

# How the EU and Turkey can promote self-reliance for Syrian refugees through agricultural trade

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# List of Acronyms

<b>3RP</b>	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
<b>AFAD</b>	Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency
<b>AKP</b>	Justice and Development Party
<b>BETAM</b>	Bahçeşehir University Economic and Social Research Center
<b>CAP</b>	Common Agricultural Policy
<b>CCTE</b>	Conditional Cash Transfer for Education
<b>CHP</b>	Republican People's Party
<b>CU</b>	Customs Union
<b>DG</b>	Directorate-General (in EU-related contexts)
<b>DG ECHO</b>	Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations
<b>DGMM</b>	Turkey's Directorate General of Migration Management
<b>EDAM</b>	Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies
<b>ESSN</b>	Emergency Social Safety Net
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organization
<b>FLA</b>	Fair Labor Association
<b>FRIT</b>	Facility for Refugees in Turkey
<b>GCR</b>	Global Compact on Refugees
<b>IGAM</b>	Research Center on Asylum and Migration
<b>IKV</b>	Economic Development Foundation
<b>ILO</b>	International Labor Organization
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organization

<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IPARD</b>	Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development
<b>İŞKUR</b>	Turkish Employment Agency
<b>LFIP</b>	Law on Foreigners and International Protection
<b>MoFLSS</b>	Turkish Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organization
<b>PAPs</b>	Processed Agricultural Products
<b>RET-YKD</b>	RET International - Rehberlik Eğitim Toplumsal Yardımlaşma ve Kalkınma Derneği
<b>QIZ</b>	Qualifying Industrial Zone
<b>SADA</b>	Women Empowerment and Solidarity Centre
<b>SGDD-ASAM</b>	Association of Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants
<b>TDİOSB</b>	Specialized Organized Industrial Zones Based on Agriculture
<b>TEPAV</b>	Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey
<b>TÜSİAD</b>	Turkish Industry and Business Association
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme



# Executive Summary

The Syrian crisis is approaching its ninth year. The conflict has taken the lives of over 500,000 people and forced over 7 million more to flee the country. Of those displaced abroad, more than 3.6 million have sought refuge in Turkey, which now hosts more refugees than any other country in the world. At a time when traditional durable solutions, either through resettlement or a voluntary, sustainable, and dignified return do not look viable, leaders at all levels of government, civil society, and international agencies are grappling with how to integrate these newcomers into society broadly and the labor market specifically.

Although the Turkish government adopted legislation in 2016 designed to facilitate access to work permits, so far less than 2% of the 2.2 million Syrian refugees of working age (15-64) are formally employed. The Turkish economy presents a unique structural problem in that more than one-third of Turkish employment is estimated to be informal. The entry of more than a million Syrian refugees, acting as competition for local workers and thus depressing wages,

has exacerbated social tensions and even violence, adding urgency to the task of finding a solution.

Thus far, most approaches to supporting refugees have focused on enhancing refugees' employability, with limited success. Yet little attention has been paid to creating the economic conditions necessary for them to be employed. An innovative way to achieve sustainable self-reliance for refugees in Turkey would be for the European Union to offer Turkey trade concessions conditional to formal employment of Syrians. Versions of this policy idea have already received backing in various high-level conferences, such as the London Conference and the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in February and September 2016, and endorsement in the UN Global Compact on Refugees adopted in December 2018.

A model for this approach already exists in the 2016 EU-Jordan Compact, in which the EU agreed to allow greater access to its market for goods produced by Jordanian



companies employing refugees. This report argues that a version of this compact should be applied to the Turkish case and offers a set of political and regulatory changes that should be adopted by both the EU and Turkey. Where the Jordanian case focused on industrial exports, in this instance the Turkish agricultural sector offers an opportunity both for a significant expansion of exports and for equally significant formal employment opportunities for Syrian refugees. This move would build on the current functional cooperation between the EU and Turkey, exemplified by the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) that has emerged since the 2015-16 European migration crisis.

The report is divided into three sections. The first presents a discussion of the current situation facing Syrian refugees in Turkey and the efforts made to provide better employment opportunities for them. The subsequent section assesses the challenges and opportunities with respect to accessing employment, with an emphasis on the agricultural sector. The final section presents a set of policy recommendations

developed through interviews and discussions with academics, civil society representatives, Turkish national and local government officials, and representatives of international agencies, as well as officials from the European Commission and Parliament. The interviews and discussions were conducted during field research in Ankara, Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Şanlıurfa in February, April, and June 2019, with consultations held in Brussels in July 2019.

# Introduction



Turkey has hosted Syrian refugees for nearly nine years, well over the threshold for a "protracted situation" - defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as "a situation where refugees have not had access to durable solutions in the form of repatriation, resettlement, or local integration for five or more years since their initial displacement."<sup>1</sup> The prospects of return for Syrian refugees remain unclear in the short, medium, and long term given the destruction and ongoing instability in their home country. Resettlement prospects are equally unpromising due to the anti-refugee and anti-immigrant political climate in most traditional resettlement countries, such as the United States and leading European Union member countries. The UNHCR has fallen well short of meeting its own resettlement targets in general and for Turkey specifically.<sup>2</sup> Local integration in the form of granting Syrian refugees a path to eventual citizenship in Turkey has not happened and only a tiny fraction has acquired citizenship. The current status quo for refugees in Turkey leaves them with no viable opportunities to end their protracted situation, to find new homes, and/or to formally adapt to their adopted refuge.

Since Syrians began fleeing violence and repression in their country in April 2011, their numbers in Turkey have reached more than 3.6 million. Together with almost 400,000 additional refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities, Turkey now hosts the largest number of refugees in the world.<sup>3</sup> Until recently, Syrian refugees in Turkey have generally enjoyed protection from forced return to Syria and access to basic public services including healthcare and, more recently, public schools. Close cooperation between the EU and Turkey has opened the way for a meaningful proportion of refugees to benefit from cash assistance programs. Yet, refugees' limited access to sustainable livelihoods in Turkey, compounded by the prospect of their long-term presence, continues to be a major challenge for the country.

The Turkish government has emphasized the temporariness of the refugees' stay in Turkey and has promised an increasingly resentful public that they will soon be going back to Syria.<sup>4</sup> In late July, the government adopted a policy demanding that Syrian refugees residing outside their initial

places of registration return to their assigned locations.<sup>5</sup> A sudden surge of supposedly voluntary returns that were later deemed as refoulement by many observers and human rights organizations accompanied this order.<sup>6</sup> This picture has become further complicated by growing calls from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan for the repatriation of the refugees following the Turkish military intervention in northern Syria in October 2019. Erdoğan has advocated for the repatriation of one to two million refugees into the region.<sup>7</sup>

Yet, as much as the return of refugees is a politically pressing issue, there is also a recognition that return, especially on the scale advocated by President Erdoğan is, at best, unrealistic.<sup>8</sup> Officials and experts in Turkey have long recognized that the presence of Syrian refugees is far from temporary.<sup>9</sup> The reality that most of the refugees would stay in Turkey was recognized as early as November 2014, when then Deputy Prime Minister Numan Kurtulmuş noted that most were “here to stay,”<sup>10</sup> a belief still shared by many Turkish officials five years later.<sup>11</sup> A 2018 government report on Syrian refugees recognized the likelihood of their stay in Turkey becoming permanent and advocated the need to work towards developing a policy of “harmonization.”<sup>12</sup>

With or without a formal policy, refugees are integrating themselves into their local communities. Securing employment is the most important driver of this integration process. This is captured by one Syrian refugee's striking remark, “I work in this country and therefore I feel I belong to this country.”<sup>13</sup> However, most of this employment is informal and leaves Syrian refugees in very precarious work and social conditions. It also exacerbates public resentment driven by falling wages and rising unemployment among unskilled local labor.

Hence, one of the toughest challenges facing Turkey with respect to the integration of Syrian refugees is drawing them

into the formal economy and enabling them to become economically independent and productive members of society. At a time when the Turkish economy is not performing strongly, specific policies aimed at engendering economic growth to incentivize the employment of Syrians by Turkish employers are needed. A new way to achieve this would be for the EU to offer Turkey trade concessions conditional on the formal employment of Syrians. This would be in line with an increasingly popular policy argument that, in the spirit of burden-sharing and discouraging secondary movements, countries hosting large number of refugees should be granted better access for their exports.

This policy idea emerged in the aftermath of the European migration crisis and received backing in various high-level conferences such as the February 2016 London Conference and the UN Summit on Refugees and Migrants in September 2016. Subsequently, it was endorsed in the UN Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) adopted in December 2018.<sup>14</sup> This trade concessions- and economic growth-focused approach to refugee support first manifested itself in the 2016 EU-Jordan Compact, in which the EU agreed to allow greater access to its market for Jordanian companies employing refugees.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, this approach emphasizes the importance of generating employment and benefits for the host communities to ensure social cohesion.

This report adopts the innovative logic behind the EU-Jordan Compact and explores a series of policy recommendations to expand Turkish agricultural exports to the EU in a manner that would incentivize Turkish businesses and farms to formally employ Syrian refugees in the agricultural sector. Because the customs union between the EU and Turkey covers only industrial goods, allowing these products to enter the European internal market freely and without tariffs, the Turkish agricultural sector stands to benefit from increased trade with the EU and the economic



growth that this would drive. Primary agricultural products are currently excluded from the customs union and are affected by quotas, duties, and regulatory restrictions, while the agricultural portion of industrially processed agricultural products are taxed. These concessions would be made conditional on the formal employment of Syrian refugees in a manner that meets ILO and EU labor standards. A certification and monitoring mechanism would be necessary to ensure compliance with the implementation terms that would be agreed upon in such an EU-Turkey Compact.<sup>16</sup>

An agricultural focus is also suitable because large numbers of Syrian refugees are already employed in this sector, particularly in the largely agriculture-based economies of the Turkish provinces near the Syrian border. At present, their employment is marked by informality and deep precarity. Such a compact would help draw the refugees into the formal economy. It would also create opportunities to better use the agricultural experience and skills of refugees who have fled the northern, rural parts of Syria at a time when the Turkish agricultural sector suffers from labor shortages and structural challenges, such as aging among farmers.

Ultimately, such pragmatic cooperation between the EU and Turkey to improve the self-reliance of the refugees by enabling them to access decent and sustainable work in the agricultural sector is in the interest of both sides. For Turkey, the implementation of these policy recommendations would help refugees become self-reliant, productive members of Turkish society, moderate public resentment, and reduce the likelihood of a lost generation, while at the same time fostering economic growth. For the EU, this plan would reduce both the likelihood of secondary movements of refugees and the need to continue to raise funds for humanitarian assistance as refugees become more independent. Finally, such a “win-win-win-win” approach benefiting the EU, Turkey, and most importantly the refugees, could constitute the basis for expanding and strengthening the functional cooperation between the EU and Turkey that has emerged since the European migration crisis and the adoption of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT)<sup>17</sup> at a time when the political relationship is strained.

However, for such cooperation to emerge and take root, a paradigm shift in policy thinking on both sides will be necessary. EU member states will need to better adjust to the realities of the global refugee crisis, take their

"responsibility-sharing" commitments to the GCR seriously, and become more flexible and willing to reconsider taboos concerning trade concessions in the agricultural sector. In turn, Turkey will need to be more realistic and recognize that the circumstances for the safe and voluntary return of refugees to Syria are unlikely to materialize for a long time to come. Hence, a concerted effort, including support from the highest levels of government, will be needed to ensure the integration of refugees if social cohesion and peace in Turkey is to be maintained. This is much more likely if Syrians can enjoy formal employment and if innovative cooperation with the EU, Turkey's only major partner in managing the presence of refugees thus far, can be developed. For this cooperation to bear fruit, a constructive engagement with the EU and a commitment to address informality in the Turkish economy more broadly, and in the agricultural sector in particular, will be required.

The report is divided into three sections. The next section presents a discussion of the current situation facing Syrian refugees in Turkey and the efforts made to provide better employment opportunities for them. The subsequent section assesses the challenges and opportunities with respect to accessing employment with an emphasis on the agricultural sector. The final section puts forward a set of policy recommendations developed through interviews and discussions with academics, civil society representatives, Turkish national and local government officials, and representatives of international agencies, as well as officials from the European Commission and Parliament. The interviews and discussions were conducted during field research in Ankara, Gaziantep, Istanbul, and Şanlıurfa in February, April, and June 2019, and in Brussels in July 2019.<sup>18</sup>

# Section I:

## Syrian refugees in Turkey



Syrian refugees first began arriving in Turkey in April 2011 as the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East. At the time, the initial expectation was that, like in Tunisia and Egypt, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule would collapse under anti-government protests and be replaced by a new reform-oriented government. Instead, these protests were violently repressed, eventually triggering a civil war between the opposition forces and the government. The situation further deteriorated as the opposition fragmented, external actors became involved, and the level of violence escalated. These conditions resulted in the forced displacement of almost half of Syria's population by the end of 2015, triggering a "daunting humanitarian crisis."<sup>19</sup> The intervention of Russia and Iran in support of the Syrian government precipitated a slow but painfully destructive process led by the Assad regime to reclaim areas of the country lost to extremist groups and the opposition, resulting in further internal displacement to neighboring countries and Europe.<sup>20</sup> As a result, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey increased from less than 15,000 at the end of 2011 to more than 3.6

million as of November 2019. The Turkish government initially responded to the arrival of the refugees with an open-door policy. This policy was partly shaped by Turkey's previous policies and practices as well as by political considerations particular to the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in power.

### **BRIEF BACKGROUND:**

Both Turkey and the Ottoman Empire have a long history of accepting refugees.<sup>21</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that Turkey was among the drafters of the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of 1951. At the same time, it acceded to the Convention with the "geographical limitation" option mentioned in Article 1,<sup>22</sup> which allows Turkey to grant "full" refugee status only to asylum seekers who fled "events occurring in Europe."<sup>23</sup> Other asylum seekers are granted the right to remain in Turkey only until resettlement in a third country can be arranged. The total number of asylum applications during the 1990s and most of the 2000s numbered around 3,500–4,000 per year, with more than half being recognized as refugees and resettled.<sup>24</sup>

However, over the last decade, the number of asylum applications has steadily increased, while resettlement prospects have shrunk. This has led to a growing number of both recognized refugees and rejected asylum seekers becoming stranded in Turkey. To manage this, and in line with the then-energetic EU harmonization process, the government prepared and then adopted the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in April 2013 and established the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) the following year.<sup>25</sup> The Law became Turkey's first piece of national legislation governing asylum and includes a provision for regulating circumstances involving the mass influx of refugees.

Previously, Turkey had experienced several mass influxes of refugees, with the most significant being from Bulgaria in 1989 and northern Iraq in 1991. In 1989, more than 300,000 Turks fled Bulgaria during a wave of repression by the ruling communist regime. In 1991, close to half a million people – mostly Kurds – fled northern Iraq to Turkey, precipitating a major humanitarian crisis. The government managed these two influxes very differently.<sup>26</sup> In the former, the refugees were quickly integrated into Turkish society and were granted the possibility of citizenship. In the latter, the Turkish government refused to allow the refugees into the country beyond the immediate border area and sought international support to enable their return to Iraq. Eventually, this culminated in the creation of a safe zone in northern Iraq and the launch of Operation Provide Comfort, which enabled most of the refugees to return to their homes within months.<sup>27</sup>

### **SYRIAN REFUGEES:**

Largely because of the belief among AKP circles and the government that the Assad regime in Damascus would quickly be replaced by a new government that would

be led by, or at least include, the opposition that Turkey supported, Turkey adopted an open door policy for Syrian refugees.<sup>28</sup> To mobilize public support from its political base, the government developed a narrative towards the reception of the Syrian refugees emphasizing solidarity and extending support to Muslims fleeing persecution.<sup>29</sup> The narrative draws specific historical parallels to the era of the Prophet Mohammad and his congregation who had to flee Mecca for Medina and enjoyed protection and hospitality from its residents.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the provision in the LFIP allowing the government to extend “temporary protection” to refugees fleeing repression and violence en masse, facilitated the introduction of the necessary bureaucratic and organizational measures to support the open door policy decision.

The principles and legal basis for the open door policy were initially crafted in a somewhat piecemeal way, with a focus on humanitarian assistance and meeting the basic needs of the refugees.<sup>31</sup> In October 2011, after the Turkish government ruptured relations with the Syrian government, it announced the extension of temporary protection to the Syrian refugees, then referred to as “guests.”<sup>32</sup> The initial elements of this policy emerged in March 2012 and consisted of the commitment to an open door policy, respect for non-refoulement, and the provision of humanitarian assistance.<sup>33</sup> Initially, both the establishment of refugee camps by Turkey's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) and the provision of basic needs including health and education in the camps were emphasized. As the flow of refugees continued, the government abandoned its policy of constructing camps and, by early 2014, most refugees lived outside them. It is against this backdrop that the government finally issued a detailed regulation in October 2014 defining the terms of temporary protection and introducing the requirement that refugees be registered to

benefit from national healthcare and other public services.<sup>34</sup> At this time, refugees also began to move beyond the cities and provinces bordering Syria, often in search of economic opportunities and propelled by shrinking personal resources and steadily increasing poverty.

The picture changed once more after 2015, with the rise of the Islamic State and the intervention of Russia and Iran on behalf of the government in Damascus, greatly aggravating the humanitarian situation. These developments adversely affected Turkish national security, with the country seeing an increase in terrorist attacks, culminating in sporadic border closures and the eventual decision to build a wall along the Syrian border.<sup>35</sup> There were also occasional reports of forced return of refugees to Syria. Nevertheless, the open door policy was not completely abandoned. Refugees continued to arrive and receive temporary protection in Turkey, growing the country's total Syrian refugee population.

The beginning of the European migration crisis would greatly change the dynamics surrounding refugees in Turkey. In 2015 and 2016, more than a million refugees of Syrian and other origins came to the EU via Turkey and by other routes.<sup>36</sup> This massive secondary movement caused such "panic" that it would threaten the very pillars of the EU and weaken the EU "permanently and radically."<sup>37</sup> However, from this panic emerged an EU that negotiated first the "EU-Turkey Joint Action Plan" in October 2015 and then the "EU-Turkey statement" in March 2016.<sup>38</sup> In these agreements, the EU promised 6 billion euros of financial assistance to support programs for Syrian refugees in Turkey, in exchange for Turkey introducing measures to prevent secondary movements towards Europe. The EU also promised to resettle one Syrian refugee for each irregular migrant that Turkey took back from the EU, to extend visa liberalization for Turkish nationals, and to restart Turkey's stalled EU accession process.

The transactional nature of the deal garnered widespread criticism on ethical and legal grounds. One prominent professor of international refugee law argued that the EU was buying "asylum space" from Turkey to keep refugees away.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the deal opened the way for the establishment of the Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT), which supports activities ranging from the construction of new schools, to strengthening protection capacity of a range of stakeholders in Turkey, to critical cash support programs such as the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education (CCTE) programs.<sup>40</sup> ESSN and CCTE have been critical to mitigating the adverse consequences resulting from the more than 70% of refugees living in extreme or moderate poverty.<sup>41</sup> FRIT is also accompanied by the EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, also known as the "Madad" Fund,<sup>42</sup> that also funds projects supporting refugees in Turkey.

FRIT and Madad have become effective burden-sharing tools, accompanied by funding from individual member states such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the U.K., as well as Canada, Japan, and United States. While these funds fall well short of the funding that the Turkish government has allocated to supporting Syrian refugees,<sup>43</sup> they are an important source of financing for more than two thirds of the activities supported by Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans for Turkey.<sup>44</sup> The Syria Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) has existed since 2012 and aims to provide overall coordination for the international community's response to the crisis in Syria under UN leadership. It covers countries neighboring Syria that host large numbers of refugees and includes a plan for each country including Turkey.<sup>45</sup>

The plans combine humanitarian and development elements, span eight different sectors including livelihoods, and are supported by funding from international

donors. The plans are overseen by the United Nations but are prepared in consultation with the host country, international agencies, and other stakeholders, including local and international non-governmental organizations and municipalities. The plans are based on the premise that both refugees and the local communities hosting them need to be supported to ensure social peace and cohesion. The European Commission, either directly or through funding devoted to FRIT, has donated over \$2.5 billion to Turkey from 2012 to May 2019.<sup>46</sup> Direct funding from Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom brings this total to nearly \$3 billion, with another close to \$4 billion currently being allotted and dispersed. Even though this sum is small compared to the \$40 billion that the Turkish President Erdoğan claims Turkey to have spent, it has made a difference to refugees and their host communities, one that is rarely acknowledged, especially by the Turkish leadership.<sup>47</sup>

Yet, other aspects of the EU-Turkey deal have been disappointing. There has been very limited resettlement of Syrian refugees from Turkey to the EU leading to bitter criticism of the EU's approach to burden-sharing. Between 2014 and 2019, fewer than 24,000 refugees were resettled from Turkey to the EU, overwhelmingly to Germany.<sup>48</sup> Mostly because of events in Turkey, promises of visa liberalization and of restarting the accession process also remain unfulfilled. However, the greatest source of resentment is the recognition by many in Turkey that the deal primarily serves the EU's interests and "transforms Turkey into a migratory buffer zone...outside European boundaries, symbolically sealing off the perspective of having Turkey in Europe in the future."<sup>49</sup>

More recently, the deal has faced two new challenges. With the Turkish government pushing the issue of return and



forcing Syrian refugees to go back to the locations where they originally registered, there has also been an uptick in irregular crossings from Turkey to the Greek islands.<sup>50</sup> In response to the uptick, the EU Commissioner for Migration was dispatched to Ankara to re-emphasize the struggle against human smuggling and the need to ensure that refugees continue to “receive assistance closer to their home” in Syria.<sup>51</sup> Matters reached a crisis level when Turkey launched a military operation into northern Syria and President Erdoğan threatened to “open the gates and send 3.6 million refugees your way” if the Europe Union continued to criticize the operation and the effort to create a safe zone for returning refugees.<sup>52</sup> In turn, the EU has threatened Turkey with sanctions if the operation is not ended, and some member countries imposed an embargo on weapon sales.<sup>53</sup>

But a return for Syrian refugees is not realistic, despite the claim being propagated in Turkey and President Erdoğan advocating for the construction of houses for refugees in a safe zone in northern Syria.<sup>54</sup> *The Economist* called the idea of repatriation “either delusional or a euphemism for forced resettlement,” and an opposition member of the Turkish national assembly argued that it would run against the government’s repeated promises since the launch of the military operation to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria.<sup>55</sup> Should Turkey indeed consolidate its control in the area of military operation, some limited return of refugees that actually came from these areas may occur.<sup>56</sup> This has already taken place in two areas around al-Bab and Afrin that are further to the west and under Turkish control.<sup>57</sup> However, it is very difficult to see how Turkey could send back larger numbers of refugees without a diplomatic resolution to the conflict and still ensure the basic principles of “voluntary, safe and dignified of return.”<sup>58</sup> Hence, repatriation is clearly still far from being a viable option.

Similarly, formal local integration does not appear to be forthcoming either. Granting citizenship to the refugees is a very sensitive, politicized, and procedurally difficult issue. Erdoğan has advocated the idea several times but retracted it in the face of strong pushback from the opposition and his own party, later advocating Syrians’ return instead.<sup>59</sup> But in exceptional circumstances, the government can also grant citizenship. So far, approximately 92,000 (or less than 3%) of the Syrian refugee population has received citizenship.<sup>60</sup>

In the absence of durable solutions, Syrian refugees find themselves in a protracted situation, and many are taking steps to integrate informally in the absence of formal avenues. The process is multifaceted, complex, and mostly driven through the acquisition of Turkish language skills, interaction with the local community, sending their children to Turkish schools, marriage to Turkish citizens, and through employment, which is seen as the most important driver of integration.<sup>61</sup> With this in mind, there is a growing need to move from a basic needs response to an approach that emphasizes enabling refugees to gain access to livelihood through formal employment and improving the self-reliance of refugees.

#### **IN THE LONG-RUN:**

As will be discussed in the next section, a large proportion of the employment of Syrian refugees is currently in the informal sector. This not only leaves Syrian refugees in very precarious work and social conditions, but also exacerbates public resentment driven by falling wages and rising unemployment among unskilled local labor.<sup>62</sup> A survey conducted in late 2017 found that more than 71% of respondents believed that Syrians were taking jobs away from people in Turkey.<sup>63</sup> Yet, at the same time, there is also a recognition in government circles and beyond that the precarity accompanying informality risks creating a

permanently disaffected underclass.<sup>64</sup> This is accompanied by the dangers of criminalization and recruitment to extremist groups among a “lost generation.”<sup>65</sup> Such concerns are cited as one reason why the government adopted legislation to enable Syrian refugees to apply for work permits in January 2016.<sup>66</sup> In practice, though, the number of work permits issued to Syrian refugees has been very limited. As of May 2019, only 47,800 Syrian refugees were formally authorized to work.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, during the last 2–3 years there has been a concerted effort between the government and the international community, as well as local stakeholders, to include Syrian refugees in the formal economy.

The origin of these efforts can be traced back to the EU Action Plan to slow down the flow of Syrian refugees in 2015, which also envisaged “the enhancement of [their] self-sufficiency and participation in economy.”<sup>68</sup> The idea of focusing on livelihoods and economic opportunities for Syrian refugees was also taken up at the London Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region in February 2016 and emphasized in the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan for 2016–2017 (3RP).<sup>69</sup> Since then, the implementation of these plans has taken many forms. Of particular interest is the focus given to improving life skills and the provision of language and vocational training for refugees. As a matter of policy, these efforts have also included members of the local host populations, especially the economically vulnerable, with a view to supporting social cohesion and host community resilience. These training-focused programs have also been accompanied by modest job creation projects mostly centered around the establishment of Syrian-founded small businesses.

In 2018, 3RP livelihood partners “trained, counselled and supported business start-ups for a total of 54,597 Syrians under temporary protection and host community

members”<sup>70</sup> constituting, together with those reached in 2017, 15% of people identified as needing support to increase their employability.<sup>71</sup> Yet these efforts have achieved limited success in terms of placing refugees in real jobs and initiating business ventures. Out of the almost 55,000 targeted refugees and locals, only 3,334 were placed “into jobs or income opportunities,” and another 1,879 were able to start their own businesses. This result constituted a marginal improvement from 2017 when the respective figures were 1,667 and 2,180 people.<sup>72</sup> The limited nature of the achievement and the need to significantly scale up efforts to meet the growing need for self-reliance has been recognized in the most recent 3RP strategy report for 2019–2020.<sup>73</sup>

This relatively weak performance appears to be partially a result of these programs being primarily focused on the “supply side” of improving employability of the Syrian refugees. Thus, this report will argue that at a time of acute economic difficulties in Turkey an effort also needs to be made to boost the “demand side” of the equation. While research clearly shows that international assistance in support of 3RP programs and refugee participation in the Turkish economy have generated some economic growth by boosting economic activity, employment, and wages,<sup>74</sup> the beneficiaries have mostly been local businesses, skilled local labor, and the government through taxation, as opposed to low-skilled labor.

## Section II:

### Challenges and opportunities for formal employment



The absence of durable solutions does not prevent many refugees around the world from informally integrating into their host communities and even “claim[ing] for themselves forms of belonging that the wider policy structure often seeks to withhold from them.”<sup>75</sup> Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey are no different. According to a survey carried out in 2018, nearly 86% of Syrian refugees felt “close or very close” to Turks while more than 60% saw a future for themselves and their families in Turkey.<sup>76</sup> This sense of belonging is also anecdotally captured by a Syrian refugee who remarked, “we are now Turkish only, without the right papers.”<sup>77</sup> Central to this informal integration and sense of belonging is access to livelihood and employment. According to a presentation by an official of the Turkish Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services (MoFLSS), an estimated 937,000 Syrian refugees, or 43% of the working age population (aged 15–64), are participating in the labor force.<sup>78</sup> However, the fact that most of this employment is informal is deeply problematic.

During the last three years, there has been a growing effort to move Syrians into formal employment and enhance the quality of their economic inclusion. This effort is reflected across numerous governmental and international agencies as well as local and international civil society actors, many of which are focused on improving the skillsets of refugees and increasing their employability.<sup>79</sup> There are also national efforts involving the Directorate General of International Labor of the MoFLSS, as well as the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) to facilitate access to livelihoods, with a growing emphasis on vocational training, programs fostering entrepreneurship, and tax subsidies to create sustainable employment.<sup>80</sup> More importantly, the “Exit Strategy From The ESSN Program” adopted by the FRIT Office at the Turkish Presidency and the MoFLSS openly acknowledges the need to move from a humanitarian assistance-oriented approach to one that will engage refugees in the formal economy.<sup>81</sup> This is reflected in İŞKUR’s recruitment of 1,000 additional “Jobs and Vocation Counsellors” to help absorb the numbers of job-seeking Syrians.<sup>82</sup>

Local NGOs such as SGDD-ASAM, Support for Life, and RET-YKD, with support from international agencies and INGOs such as United Work and Spark, provide vocational training and work on placing refugees in formal jobs. These initiatives are accompanied by similar efforts from international agencies, in cooperation with local chambers of commerce, at job creation, especially through projects supporting business development and entrepreneurship.<sup>83</sup> IOM, ILO and UNDP, in cooperation with the MoFLSS, are also focused on “entrepreneurship training” and “business development” programs as a way to drive job creation working in close cooperation with chambers of commerce and local stakeholders, particularly in provinces close to the Syrian border.<sup>84</sup>

Integrating Syrian refugees into the formal economy requires overcoming a range of challenges, both general and specific to Syrians. However, there are also emerging opportunities, particularly in the agricultural sector, that could be leveraged to move the refugees from informal to formal employment.

#### **CHALLENGES:**

Possibly the greatest challenge facing refugees is the high level and persistent nature of informality that characterizes the Turkish economy and has long been part of Turkish people’s daily lives.<sup>85</sup> In July 2019, the rate of unregistered employment, defined as “persons working without any social security,” stood at 36%.<sup>86</sup> High labor costs, relatively high minimum wages, low skill levels, and lax enforcement create a dual labor market in Turkey, with informal workers laboring under precarious conditions. The slowdown in Turkey’s economic growth coupled with growing unemployment is likely to increase the number of refugees that seek to work in the informal sector. The economy contracted from a growth rate of 11.1% in 2011, when refugees first began

to arrive, to 2.6% in 2018.<sup>87</sup> To make matters worse, in the first two quarters of 2019, the economy shrunk by 2.4% and 1.5% compared to the same quarters in the previous year.<sup>88</sup> Unemployment has reached its highest level in recent years, increasing from 9.7% in June 2015 to 13.9% in July 2019, now totaling 4.6 million people out of work.<sup>89</sup> Little durable improvement is expected, as experts fear that the government’s attempts to spur growth through cheap credit will actually aggravate the crisis.<sup>90</sup> The recent military intervention in Syria is likely to make matters even worse.

Syrian refugees in Turkey are particularly vulnerable to informality for several reasons.<sup>91</sup> Lack of language skills is a major problem as only “13 percent of Syrian households



reported having above average skills in Turkish.<sup>92</sup> A survey conducted by Oxfam found that, “Syrians believe their inability to speak Turkish diminishes their chances of finding a better position in the job market and condemns them to low-paid manual jobs.”<sup>93</sup> The survey also found that knowledge of Turkish not only helps Syrians to find jobs, but is correlated with receiving higher incomes.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, the fact that the education levels of refugees are significantly lower than locals is an issue.<sup>95</sup> According to the Turkish Red Crescent and World Food Program (WFP), more than 50% of Syrians in Turkey have either no education or only primary-level schooling, severely hindering their employment prospects.<sup>96</sup> At the same time, for those who do have higher education levels, establishing degree equivalence often stands in the way of formal employment and complicates their ability to use their skills and education. As a result, many educated Syrians either find it very difficult to find jobs or accept job offers for lower wages.<sup>97</sup>

Furthermore, Syrians often remain in the informal sector because formal employment would cause them to lose their competitive advantage over Turkish citizens in the form of accepting lower pay and poorer working conditions.<sup>98</sup> This is compounded by a fear among Syrian refugees that insisting on formal employment from reluctant employers could put their jobs at risk.<sup>99</sup> Inadvertently, the terms of cash assistance programs like ESSN create a disincentive to move away from informality; while ESSN has been recognized as a highly innovative program that has improved the welfare of refugees,<sup>100</sup> refugees become ineligible for it when employed formally with a work permit.<sup>101</sup> This inevitably compels refugees to remain in the informal sector and even discourages them from attending vocational training and language courses.<sup>102</sup> This picture creates a situation in which both sides - local employers and Syrian employees - find themselves preferring to perpetuate informality. This informality complicates prospects of ensuring reliable and

sustainable employment for refugees.<sup>103</sup> This in turn explains why 59% of Syrian households are classified as “multi-dimensionally” poor.<sup>104</sup>

One final challenge stems from the fact that almost a third of Syrian-founded business start-ups end up closing and fail to become sustainable sources of income and employment.<sup>105</sup> The number of Syrian-run businesses set up in Turkey is difficult to ascertain. According to a Turkish think tank, there were 7,906 businesses involving Syrian capital as of the end of 2018.<sup>106</sup> Yet, by other estimates, this figure exceeds 10,000 and even 20,000 businesses, when informal and unregistered businesses are included, and the capital invested is estimated to be between \$300 and \$380 million.<sup>107</sup> These businesses have also been recognized as “an important engine for refugee job creation and represent a premier example of ‘growing the pie’ approach in host communities.”<sup>108</sup> One study estimates that, on average, these businesses “employ 9.4 people and report that most of their employees were previously working in the informal sector.”<sup>109</sup> Beyond creating jobs for both Syrian refugees and locals, they have helped to revitalize local industries, created significant export markets, especially in Arab countries, and introduced new products to the Turkish domestic market.<sup>110</sup> Yet these businesses face a range of problems, from unfamiliarity with the administrative and legal environment governing business in Turkey, to complications in opening bank accounts and receiving credit, to restrictions on the ability of refugees to travel freely within Turkey to conduct business. Inevitably, such problems drive informality but also lead to business failures and inhibit these businesses from achieving their full potential in terms of contributing to economic growth and employment.

#### **OPPORTUNITIES:**

Since the European migration crisis of 2015, the adoption of the EU-Turkey Action Plan, and the implementation of the



2016 EU-Turkey deal, there has been a steady evolution of policies, from an initial "basic needs" approach to one that emphasizes improving the self-reliance of refugees and the resilience of their host communities. This is reflected not only in the content of the Syrian Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans (3RPs), but also in the plans specifically focusing on Turkey. The 3RPs, especially for 2017 and 2018, increased their allocation of funds for projects within the livelihoods sector focused on improving the employability of refugees through language skills and vocational training programs.<sup>111</sup> This focus emerged through close consultations and cooperation with the Turkish government and led to several government agencies and Turkish NGOs becoming livelihood project partners.

So far, a significant increase in Syrian participation in the formal labor market has not materialized. As previously mentioned, the Turkish government's decision in January 2016 to introduce work permits has not culminated in a

major increase of the number of Syrians formally employed. Bureaucratic requirements such as relatively high fees, the need to renew the permits annually, and the 10% maximum quota for Syrian workers in a given firm have dissuaded many refugees and their employers from applying for work permits.<sup>112</sup> However, legislative and administrative efforts have been made to improve some of the shortcomings, such as significantly reducing fees and enabling Syrians working in seasonal agricultural employment to seek exemption from local authorities from the requirement of applying and obtaining a work permit.

These measures have been accompanied by urgent efforts to go beyond a focus on employability of refugees in favor of projects aimed at overcoming the persistent difficulties refugees face in finding formal job opportunities. This urgency is reflected in the 2019-2020 3RP for Turkey and was echoed by a Dutch diplomat, who said at a conference in Istanbul focused on the economic inclusion of refugees, that

there was a need to turn “employability to employment.”<sup>113</sup> A close reading of the 3RP and of the presentations at this conference suggests that the crucial next step will be to develop training programs in closer cooperation with the private sector to ensure that programs better meet the specific needs of businesses.

However, these steps continue to reflect an emphasis on employability, or the “supply side” of the equation. In a country whose economy is struggling, this needs to be supplemented by measures that can also help grow the demand for Syrian labor. Furthermore, it is important to remember that “firms are not charities,” and that it is unrealistic to expect them to act based on purely philanthropic motivations.<sup>114</sup> They will need to be economically incentivized to employ refugees. In other words, the employment of refugees will have to make commercial sense. The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) offers constructive ideas in this respect.

The Compact emerged from the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted at the United Nations Summit in September 2016, convened in response to the European migration crisis of 2015-2016.<sup>115</sup> It emerged from the recognition that the refugee protection regime based on the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was “broken,” as illustrated by the dysfunction of traditional durable solutions.<sup>116</sup> Instead, the Compact is based on the premises that it is best to offer protection to refugees close to their home countries in preparation for an eventual return, and that the countries hosting them must be supported with innovative means of “responsibility-sharing” to improve the self-reliance of the refugees. This emphasis on “responsibility-sharing” stems from the recognition that the huge movement of refugees towards the EU in 2015 was at least partly due to “the failure of the international community to support countries at an appropriate scale and

in a timely fashion,” as well as the absence of employment opportunities in these host countries.<sup>117</sup> In addition to this, the Compact takes a “whole of society approach” and advocates that actions by the international community taken in line with “responsibility-sharing” must benefit members of host communities as well as refugees, to preempt or reduce conflict and resentment between locals and refugees.

One such idea emphasizes the need for policies that create inclusive economic growth for host communities and refugees. In this regard, the GCR suggests exploring “preferential trade arrangements ... especially for goods and sectors with high refugee participation.”<sup>118</sup> A similar idea emerged at the London Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region. Here, participants recognized the utility of enabling improved access to external markets as a possible policy tool not only to encourage host governments to open up their labor market to refugees, but also to help create jobs for local populations.<sup>119</sup> In its report advocating “a call for action” to reform the global refugee system, the World Refugee Council also emphasized trade concessions as a means of spurring economic growth for the benefit of both refugees and their host communities.<sup>120</sup> Finally, the European Commission listed gaining access to “export markets... and providing preferential export and trading status to specific products” as a “priority action” for improving Syrian refugees’ self-reliance in Turkey.<sup>121</sup>

These policy suggestions are very much in line with the notion that trade liberalization in the form of reduction of tariffs, the expansion or even full elimination of quotas, and the resolution of regulatory obstacles have long generated economic growth and employment.<sup>122</sup> But these ideas need to be operationalized. Currently, the only major operational example involving concessional trading arrangements is the EU-Jordan Compact.

In this compact, the EU agreed to give Jordan facilitated access to its markets, particularly for its textile products, in return for the issuance of work permits to Syrian refugees employed by Jordanian companies. The benefits of this are twofold: they offer Syrians economic opportunities on the one hand and benefit Jordan's development by expanding its industrial production base through exports to the EU on the other. These benefits were also expected to improve social cohesion by integrating refugees into the formal economy and enhancing employment opportunities for Jordanians at the same time.<sup>123</sup> The Compact is almost in its fourth year and has not yet reached its full potential. Commentators have cited the compact's failure to achieve a significant number of legally employed Syrians.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, the absence so far of any substantive growth in Jordanian exports to the EU has been attributed to weak trade concessions that are marked by the compact's failure to cover "almost two-thirds of Jordan's current international exports."<sup>125</sup> Nevertheless, it continues to be regarded as a game-changer for demonstrating "how host countries and the international community respond to protracted refugee situations."<sup>126</sup> The size of the Turkish economy and the high level of economic integration between the EU and Turkey provides for better opportunities to overcome problems faced by the EU-Jordan Compact if meaningful arrangements can be put into place to expand Turkish agricultural exports to the EU.

### WHY AGRICULTURE?:

The specifics of the EU-Jordan Compact model are not particularly suited for Turkey because Turkey has had a customs union with the EU since 1995, which has benefitted Turkish industrial development and the expansion of its exports.<sup>127</sup> This customs union covers only manufactured products and the industrial parts of "processed agricultural products" (PAPs) but excludes primary agricultural products.



Instead, Turkish exports of primary agricultural products such as fresh fruits and vegetables to the EU are managed by a set of preferential trade agreements and are subject to quotas, customs duties, and regulatory restrictions.<sup>128</sup> The agricultural portion of PAPs, such as olive oil, pasta, and tomato paste covered by the customs union are also subject to taxation.

These barriers to trade prevent Turkey from taking advantage of the full potential of its agricultural exports to the EU, leading to a loss of welfare reflected in the relatively lower levels of agricultural exports in comparison to



industrial products. From 2014 to 2018, agricultural exports to the EU have fluctuated between 4 and 5 billion euros per year. Compared to Turkey's overall exports to the EU, which amounted to roughly 70-80 billion euros per year during the same period, this is a particularly weak performance.<sup>129</sup> Growing authoritarianism in Turkey and poor political relations with the EU have made negotiations around reforming and upgrading the customs union very difficult.<sup>130</sup> These negotiations were also meant to expand the customs union to the agricultural, services and public procurement sectors, but it is not evident that they will start any time soon, especially since in June 2018 the European Council declared "no further work towards the modernization of the EU-Turkey Customs Union is foreseen."<sup>131</sup> In the meantime, both sides could explore a set of policies to incentivize Turkey to employ more Syrian refugees formally in return for trade concessions for agricultural products.

The agricultural sector looks especially promising because

of the opportunities it offers for increased employment for Syrian refugees. Even though systematic data on labor demand in agriculture is scant, it is frequently reported that the agricultural sector in general and certain sub-sectors in particular suffer from a labor shortage, as both GDP and employment shift towards more attractive non-agricultural sectors and the existing population of farmers ages.<sup>132</sup> This is in spite of the fact that 5.5 million people, or 19% of all workers in Turkey, still work in agriculture, while only 7.5% of the population continue live in rural Turkey, compared to 43% in 2000.<sup>133</sup>

The Turkish agricultural sector has long suffered from a range of entrenched structural problems that account for a land mass corresponding roughly to the size of Belgium going uncultivated since 1990.<sup>134</sup> The accompanying failure of maintaining predictable levels of agricultural production is cited as a factor causing a mismatch between supply and demand, in turn contributing to growing inflation rates in

recent years.<sup>135</sup> There is no reliable information on Syrian businesses operating in the agricultural sector; however, such businesses and Syrian labor could be critical to recovering some of this land and production.

Turkish agricultural productivity remains low because the family farm is still the predominant mode of production.<sup>136</sup> Yet, not all agricultural work is done by families. Overall, in 2018 there were approximately 550,000 wage earners spread across small- and medium-sized agricultural establishments<sup>137</sup> in addition to large food manufacturing companies with sales greater than \$16 billion per year and an overall export record of over \$2 billion.<sup>138</sup> A need for a semi-skilled labor force to address shortages, especially in the areas of “animal husbandry; beekeeping; irrigation; pruning; as well as in the production of pistachios, olives, cotton, citrus, apples, grapes and tomatoes,” has been cited by government officials.<sup>139</sup> Additionally, Turkey suffers from a shortage of skilled labor, in particular agricultural consultants who could provide “technical advice to farmers” and who could help address Turkey’s ongoing difficulties with the proper use of pesticides and fertilizers to meet the EU’s stringent Sanitary and Phytosanitary standards for fruits and vegetables imports.<sup>140</sup>

It is commonly reported that immigrants in general and Syrians in particular increasingly provide the necessary unskilled labor in agriculture.<sup>141</sup> Anecdotal evidence suggests that large numbers of Syrians have found employment mostly as temporary agriculture workers, particularly in Turkey’s southeastern provinces bordering Syria.<sup>142</sup> This is not surprising given that many of the refugees come from rural areas bordering Turkey and previously worked in agriculture prior to their displacement.<sup>143</sup> Together with the similarities between the climates, soil composition, and biological diversity of both countries, this has facilitated their transition into agriculture

in Turkey, especially as seasonal workers.<sup>144</sup> It is with the objective of supporting this transition that the government has exempted Syrians in agriculture from having to obtain work permits. However, seasonal employment in agriculture has been notoriously exploitative for refugees as well as migrants and locals, and has generated a state of “hyper-precarity” for all involved, as well as resentment among locals towards the refugees for driving wages down.<sup>145</sup> Hence, there is a need to improve the skillset of Syrian labor in agriculture together with efforts not only to draw this kind of employment into formality, but also to improve economic inclusion for refugees and address issues of social cohesion.

As previously discussed, the Turkish government, international agencies and NGOs are all focused on efforts to improve the skillsets of refugees. An important proportion of these livelihood-focused projects to enhance refugees’ self-reliance is funded by FRIT. However, FRIT is set to end in two years, and there are no indications that it will be renewed. Hence, it will be important for Turkey and the EU to develop a long-term strategy to better the prospects of integrating Syrian refugees into Turkey’s formal economy. The next section offers a set of policy recommendations with a focus on the agricultural sector that could constitute the basis of the strategy behind a new EU-Turkey Compact.

## Section III: Policy Recommendations



These policy recommendations were developed through interviews and discussions held with Turkish and European Commission officials as well as representatives of UN agencies based in Turkey and several local and international NGOs operating in Ankara, Istanbul, and Gaziantep. They are meant to expand the demand for Syrian refugee labor while further incentivizing the Turkish government to adopt policies and administrative measures to draw the refugees into the formal labor market. They also converge with the goal set by the Turkish government to reduce informality from the current (July 2019) level of 36% to 28.5% during the next five years.<sup>146</sup>

The first set of recommendations focuses on measures that, if adopted by the EU, would help spur economic growth by increasing agricultural trade between the EU and Turkey in products specifically involving Syrian labor. The second seeks to draw the attention of European and Turkish businesses to select and promote products utilizing Syrian labor on commercial and corporate responsibility grounds. A third group of recommendations focuses on encouraging

young Syrian refugees to explore higher education opportunities in agriculture-oriented topics, which in turn would address some of the persistent problems in Turkey's agricultural sector and ultimately enable young Syrians to develop promising careers in Turkey. Finally, this section also provides recommendations on how the Turkish government could better leverage its cooperation with the EU beyond FRIT and adopt measures that could help enhance the effectiveness and impact of the other recommendations. The actual adoption and operationalization of these recommendations would call for considerable diplomacy and stakeholder support. The Turkish intervention in northern Syria and the international reaction to it has deeply complicated matters, and the resulting tension in EU-Turkish relations does not obviate the challenge of enhancing the self-reliance of refugees and the resilience of host communities. On the contrary, it makes these priorities even more urgent. Hence, this makes the argument of this report and the implementation of its recommendations even more critical.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE EU:**

- ▶ The EU should **either significantly increase quotas or completely lift custom duties and time limits for agricultural products** whose cultivation involves Syrian labor. Such a measure would go a long way towards facilitating access to formal and sustainable employment for many Syrian refugees who are currently informally and precariously employed in the agricultural sector. Admittedly, agriculture is a highly sensitive topic in the EU. The EU through its Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) extensively subsidizes European producers and has traditionally been unwilling to lower protective barriers to its agricultural markets. Examples of strict restrictions faced by Turkey include custom duties, quotas in tonnage free of custom duties and seasonal time limits on when agricultural products can be exported. Ideally duties on products involving Syrian labor could be zeroed or simply exempted from quota restrictions. However, mobilizing the will to overcome this sensitivity would be in the interest of EU member states as it would create livelihood opportunities for refugees and diminish their likelihood of embarking on secondary movement, likely into the EU. This would also be in line with their commitment to the principle of "responsibility-sharing" under the GCR.
- ▶ The EU **should unilaterally lift duties for processed agricultural products that involve Syrian refugee labor.** Turkish processed agricultural goods such as confectionaries, fruit juices, jams, pastas, tomato paste, and olive oil are covered by the existing customs union, but the agricultural component of these products is subject to customs duties.<sup>147</sup> The food industry is relatively labor-intensive with value chains extending to large scale agricultural production marked by labor shortages. Such conditional trade concessions are likely to incentivize companies to employ Syrian refugees.<sup>148</sup>
- ▶ The EU-Turkey Compact **should include support for a Qualifying Industrial Zone (QIZ)** near the Syrian border, where nearly a million refugees live. The region (the provinces of Gaziantep, Kilis, and Şanlıurfa) is known for its diverse industrial and agricultural production. Kilis, only a few miles from the Syrian border and with almost as many refugees as locals, would be an ideal location since there is an existing project for the construction of an industrial zone. The project was developed in 2016 to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the influx of Syrian refugees in the region by creating an initial 75,000 jobs with a target of 200,000 jobs in the longer term. The project assumes that at least 10% of jobs would be filled by Syrians.<sup>149</sup> Previous examples of QIZs include the U.S.-backed ones put into place in 1996 in Jordan and Egypt to generate local industrial development and employment as well as indirect support for the Arab-Israeli peace process.<sup>150</sup> In the case of a QIZ in Kilis, the EU would provide trade concessions for processed agricultural products involving formally employed Syrian labor. This would require certification and a reliable monitoring process to prevent any abuse of the system.<sup>151</sup> Such a zone would make the certification and monitoring processes easier to achieve. Additionally, if the previous recommendation was to counter difficulties and delays, the QIZ might be an easier recommendation to implement and could even become a confidence building exercise between Turkey and the EU. Furthermore, a QIZ could also attract foreign direct investment interested in benefiting from concessional access to EU markets. In the spirit of burden-sharing underlined in the GCR, high-income countries beyond the EU, such as Australia, Canada, Japan, and South Korea could also be invited to support this QIZ, especially if the product range is expanded beyond processed agricultural ones to include manufactured goods.

Finally, such a zone could also have an added long-term advantage of spurring economic development and reconstruction across the border in Syria after the end of the conflict.

- ▶ Beyond the QIZ, the Compact **should also consider including products involving Syrian labor and originating from Specialized Organized Industrial Zones Based on Agriculture (Tarıma Dayalı İhtisas Organize Sanayi Bölgesi (TDİOSB))**<sup>152</sup> for trade concessions. These zones are relatively recent and are meant to cluster producers and processors of agricultural and dairy products to enhance efficiency and quality as well as drive better compliance with food safety standards. They exist in 27 provinces, including

ones near the Syrian border, and currently involve close to 2,500 establishments.<sup>153</sup> The integrated nature of these zones, like the QIZ, should make certification and monitoring relatively easier to ensure.

- ▶ Bulgarian authorities **should reduce fees associated with the control of trucks** carrying the products of companies employing Syrian refugees, and the EU should support this change. A longstanding, unresolved grievance for Turkish producers and exporters of agricultural products is the long processing times and costs associated with Sanitary and Phytosanitary controls imposed on Turkish trucks transporting fresh fruits and vegetables at the Bulgarian border, the main entry point from Turkey into the EU. The World Bank



highlighted this issue in their detailed assessment of the performance of the customs union as a problem that considerably increases the transportation cost of these products.<sup>154</sup> Because such fees and processing practices fall under the competency of member states, Bulgaria should adopt lower fees and quicker processing times in the spirit of "responsibility-sharing" that it has morally committed itself to by signing the GCR.

- ▶ The EU **should reduce fees across the board for the visas of truck drivers**, with the understanding that this will incentivize Turkish agricultural exporters to expand opportunities for Syrian refugees. A long-standing grievance concerns transport quotas and visas for truck drivers, and the World Bank has noted that "road quotas, and notably transit permits, create obstacles to the free movement of goods and impede transit traffic thereby hindering the full operation of the CU."<sup>155</sup> A large proportion of Turkish exports are transported by land and are subject to transit quotas imposed by member states, as goods travel from Turkey to main export destination countries such as Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands and the U.K.<sup>156</sup> The issue of transit quotas falls under the purview of member states, but transit countries could again in the spirit of solidarity institute exemptions for trucks carrying products involving refugee labor. Since visa fees are determined at the EU level, reducing or waiving them solely for truck drivers transporting products involving Syrian labor may not only pose difficult administrative challenges, but may also generate considerable public resentment in Turkey based on perceived favoritism of Syrian refugees. Reducing or totally lifting visa fees for truck drivers across the board would then constitute an "innovative scheme" to solving a long-standing grievance at least partially.<sup>157</sup>

#### **OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- ▶ **The EU should restore funding for the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance in Rural Development (IPARD) to previous levels in return for guaranteed inclusion of Syrian refugees in IPARD projects.** As an EU program, IPARD has been particularly beneficial to improving agricultural production in Turkey.<sup>158</sup> This program has funded more than "14,500 projects on farms, food processing companies and rural diversification and enterprises," amounting to 2 billion euros in investments, and created "an estimated 60,000 jobs in rural areas and more are created every month" since its launch in 2007.<sup>159</sup> Since then, IPARD II has come into effect over the period until 2020 but with a reduced budget.<sup>160</sup> The EU should consider reverting to at least the level of funding provided for IPARD I with the possible proviso that the difference be allocated to projects that specifically involve Syrian refugees as partners and/or as employees.
- ▶ **Partnerships/synergies should be created between Turkish and EU programs providing funding and expertise to encourage Turkish nationals and Syrians to consider careers in farming.** One program that could be adapted to benefit young Syrian refugees is the EU program that supports young Europeans to take an interest in farming, a sector that is suffering from aging.<sup>161</sup> Turkey too is increasingly facing aging among its own farmers and has in place a similar program to encourage young Turks to take up farming.<sup>162</sup> This partnership could be created between the two programs in a manner that enables a qualified Turkish youth paired with a Syrian to benefit from the EU's "Exchange programs for young farmers."<sup>163</sup> Some leading companies operating in the Turkish agricultural sector may also be interested in supporting such a program.

- ▶ **Programs encouraging students to enter agricultural studies at Turkish universities, either through a scholarships or special training, should be expanded and made to include European universities.** There were 27,034 Syrian students enrolled in 2018/2019 in Turkish universities, a number that is expected to increase in the years to come.<sup>164</sup> Some of these students could be encouraged to study in faculties of agriculture, as enrollment by Turkish youth in these faculties has been low and is thought to be “below the sector’s need for skilled labor.”<sup>165</sup> A Dutch NGO, Spark, has already put in place two such programs: one extends scholarships to Syrian students at three Turkish universities in the southeast near the Syrian border, and another is specifically geared to train agronomists.<sup>166</sup> If expanded and given appropriate funding, these programs would help develop the human capital needed for Turkey to better meet the EU’s food safety and sanitary standards. There would also be the added advantage of this human capital and experience one day becoming available for the reconstruction and development of post-conflict Syria right across the border.
  
- ▶ Both the EU and Turkey **should encourage initiatives raising awareness in support of fair and ethical trading among companies and consumers.**<sup>167</sup> These initiatives would aspire to achieve and ultimately sustain a better trading partnership with a clear focus on ameliorating working conditions as well as securing the rights of small producers and workers. The notion of fair and ethical consumption is still relatively underdeveloped among consumers in Turkey compared to Europe.<sup>168</sup> However, a common effort could be made to raise consumers’ consciousness, both in Europe and especially in Turkey, for products produced by Syrian refugees. For example, there are NGOs, such as Anatolian Artisans, that support and help Turkish women and Syrian refugees find



markets for their products.<sup>169</sup> Fair labor is yet another area that can help improve working conditions not only for Syrian refugees, but also for local producers. The Fair Labor Association (FLA), another NGO, has created projects that increase awareness of labor abuses, especially surrounding child labor, and that aim to invoke a sense of corporate civic responsibility in order to improve working conditions for seasonal workers on hazelnut farms and secure fair deals for producers.<sup>170</sup> Large companies such as Nestlé and Ferrero have responded to these pressures, although accusations of exploitation persist.<sup>171</sup> All the same, Development Workshop, a Turkish NGO with a long record of studying and documenting poor and exploitative working conditions for seasonal workers, and FLA have both noted a willingness and effort among producers to improve.<sup>172</sup> Structured cooperation between the EU and Turkey could help promote and sustain such efforts in an impactful manner.



- ▶ Lastly, the **EU should encourage large European companies to incorporate the products of fledgling social cooperatives, employing Syrians and locals, in their global value chains.** One such cooperative is the Women Empowerment and Solidarity Centre in Gaziantep (SADA), which has brought together Syrian and local women since 2017 for a range of activities.<sup>173</sup> This ILO-supported cooperative is involved in the production of a range of products that enable it to sustain itself and its workforce.<sup>174</sup> The Kilizi Integrated Olive Oil Facility is yet another example of a project in cooperation with regional governmental and international agencies to provide sustainable livelihood for locals and refugees, by increasing the added value of organic olives produced in Kilis.<sup>175</sup> Moving forward, to improve the sustainability of such projects and increase their impact in creating livelihoods for refugees and locals, it will be important that their products become part of the value chains of large Turkish and European companies.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TURKEY:

Admittedly, many of these steps will require the EU to make concessions in highly political areas. It will be important for Turkey to take steps to meet the EU halfway, creating synergies with the above EU-focused recommendations, thereby indicating that a good faith effort is being made. Below are several policy measures that the Turkish government could consider.

- ▶ **The Turkish government should refrain from policies advocating repatriation that fall short of UNHCR's "principles of voluntariness, safety and dignity"<sup>176</sup> and instead double-down on integrating refugees.** Premature and involuntary repatriation would not only undermine existing levels of integration and international goodwill, but would also be in violation of the "non-refoulement" principle, a pillar of the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees to which Turkey is a long-standing signatory and which has since acquired the status of "a rule of customary international law."<sup>177</sup> The principle is also enshrined in Turkish law, as acknowledged by the communications director of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>178</sup> Instead, combining Turkey's harmonization efforts with an EU-Turkey Compact would offer better prospects for social cohesion and could help to create more realistic conditions for the future return of at least some of the refugees.
- ▶ The Turkish government should **sustain the current level of close cooperation with international and local stakeholders,** with a focus on enhancing the livelihood opportunities of Syrian refugees. These efforts need to be supported by a strong political will to draw refugees into the formal economy with a clear recognition that formal, sustainable, and reliable employment will not only benefit refugees, but also

bring the country positive economic and fiscal gains. This is also in line with the government's goal to reduce informality in the Turkish labor market in general and with the ILO conventions<sup>179</sup> to which Turkey is a signatory, and would also address concerns about the "commodification" of refugees.<sup>180</sup> Through interviews and a growing number of conferences and meetings held on improving mechanisms for the inclusion of refugees in the Turkish economy, this political will is evident at the operational level of Turkish agencies. But this political will needs to be expressed at the highest levels of the Turkish government. The fact that the main opposition party, CHP, has also endorsed the importance of formal employment for refugees should facilitate this.<sup>181</sup>



- ▶ Recognizing that Syrian businesses are becoming important mediums of integration and sources of income for refugees and locals, Turkey **should address the mounting structural problems that Syrian-founded businesses face.** These problems have driven thousands of businesses into informality, resulting in a loss of tax income for the government and generating resentment from formal businesses. It also breeds unfair competition in the markets, especially for firms that pay taxes and thus incur higher costs. It is important to bear in mind that providing an "enabling business environment" would benefit all.<sup>182</sup> In particular, Turkey **should allow a degree of greater mobility for refugees to give them the opportunity to seek out fitting businesses and jobs.** The greatest problem for Syrian employees and businesses stems from restrictions preventing them from leaving the locations to which they were assigned as refugees. This is especially a problem for Syrian entrepreneurs. Resolving the mobility problem would also benefit Syrian workers by enhancing their ability to find jobs that suit them and would serve the recruitment needs of employers. This would particularly benefit seasonal agricultural workers who, by the very nature of their work, need to be mobile. Nevertheless, it is also important to bear in mind that granting full mobility could pose some political and security concerns that would need to be proactively addressed.<sup>183</sup>
- ▶ The Turkish government **should explore innovative ways of addressing the challenges that Syrians face with having their university diplomas and professional certificates recognized in Turkey.** Most refugees fled Syria in haste, often leaving behind personal documents, and as such, they are not able to present documentation as proof of their qualifications. Without these documents, refugees are unable to establish the

equivalency of their qualifications, and as a result, highly educated refugees find it difficult to get jobs matching their qualifications. This creates losses on both sides.

The Council of

Europe and UNESCO document on the

“Recommendation on Recognition of Qualifications Held by Refugees, Displaced Persons and Persons in a Refugee-like Situation” could provide a useful guideline for policy making.<sup>184</sup>

- ▶ Turkey needs to develop a **communications strategy that emphasizes the positive contributions Syrian refugees make to the Turkish economy and society through employment**. A growing body of research shows that proper employment prospects for refugees and a welcoming environment for refugee entrepreneurs contributes to economic growth in the host country.<sup>185</sup> This research also demonstrates that the faster obstacles to formal employment are resolved, the faster refugees integrate as productive members of their host society. Furthermore, this kind of positive integration enhances refugees' likelihood of return to their country of origin and their ability to help with reconstruction over the long-term.
- ▶ Finally, Turkish leaders **should adopt a more constructive and diplomatic approach** towards the EU. This would help the above communications strategy by making the public aware that Turkey is not alone in shouldering the burden of hosting the refugees. Although the EU's support does not fully meet Turkey's needs with respect to supporting the refugee population it hosts, the EU is by far the primary funder of humanitarian and development programs in Turkey in support of the refugees and their host communities. It would also help achieve a “win-win” outcome for all involved.

# Conclusion



Given that Assad's "slow grinding murderous game" will persist<sup>186</sup> and that he is determined not to take back refugees from neighboring countries, instead labelling them "terrorists and traitors" and calling for a "healthier and more homogenous society,"<sup>187</sup> Syrian refugees will likely remain in Turkey for a long time to come. Turkey and its international partners have been scaling up their efforts to promote formal employment opportunities for Syrians to help them achieve greater self-reliance. These efforts are currently centered around improving the employability of refugees, increasing their command of the Turkish language, and equipping them with vocational skills. In other words, the focus of most activities is on the supply side of their employability, with some modest job creation programs encouraging Syrians to set up their own small businesses.

This report argues that there should also be a complementary effort focusing on demand-side policies that foster economic growth and increase the demand for formal Syrian labor. The idea of using trade concessions to generate economic growth, as suggested by the GCR, has

been matched with a focus on the agricultural sector that uniquely suits Turkey's trade relationship with the EU. It is the sector that offers the most potential for trade expansion between the EU and Turkey. Furthermore, this sector is particularly promising because many refugees are already employed within it, though in an informal and precarious manner. Trade concessions could incentivize Turkey to improve these working conditions and enable refugees to achieve better and more sustainable employment. The recommendations in this report are tied specifically to the formal employment of Syrian refugees but would, if implemented, also meet the GCR's "whole society approach" by benefitting locals through enhanced job prospects in general and local economic growth as a result of increased consumption and tax revenue that improved and sustainable employment for refugees would bring.

Moving forward, there are several issues that deserve special attention. First and foremost, it is critical to recognize that considerable effort and political capital on both sides will need to be invested to realize the commitment to reduce

informality in return for trade concessions. Additionally, it will be important that the EU does not tie the benefits accruing to Turkey from trade concessions solely to additional regulations and controls to prevent onward journeys by refugees. Instead, these concessions should be construed as a means not only to creating conditions and incentives for refugees to build sustainable lives in Turkey (where they remain closer to their homes in Syria), but also to generating benefits for the local host economy. Such a developmental and pragmatic approach may lend itself to criticisms asserting that refugees risk becoming commodified to serve the interests of a range of economic players. Unfortunately, this is to some degree true and inevitable, given the protracted nature of the situation marked by the absence of durable solutions. To minimize this risk, it will be important for both EU and Turkish stakeholders to study and draw lessons from the experience of the EU-Jordan Compact, one of the first exercises that reconceptualized protracted refugee situations as an opportunity for development rather than a burden on society.

Ultimately, an EU-Turkey Compact to improve refugees' self-reliance through decent work is in the interest of all parties. For Turkey, implementing these policy recommendations would help refugees stand on their own feet, become productive members of Turkish society, defuse growing public resentment, and reduce the likelihood of crime, while at the same time helping to grow the local economy. For the EU, a compact of this nature would reduce the likelihood of secondary movements resulting from economic destitution, and, as refugees become economically more independent, the need to continuously raise additional funds for humanitarian assistance would diminish. For refugees, it enables them to replace informal employment with access to sustainable livelihoods and to enjoy the dignity that comes with self-reliance. Finally, such a compact

could act as a confidence building measure between the EU and Turkey and help both sides expand and strengthen their cooperation at a time when their political relationship is especially fraught. Such a "win-win-win-win" approach benefiting the EU, Turkey, EU-Turkish relations, and most importantly, refugees, would constitute a concrete example of how the burden-sharing message behind the GCR can be implemented in a unique and constructive precedent-setting manner. Such an approach would also be a marked contribution to the international community's efforts to "leave no one behind" and contribute to the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals in concrete terms.<sup>188</sup>

# Appendix:

## List of Government Agencies and Institutions Consulted

The author consulted during field trips, in February, April and June 2019 to Ankara, Gaziantep, Istanbul and Şanlıurfa as well as Brussels in July 2019, with individual representatives of the following Turkish government agencies and related agencies and programs; European Commission and Parliament; international and regional organizations; academic institutions; and nongovernmental organizations

### **TURKISH GOVERNMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES**

- FRIT Office at the Turkish Presidency
- Ministry of Commerce
- Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Services
- Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Directorate General of Migration Management
- EU Affairs Directorate - *Ankara*
- Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR)
- Turkish Agricultural Credit Cooperatives Agency
- Southeastern Anatolia Project Regional Development Administration
- Permanent Delegation of Turkey to the EU

### **EUROPEAN UNION**

- European Commission: DG Agriculture, DG Labor, DG Tax, DG Trade, DG Echo
- Delegation of the European Union to Turkey
- European Parliament Turkey Forum
- European Parliament Research Services

### **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

- FAO - *Ankara*
- IOM - *Ankara and Gaziantep Office*
- ILO - *Ankara and Gaziantep Office*
- UNDP - *Ankara and Gaziantep Office*
- UNICEF - *Gaziantep Office*
- UNHCR - *Ankara and Istanbul Office*
- UNHCR - *Brussels Office*
- World Bank - *Washington DC*
- World Food Program - *Ankara*

### **ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS AND THINK-TANKS**

- BETAM, Bahcesehir University Economic and Social Research Center - *Istanbul*
- Boğaziçi University - *Istanbul*
- EDAM, Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies - *Istanbul*
- IGAM, Research Center on Asylum and Migration - *Ankara*
- Muğla University - *Muğla*
- TEPAV, Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey - *Ankara*
- Turkish German University - *Istanbul*

**BUSINESS**

- Anadolu Etap - *Istanbul*
- Gaziantep Chamber of Commerce
- Sutaş - *Istanbul*
- TUSIAD, Turkish Industry and Business Association - *Brussels Office*

**NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

- SGDD-ASAM, Association of Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants
- Building Markets - *Istanbul*
- Economic Development Foundation (IKV) - *Istanbul*
- Development Workshop - *Ankara*
- Hayatsur - *Istanbul*
- Heinrich Boell Foundation - *Istanbul*

- Human Resources Development Foundation - *Istanbul*
- International Agriculture Cooperation Organization - *Gaziantep*
- International Transporters' Union - *Istanbul*
- Kırkayak Kultur - *Gaziantep*
- Oxfam - *Istanbul*
- RET YKD, Rehberlik Eğitim Toplumsal Yardımlaşma ve Kalkınma Derneği - *Ankara*
- Spark - *Istanbul and Gaziantep Office*
- Support for Life - *Istanbul*
- United Work - *Istanbul*



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