I do not want to go to other areas. They offered me to go to Europe last year. They told me that the medicines there are free but I refused. I have four disabled children.”

Male, Turkman, Istanbul

**The perception of Turkey as a “safe” country** was a prominent factor in respondent decision-making. Female respondents, in particular, highlighted “safety” and “security” for their children as a draw. Respondents expressing this sentiment did not share their perceptions of other refugee-hosting countries, such as Jordan or Lebanon, though this omission could be caused by a geographic bias (respondents were largely from areas of Syria that are closer to Turkey). In other words, the perception of safety in Turkey appeared to be in relation to Syria rather than other possible destinations.

In addition to physical safety, one refugee also pointed to legal protection as an influence on decision-making. He said, “There’s a law that protects our rights, we feel secure [in Turkey]” (male, Turkman, Gaziantep).

“Turkey is a Muslim country and good for students, and when I graduate I can work.”

Male, Arab, Istanbul

Work opportunities and education influenced some respondents to go to Turkey. Secondary and post-secondary education was often cited by younger respondents, while older respondents discussed primary and secondary education in relation to their children. Some refugees had previously worked in Turkey, and consequently chose to return to Turkey in order to obtain work.

For some, Turkey’s proximity to northern Syria influenced the choice of destination due to its impact on the cost of travel. Nearly all participants came from Aleppo just 60 kilometers south of the Turkish border. One respondent said that coming to Turkey was the “best and the easiest place” to flee to, while others were more explicit in

describing how travel to Turkey was “cheaper” than other options. As noted previously, the journey to Turkey was not viewed as less expensive by all respondents. Overall, about a third of respondents said that the relatively low cost of traveling to Turkey was a factor in their decision-making as they fled Syria.

Last, there was a sense among some participants that Turkey was their only option for refuge. As one respondent said, she believed that Turkey was the only country that “opened its doors” to them. This perception aligns with the broadly positive sentiments that FGD participants expressed towards Turkey and the Turkish government.

“Honestly, Turkey is the only country that opened its doors to us. The other Arab countries did not receive us.”

Female, Arab, Gaziantep

## PROGRAM & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Findings are broadly split into two categories: better supporting Syrians living in Turkey and supporting refugee return in safe and appropriate situations. Other key findings relate to implications for Syrian migration to Europe, as well as areas of future research.

### Promoting self-sufficiency for refugees remaining in Turkey

While living in Turkey, support for Syrian refugees should prioritize jobs, education, and social integration. Most Syrian refugees in this study have informal or familial support networks, which may lessen the need to provide short-term support outside of life-saving situations; instead, refugees can most benefit from formal self-sufficiency programs and improved access to services.

**Promoting jobs for refugees:** Livelihoods continue to be a major need, despite the efforts of actors at the program and policy levels. Many Syrians mentioned a desire for Turkish citizenship, but this desire was closely linked with job aspirations rather than a desire to locally integrate. The perception of a pay gap between Turks and Syrians contributes to a sense of discrimination, particularly in hiring. At the policy level, policymakers should look at ways to continue to reduce legal barriers to livelihoods for Syrians and promote the fair hiring of qualified Syrian refugees where possible.

At the programmatic level, initiatives that help link Syrian refugee skills with employment openings—or provide vocational training to suit local economic needs—would likely be effective at reducing vulnerability. Language classes may also be helpful in overcoming discrimination in hiring. Humanitarian and development actors should pay careful attention and provide additional support to families with chronically ill or disabled income-earners.

**Reducing barriers to education:** While donors and humanitarian actors have prioritized education for Syrian refugee children, this research highlights the need for continued efforts to lower the costs of education. Interventions to facilitate access to school should focus on both direct expenses (e.g. school fees) as well as indirect expenses (e.g. school clothes and transportation to school). Improved incomes are the counterpart to this.

Moreover, actors must better account for the relationship between barriers to education and child work, particularly among urban refugees. Effective responses to child work could include cash transfer programs to incentivize school attendance and help cover direct and indirect costs.

**Promoting social inclusion:** Improved social inclusion programming that promotes access to services is desired by many Syrian refugees. Many respondents acknowledged the presence of discrimination and marginalization of Syrians living in Turkey. However, they often censored their discussion of social inequities due to a sense of loyalty and gratitude towards the Turkish government for hosting large numbers of refugees. Programs improving social cohesion between Turks and Syrians as well as lowering barriers to services would be useful. Specific to healthcare, effective actions include increasing refugees' understanding of how to access healthcare, lowering the cost of medication in certain cases, and examining documentation requirements that may inadvertently constrain access to healthcare. Last, actors should consider increasing available psychological services and counseling for refugees, especially for children.

**Building trust between humanitarians and beneficiaries:** Few respondents knew NGOs or CSOs by name and, correspondingly, did not appear to benefit from their programming or view them as sources of support. One respondent even said that Syrians do not trust such organizations because they 'don't know them'. The Red Crescent was the only international organization mentioned repeatedly by respondents as a source of support. This suggests that NGOs and CSOs should consider investing in community outreach, as they may already be providing services that address the programmatic recommendations noted above, such as psychological counseling.

### Supporting safe return

Much of the discourse surrounding the return of Syrian refugees in Turkey centers on an eventual end to the Syrian conflict. However, this study's central finding is that respondents hold multiple understandings of the term 'security' in the context of return. These different definitions (See Figure 4) are often based on individual circumstances and directly affect the ability of displaced persons to return to Syria.

At the policy level, these different barriers to return indicate that return will likely occur in a non-linear pattern—possibly several waves as the security context evolves and information spreads among refugees. Refugees who already believe the context permits their safe return will realize their return aspirations once they have the necessary financial and logistical means. Others await the end of fighting and air strikes, at which time they will be more likely to return. Yet many respondents have more long-term conditions for return, including the reconstruction of infrastructure and provision of services. Some refugees may never be able to safely return to Syria without the risk of persecution so long as the Assad regime remains in power, while others may initially refuse to return without regime change but lack a specific fear of persecution.

Messaging campaigns designed to inform refugees’ decision-making, as well as programs facilitating return in the coming years, should account for each of these definitions of ‘security’ in Syria. This research suggests that it is unrealistic to expect policies promoting the return of Syrians following the conclusion of formal hostilities to appeal to all refugees. Thus, Turkey may continue to host many Syrian refugees in the years to come even if the conflict ends.

At the programmatic level, the research indicates that refugees with family connections or undamaged land or property in Syria may be more likely to want to return

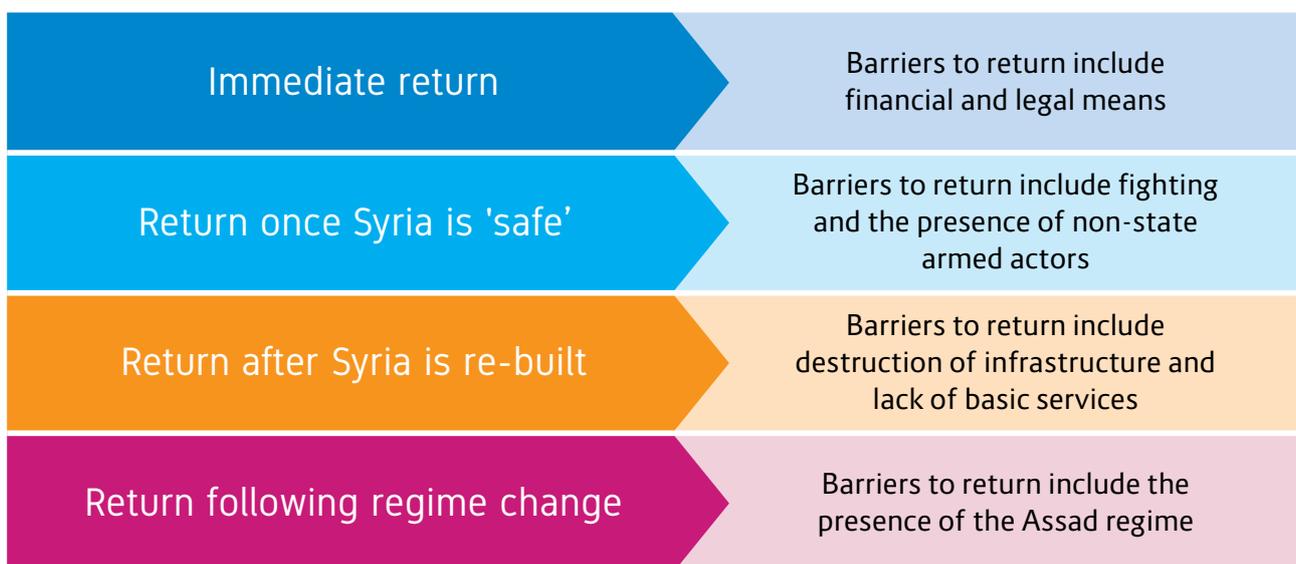
as their long-term displacement solution. Refugees who continue to perceive high levels of social exclusion in Turkey may similarly hope to return.

### New arrivals in Europe?

Study data suggest Syrian refugees living in Turkey may be less interested in regular and irregular onward migration than often assumed. The widespread aversion to migration is not statistically representative of all refugees in Turkey, but the narratives relating to migration that were reflected in the data provide at least a partial explanation for why Syrian arrivals in Europe have decreased over the last few years. Most Syrian refugees in this sample had not applied for (and did not appear interested in applying for) resettlement to Western countries through UNHCR. Again, this reinforces the finding that participants largely lacked interest in onward migration. Contentment with life in Turkey, fear of the hazards of migration, skepticism about economic opportunities and living conditions abroad, language or cultural barriers in foreign countries, and desire to ultimately return to Syria are factors discouraging refugees from migration.

These findings present a markedly different picture than the migration landscape often depicted by European policymakers. While policies related to Syrians in Turkey often assume that migration is a popular coping mechanism or long-term ambition, this research calls that belief into question.

Figure 4: Deconstructing conditions necessary for safe refugee return



## Identifying knowledge gaps

The study's methodology and findings provide an excellent basis to inform subsequent research that may be more generalizable to populations of Syrian refugees in Turkey. Areas of further research include:

**Support for Syrian refugees upon return.** This study looked at the overarching conditions necessary for individual refugees to safely return; however, the data does not speak to the specific needs returned refugees will have, or how international actors can support their reintegration. Interviewing Syrians who have attempted to return to Syria, but who have since returned to Turkey, will be key to addressing this gap.

**Further exploration of the factors motivating return.** This study found that refugees define the security conditions necessary for their return in vastly different ways, including a popular call for 'regime change' as a prerequisite for return. A more nuanced understanding of this concept would help estimate the proportion of the refugee population likely to return or remain in Turkey even after the end of the conflict. At the individual level, such findings could help to develop an assessment tool informed by conditions in different regions in Syria to determine which refugees may be able to safely return.

**Assessing appetite for onward movement to Europe.** The data from this report indicates potential explanations for decreased arrivals of Syrian asylum-seekers in Europe. While policy changes under the EU Turkey deal are widely

assumed to drive lower arrival numbers in recent months, this report suggests that an individual desire to remain in Turkey or return to Syria may explain the decision not to migrate to Europe. However, it is unclear whether this finding is reflective of widespread aversion to migration. Further research is needed to assess perspectives on migration, ideally from a representative sample of Syrian refugees living in Turkey.

**The link between livelihoods and child labor.** Given the challenges of implementing policy changes to allow greater access to livelihoods for refugees in Turkey, identifying the prevalence of child work among refugee families and its relationship to educational barriers would be particularly important. How efficient and effective are interventions aimed at reducing barriers to education at decreasing child work? Is there a minimum level of income at which families are less motivated to rely on child labor or work as a coping mechanism? For example, assessments of the EU's Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) program could shed light on this point.

**Exploring specific livelihood interventions.** While respondents clearly identified the need for improved livelihood opportunities, the data does not speak to specific livelihood interventions that would be effective in improving refugee self-sufficiency. Respondents have a variety of professional backgrounds, but qualitative interviews did not provide insight into the type of work that would be most effective in improving their family's economic well-being.

## CONCLUSION

As the Syrian conflict evolves and the possibility of political solutions or the cessation of hostilities in certain parts of the country appear increasingly achievable, all concerned actors must continue to improve support for refugees living in displacement while also facilitating the achievement of durable solutions for refugees. This study provided insight on ways humanitarian, development, and political actors can take concrete steps towards these goals, while also highlighting key areas of further research.

Participants in this study largely did not have acute humanitarian needs, but conditions for Syrian refugees in Turkey are far from easy. Respondents displayed broad consensus on the need for improved access to livelihoods and lower barriers to education. Despite their reluctance to criticize Turkey, respondents also called attention to social inequity, discrimination, and difficulty accessing services. Strikingly, few refugees were familiar with—or trusted—local and international non-government organizations, potentially underscoring the need for better outreach by humanitarian actors. The need for refugee access to psychological services should be considered by donors and humanitarian actors.

This report described diverse perspectives on return, local integration, and migration, revealing the highly individualized circumstances that determine long-term aspirations among Syrian refugees. Policies designed to facilitate return must account for the fact that refugee families will apply different sets of criteria when determining whether the ‘security’ context will allow them to go home. This finding suggests that refugee return programs should set realistic expectations for beneficiaries and account for the possibilities of multiple ‘waves’ of return over time. Further, many refugees may never feel safe returning to Syria, and efforts to support repatriation must be carried out alongside continued support of those remaining in Turkey and elsewhere.

Figure 5: Over half of the participants had migrated with their children.



## ANNEX: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

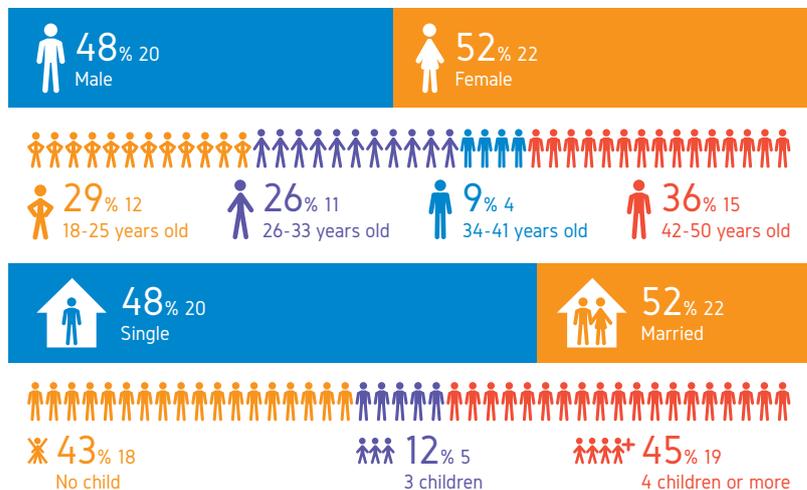
The sample included a diverse group of participants with respect to age, sex, marital status, dependent children, education, area of origin, and ethnicity.

- Age:** All participants were between the ages of 18-50. 29% of participants were 18-25 years old, 26% were 26-33 years old, 9% of participants were 34-41 years old, and 36% of participants were 42-50 years old. The research team did not interview children for this study.
- Sex:** The sample was approximately equal in its representation of female respondents (52%) and male respondents (48%).

Figure 6: Participant Demographics (#, %)

### DEMOGRAPHICS

Base size 42



- **Marital Status:** About half of the FGD participants were married (52%) or single (48%). No respondents were widowed or divorced.

- **Dependent Children:** Most participants were living with family members. Over half of participants had migrated to Turkey with at least one dependent child and were currently living with their children (52%). Nearly half of participants had 4 or more children (45%), while many had no dependent children (43%).

- **Education:** Participant education varied as well, with nearly half reporting that they had completed secondary school (45%). Just over a third of participants had completed primary level education, or had no formal education. A number of respondents were currently in school at either the secondary or post-secondary level.

- **Area of Origin:** Most participants were from the greater Aleppo area (93%) in the north of Syria, though this included a number of neighborhoods and villages. Several participants hailed from other parts of Syria, including Damascus (2 respondents) in the south and Deir ez-Zor (1 respondent) in the east.

- **Ethnicity:** The majority of participants identified as Turkmen (67%). The rest identified as Arab (24%) or Kurd (9%).

Figure 7: Respondent Education (#, %)

EDUCATION

Base size 42

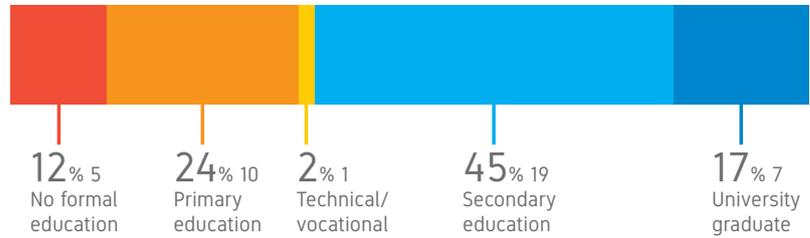


Figure 8: Area of Origin (#, %)

PLACE OF ORIGIN

Base size 42

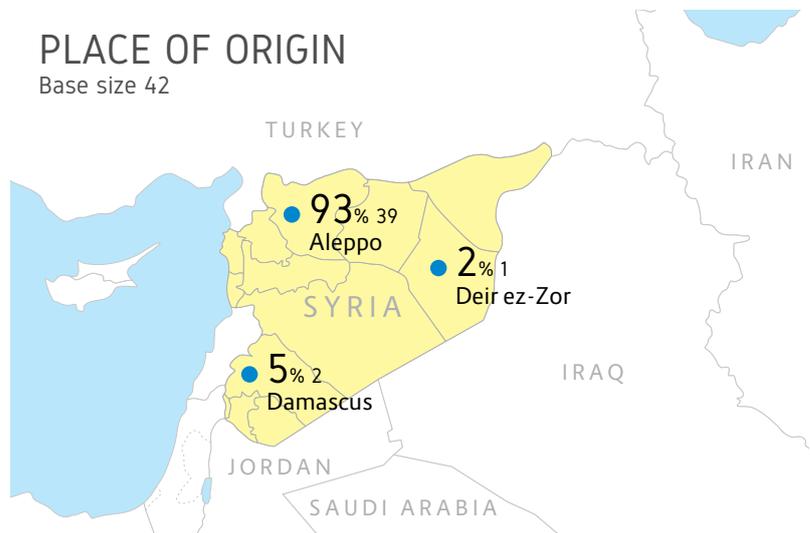


Figure 9: Respondent Ethnicity (#, %)

ETHNICITY

Base size 42



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