



INTEGRATING SYRIAN REFUGEES INTO THE TURKISH LABOR MARKET: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Policy brief

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Since the start of the conflict in Syria, Turkey has welcomed over 3.6 million Syrian refugees into its borders, making it the country hosting the largest number of refugees worldwide. In the last few years, Turkey has stepped up its efforts to integrate Syrians into the labor market, including through adopting a new legal framework that allows Syrians to access work permits and formal employment. In practice, as numerous challenges to integrate Syrians into Turkey's labor market continue to exist, there is a need to design more long-term plans for employment opportunities for Syrians and Turkish citizens in a way that benefits society and the economy. It is therefore vital to better understand how existing legal, economic and socio-cultural barriers impact Syrians' ability to become self-reliant and pursue sustainable livelihoods in Turkey without increasing tensions between them and host communities.¹

BACKGROUND

In April 2013, Turkey passed the "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" (LFIP), introducing the Temporary Protection (TP) regime for Syrians and granting them international protection. In January 2016, almost three years later, Turkey adopted the "Regulation on work permits of refugees under Temporary Protection" which allowed TP beneficiaries to apply for work permits and access formal employment. As of March 2018, almost 20,000 work permits have been granted to Syrians under TP and around 13,800 work permits were granted to Syrians to set up their own businesses.²

- 1 This policy brief draws on an extensive literature review and primary data collection consisting of 24 focus groups and 20 interviews conducted in Sultanbeyli, Hatay and Ankara between October and December 2018.
- 2 European Union (2018). "Assistance to Syrian refugees in Turkey": Conference document. Supporting the future of Syrian and the region. Brussels II Conference 24-25 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/34146/turkey-partnership-paper.pdf>. Accessed on 24 January 2019.

While this is a positive step forward, the vast majority of Syrians at an estimated 1 million are working informally, without access to social security and at risk of exploitation.³ Informality in the labor market represents a major issue in Turkey overall, with an estimated one in three workers in urban areas and three in four workers in rural areas working informally, i.e. not registered with the social security institutions.⁴ Moreover, Syrians join around 3.8 million unemployed Turkish citizens,⁵ of whom 1 million are estimated to be jobless university graduates.⁶ Despite the Turkish economy's need for low-skilled labor, the informal nature of Syrians' employment is in many cases not creating self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods.

In an effort to support Syrians to meet their basic needs, the EU-funded program Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), implemented by the World Food Program and Turkish Red Crescent got into force in December 2016 to provide eligible Syrian and other refugee families with cash assistance on a monthly basis, reaching around 1.4 million Syrians.⁷ While Turkey as a host society has displayed commendable solidarity towards Syrian refugees, there are signs that compassion is gradually running out, as many perceive Syrians as competitors for jobs and as socially different.⁸

1. SELF-RELIANCE AND SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS ARE ALMOST UNATTAINABLE FOR SYRIANS

Syrians face significant legal barriers to accessing formal employment – Employing a Syrian under TP incurs administrative and financial burdens, leading small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to default to informal labor. Existing rules under the 2016 Regulation on work permits legally limits TP beneficiaries to a quota of 10 percent of total staff at a workplace. Additionally, a geographical limitation means that work permit issuance is restricted to cities in which Syrians were registered upon arrival in Turkey, presenting a big hurdle for many who seek more employment opportunities in different parts of the country.

Economic precariousness and financial pressures are hurdles to self-reliance – Many Syrians are at risk of economic exploitation, being paid below the minimum wage on an irregular basis or sometimes not at all. Moreover, the economic sectors that Syrians are mostly engaged in, such as the textile, construction and agricultural sectors, were already prone to informality before Syrians' arrival in Turkey. A major expense for Syrian families is rent, which is not covered or supported by the TP regime, unlike healthcare and education costs. With almost half of Syrian households in Turkey considered poor, rent costs contribute to socio-economic precarity, leading many to live in overcrowded flats and makeshift arrangements.⁹



I think I am contributing to the Turkish economy. I want to expand my business because I am not making much profit now. I have to pay double for the store rent than it is normally worth. We have to pay rent for both the store and our home, so there is not much extra money left at the end of the month. It is very difficult to take care of oneself here. In Syria, my three children were going to school but here they all need to work.

Syrian man, small-scale business owner in Sultanbeyli

- 3 Bidinger, S. (2015). Syrian Refugees and the Right to Work: Developing Temporary Protection in Turkey. Boston University. Available at: <https://www.bu.edu/ilj/files/2015/01/Bidinger-Syrian-Refugees-and-the-Right-to-Work.pdf>. Accessed on 23 January 2019; Erdoğan, M. (2017). Syrians-Barometer-2017: A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey. Available at: <https://mmuraterdogan.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/syrians-barometer-executive-summary.pdf>. Accessed on 20 December.
- 4 World Bank (2006). Turkey: Labor Market Study. Report No. 33254-TR. Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit. April 2006. Available at: http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTTURKEY/Resources/361616-1144320150009/Labor_Study.pdf. Accessed on 29 January 2019. P. iii
- 5 Trading Economics (2019). Turkish Jobless Rate Rises to 11.6% in October. Available at: <https://tradingeconomics.com/turkey/unemployment-rate>. Accessed on 31 January 2019.
- 6 Açıkgoz, E. (2018). Turkey's unemployed university graduates take unskilled jobs. Hürriyet Daily News. 11 February 2018. Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-unemployed-university-graduates-take-unskilled-jobs-127127>. Accessed on 31 January 2019.
- 7 World Food Programme and European Union (2017). About the ESSN Card. Available at: <http://www.essncard.com/about-card/>. Accessed on 20 December 2018.
- 8 International Crisis Group (2018). Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions. Report N°248. (29 January 2018). Brussels: International Crisis Group. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/248-turkeys-syrian-refugees-defusing-metropolitan-tensions>. Accessed on 23 January 2019
- 9 World Food Programme (2018). Refugees in Turkey: Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise (Round 2). Ankara. Available at: <http://goo.gl/i3aThJ>. Accessed on 20 December 2018. P.16; and Baban, F., Ilcan S. and Rygiel, K. (2016). Syrian refugees in Turkey: pathways to precarity, differential inclusion, and negotiated citizenship rights. Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 43(1). Pp.41-57.

Language barriers strongly impact access to employment opportunities – The language barrier is the most pressing socio-cultural issue in employment. Apart from strengthening their ability to access employment opportunities, effective communication also helps Syrians to avoid exploitation by employers, and contributes to a more positive attitude among host community members. Overall, Turkish host communities seem to be skeptical about Syrians’ integration potential and try to maintain a “conscious” distance to them, while Syrians express more positive views towards feeling part of Turkish society.¹⁰

2. MANAGING HIGH LIVING COSTS ON LOW INCOME: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ESSN

Syrians choose informality over the loss of cash assistance – Syrian respondents who benefited from the ESSN stated it as essential to meet their basic needs. Critically, some Syrian respondents indicated that they did not try to pursue *formal* work, but instead pursue *informal* work, for fear of losing access to this financial assistance. The necessity to meet basic needs such as shelter and food, coupled with income insecurity, means that there is limited time and resources to pursue education opportunities that could pull families out of poverty.



Being insured [working formally] has both positive and negative sides. When I am insured, my employer will have to pay me compensation when I leave my work. The harm of getting insurance is that I will stop receiving the financial assistance I currently get from the Turkish Red Crescent [ESSN].

Syrian man, working informally in Sultanbeyli

Salaries from formal employment are not sufficient to meet household needs due to economic discrimination – Syrians respondents stressed that they could not rely solely on a salary from formal employment to cover the basic needs of their families. Despite those salaries being higher, the additional ESSN assistance was argued to be essential. This is mainly due to economic discrimination Syrians face – almost all Syrian respondents in focus groups expressed facing inflated prices, especially for rent. The need to cover rent and additional costs such as electricity, water and transport pushes more household members to generate an income, reinforcing Syrians’ predicament of finding jobs in the informal sector.



Daily life in Akcakale and Harran refugee camps. Sanliurfa, Turkey. Photo by: cemT

¹⁰ Also see Erdoğan, M. (2017). Syrians-Barometer-2017: A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey. Available at: <https://mmuraterdogan.files.wordpress.com/2016/06/syrians-barometer-executive-summary.pdf>. Accessed on 22 December 2018.

3. GENDER NORMS PRESENT AN ADDITIONAL OBSTACLE FOR SYRIAN WOMEN TO ACHIEVE SELF-RELIANCE

Syrian women have insufficient access to the labor market – A recent assessment by UN Women found only 15 percent of Syrian women in employment, both formal and informal, and over 90 percent unaware of work permit regulations.¹¹ This stands in contrast to an average of 45 percent of Turkish women participating in the Turkish labor force.¹² Reasons for the low labor market participation of Syrian women might lie in cultural and gender norms dating back from Syria, where a division in gender roles was the norm as women undertook most of the domestic chores, even if they were employed, while men were mainly responsible for financially supporting the nuclear as well as the extended family.¹³



The main reason I left my previous job was the harassment I faced there. I did not know whom to complain to. I did not know how to tell my problem because I do not know Turkish. People think that because I am a refugee here I am supposed to accept everything.

Syrian woman, formally employed in Hatay

Gender norms, lack of Turkish language skills and gender-based violence (GBV) in the workplace are the key barriers to Syrian women accessing employment – Gender norms have a real impact women's access to employment and self-reliance. Gender norms can create barriers for women to access these rights – be it due to real and perceived protection risks associated with women and girls, or to working in public spheres not perceived as being appropriate for women.¹⁴ As women bear most domestic and caretaking responsibilities, they require further support structures to access employment. Syrian women respondents generally felt positive about seeking employment, while Syrian men felt strongly against this idea. Women reported that the risk of GBV, especially sexual harassment, represented a real threat at workplaces, especially when they spoke no Turkish.

4. THE LACK OF LONG-TERM INTEGRATION POLICY GIVES RISE TO UNCERTAINTY OVER SYRIANS' FUTURE IN TURKEY

Lack of long-term integration policy impacts negatively on Syrians' economic security and self-reliance – While Turkey's commitment to support Syrian refugees is highly commendable, the lack of a macro-level integration policy has meant that Syrians' participation in the Turkish labor market has not been adequately guided. Experience shows that when refugees are supported in becoming socially and economically self-reliant, and given freedom of movement and protection, they are more likely to contribute economically to their host country.¹⁵



I feel that I am part of Turkey. It took a few years to adapt here. When we get to know Turkish people our lives become easier. It is important to have Turkish friends. When I need something, I go to them and they help me. When I need a warrantor, my Turkish friends warrant for me.

Syrian man, formally employed in Sultanbeyli

- 11 UN Women and ASAM (2018). Needs Assessment of Syrian Women and Girls under Temporary Protection Status in Turkey. June 2018. Available at: www.goo.gl/czH7Vv. Accessed on 23 January 2019.
- 12 The World Bank (2019). Gender Data Portal: Turkey. Available at: <http://datatopics.worldbank.org/gender/country/turkey>. Accessed on 23 January 2019.
- 13 Khattab, L. And Myrntinen, H. (2018). "Most of the men want to leave": Armed groups, displacement and the gendered webs of vulnerability in Syria. International Alert. Available at: https://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Gender_VulnerabilitySyria_EN_2017.pdf. Accessed on 30 January 2019. P. 16
- 14 CTDC (2015). Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Gender Analysis. London: Centre for Transnational Development and Collaboration. Available at: <http://ctdc.org/analysis.pdf>. Accessed on 22 December 2018; Tören, T. (2018). Documentation Report: Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Labour Market. The International Center for Development and Decent Work and University of Kassel. Available at: <http://www.uni-kassel.de/upress/online/OpenAccess/978-3-7376-0450-5.OpenAccess.pdf>. Accessed on 22 December 2018.
- 15 World Bank (2015). Turkey's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Road Ahead. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/23548/Turkey0s0respo0s0an%20d0the0road0ahead.pdf?sequence=1>. Accessed on 24 January 2019.

Uncertainty over the future affects Syrians and Turkish host communities – The lack of long-term policy is strongly felt by Syrians, who are desperate to bring a sense of stability into their lives after years of displacement but feel unsure about their future in Turkey. Turkish host communities, who in most part support assisting Syrians in need, are getting impatient with the lack of structured approach for improving the Turkish economy and outlining a plan for Syrians’ future in the country.

5. ECONOMIC INTEGRATION PROVIDES SYRIAN REFUGEES WITH AN OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE

Stable employment helps refugees feel integrated, which in turn helps them become productive members of society – As the conflict in Syria passed the eight-year mark, many Syrians are eager to find permanency and consistency in their lives. Formal employment seems to represent a cornerstone to refugees’ ability to plan their future, feel confident regarding their legal status in the country and constructively engage in the economy and host society.

Including newly naturalized Syrians into Turkish socio-economic fabric is key – The granting of Turkish citizenships to around 79,820 Syrians by 25 January 2019 is an important step towards durable solutions, acknowledging that some Syrians might stay in Turkey longer-term.¹⁶ It is critical to ensure that the newly naturalized Syrians feel, and are, part of the Turkish socio-economic fabric, so as to boost the national economy and create new jobs in Turkey.



Syrian refugee workers are in a textile factory. Istanbul, Turkey. Photo by: Seyephoto

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of key policy and programming **recommendations** can be drawn from the findings of this study in order to improve the economic integration of Syrians into Turkey’s formal labor market, and therefore make durable solutions available to Syrians in displacement.

Government of Turkey

- Expand protection of Syrians in Turkey by granting Temporary Protection (TP) beneficiaries a special dispensation from employment restrictions usually granted to aliens and conferring the same rights regarding wage-earning, self-employment and liberal professions as permanent residents or nationals.
- Increase access to formal employment by lifting legal and administrative barriers for self-employment and wage earning for Temporary Protection (TP) beneficiaries, including:
 - Easing administrative restrictions on finding formal employment outside of place of registration;

¹⁶ Mülticiler (2019). Türkiye'deki Suriyeli Sayısı Ocak 2019. 25 January 2019. Available at: <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>. Accessed on 30 January 2019; Akcapar, S. K. and Simsek, D. (2018). The Politics of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: A Question of Inclusion and Exclusion through Citizenship. *Cogitatio*, 6(1), pp. 176-187 P. 180

- Increasing the quota for TP beneficiaries allowed to be hired by registered enterprises;
 - Reducing company registration costs to bring more unregistered Syrian business into the formal economy;
 - Facilitating access to financing to start and develop businesses;
 - Facilitating freedom of movement and lifting travel restrictions to encourage legal employment;
 - Fastening the process of degree and qualification equivalency and acceptance;
 - Easing regulatory burdens, improving the operating environment to encourage formalization, job creation, and enable Syrian entrepreneurs to deploy and retain their capital in Turkey.
- Increase regulations on landlords and property owners to ensure that rental arrangements are not exploitative or against existing laws.
 - Strengthen control and fine companies that employ both Turkish citizens and TP beneficiaries in non-compliance with the Turkish Labour Law.
 - Ensure that refugees are aware of their rights by improving the access and flow of correct information in Arabic and Turkish, through municipalities, NGOs, employment agencies and social media, on:
 - Legal procedures for self-employment and company registration;
 - Labor laws and employees' rights for wage-earning.
 - Develop up a communication strategy with the objective to inform Turkish host communities about Syrians' economic activities, and therefore countering rumors or inaccurate statements.
 - Increase economic growth by taking a regional- or area-based approach when developing economic policies designed to boost formal employment of TP beneficiaries and Turkish citizens, tailored to the geographic specificities and based on a market analysis and consultations with municipalities.
 - Remove language barriers by incentivizing Turkish language courses to TP beneficiaries to enable them to achieve sufficient command of the language to fulfill their everyday and employment needs. Develop minimum standards for Turkish language classes provided by NGOs with an accreditation and certification system.
 - Encourage private sector entities, especially large-sized companies, to hire TP beneficiaries and to increase the overall availability of job opportunities by reducing costs, e.g. by providing incentive loans to businesses who employ a certain number of TP beneficiaries, or reducing taxation costs to decrease informal employment (taxation subsidies could be covered by the donor community).

Donor community

- Ensure burden-sharing of the Syrian refugee caseload, increasing available resettlement spaces and accepting refugees for complementary pathways based on non-discriminatory criteria, protection needs and vulnerability.
- Continue funding financial assistance programs, including the ESSN, targeted at vulnerable TP beneficiaries, who rely on the assistance to meet their basic needs, including food and shelter, but revising it in the following ways:
 - Committing to funding the ESSN on a multi-year basis in order to provide continuity and a sense of stability for beneficiaries;
 - Making financial assistance conditional to enrolling in Turkish language courses and/or vocational courses, excluding those deemed especially vulnerable;
 - Providing a reduced amount of financial assistance for a certain period of time to TP beneficiaries who have entered formal employment, in order to support their transition into self-sufficiency.
- Continue funding and building the capacity of Turkish municipalities and civil society organizations, by prioritizing:

- Projects focused on supporting livelihoods and social cohesion between Syrians and Turkish host communities;
 - Projects that include and support Turkish-Syrian partnerships, e.g. in business cooperation and project delivery through civil society actors;
 - Capturing the needs and expectations of local Turkish host communities, along with those of Syrian refugees.
- Develop gender sensitive approaches in supporting and encouraging formal employment for both Turkish and Syrian women, including through:
 - Funding targeted programs to build Turkish and Syrian women’s skills and improving their employability;
 - Promoting practices and regulations that support gender equality in the workplace among public and private sector actors engaged in working with TP beneficiaries;
 - Developing gender-sensitive indicators as funding and/or reporting requirement.

Private sector

- Support the formal employment and livelihoods of TP beneficiaries by sponsoring and hiring them, providing them with on-the-job training and developing their skills, especially large-size companies.
- Collaborate with public sector entities, especially with relevant chambers of industries and commerce, as well as with municipalities, and with international, Turkish and Syrian NGOs, to create job opportunities and hire TP beneficiaries and Turkish citizens who graduate from vocational courses, thereby providing creative solutions to local socio-economic challenges.
- Develop procurement policies that support contracting goods and services from companies owned by, or employing, Syrians.
- Build the capacity of Syrian companies by offering business training tailored to their local or regional needs, delivered by trainers competent in Turkey’s and Syria’s business environments and who speak Arabic fluently.
- Increase commitment to providing female-friendly workplaces by setting up confidential complaint mechanisms within companies and strengthening accountability mechanisms. The improvement of gender sensitivity within the company may improve the work environment, and therefore support staff retention and higher productivity among employees.

NGOs

- Provide Turkish language courses in line with accreditation guidelines where applicable and taking into account flexible timings, mornings and evenings, for full-time workers.
- Review vocational training programs designed to support Syrians’ livelihoods opportunities to focus on the specific local market needs that Syrians could fill and be more creative in the selection of programs available, moving away from gender-stereotypical courses such as cooking or knitting into for example IT, logistics or project management, and providing career counselling.
- Incorporate gender sensitivity trainings in all livelihood programs tailored to men and women, covering basic modules such as gender norms, gender roles and harassment in the workplace.
- Bridge the gap between public and private sectors by creating opportunities for dialogue between companies, employment agencies, local Chambers of Commerce and other business groups on employing TP beneficiaries.
- Create “champions” among Syrians who have successfully set up businesses or been hired by Turkish companies, to mentor fellow striving Syrian women and men striving to set up their own businesses or make a career. Where the language is no obstacle, create such a mentorship program between Turkish and Syrian businesses, especially for women-led businesses.
- Increase constructive engagement and collaboration with Syrian organizations, including supporting their capacity-building.

