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## Social cohesion in Turkey: refugees and the host community

Online survey findings rounds 1–5

WFP Turkey Country Office

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## Summary

Turkey currently hosts approximately 3.6 million refugees, the majority of whom live out-of-camp, in cities and villages, integrated with the host (Turkish) communities and they therefore share the same environment, resources, and developments in all spheres (social, economic, etc.). In the earlier years, refugees in Turkey were widely welcomed, with empathy, and considered as guests with the expectation that the unrest in Syria would be short-lived. However, as the Syrian conflict continued (now in its tenth year), the refugees started to build their lives in Turkey and the host community attitude evolved: while many are still welcoming, some have become more reserved towards the refugees.

The social cohesion index indicates that relations between the refugees and the host community in Turkey were improving in the first three rounds of the survey (July 2017–January 2018). However, this reversed in the following rounds (February and June 2019), probably influenced by; i) the economic slowdown in mid-2018 that notably resulted in competition for limited informal employment opportunities between refugees and hosts and ii) the political discourse on refugee returns during the election period in March 2019.

Triggered by the motivation to survive in a new environment, the refugees are more willing to have interaction with their counterparts in the host community. Despite their willingness, limited Turkish language ability remains the main barrier to relationship building. The refugees who can communicate in Turkish at any level feel significantly safer and think that there is a future for their children in Turkey compared to those who do not speak Turkish at all. In addition to the language problems, it was also found that the more educated the refugees are, the more likely they were to have good relations with the hosts.

Personal interaction is a significant factor for the host community in forming their attitudes towards refugees. Turkish nationals who do not know any refugee or who merely have refugee acquaintances (e.g. from their neighbourhood or workplace) are indifferent in their attitudes towards them. Having refugee friends promotes social cohesion among Turkish people.

Approval of children's friendship with their counterparts is more common in both communities compared to other kinds of interaction such as intermarriage, business relations or sharing neighbourhood. Even though refugees are more open to such friendship, they have concerns over possible conflict among children. Refugees are also more open to intermarriage (between their children and the hosts) but prefer marriages within their nationality for family unity as their future in Turkey is unknown and return to their home country is likely.

The percentage of host community members who think refugees are more vulnerable than the Turkish poor has decreased over time, perhaps due to the fading of the “emergency” with the longer stay of refugees and the ESSN assistance. However, even the ones who think that refugees are not very vulnerable believe that the international community should provide them with assistance. Despite the decline through time, many Turkish people are willing to share public facilities with the refugees.

In fact, almost half of the Turkish people believe that the refugees are likely to settle in Turkey even if the conflict in Syria is resolved. Around two-in-five host community members believe that the cost of living in their neighbourhood increased due to the presence of refugees across. Even so, one can say that the host community, willingly or with concerns, accepted the possibility of living together with the refugees in the long run, which is an important milestone for social cohesion. Furthermore, the proportion of refugees who state that they are charged higher rental fees than the Turkish people has decreased over time, indicating an increase in fair treatment by landlords.

However, the financial struggle people face seem to affect negatively the social cohesion between the two communities in the labour market. The support for equal payment for the refugee employees declined in 2019, when the unemployment rates and job competition in both communities increased. Some Turkish people believe that the refugees are more favoured in the welfare system, while many refugees state that they earn less than their Turkish co-workers for the same job while working in unfair conditions, and without social security.



## Introduction



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The instability in Syria resulted in the displacement of people across the region, affecting the neighbouring countries the most. The first 250 Syrians arrived in Turkey on 29 April 2011 through the Hatay-Cilvegözü border crossing. As of June 2020, there are approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition, there are around half a million refugees of Afghan, Iraqi, Iranian, and Somali nationality under Temporary/International protection.<sup>3</sup>

The high influx of refugees not only affected the lives of the refugees, but also impacted Turkey from many aspects including in Education, Healthcare, among others. In the last decade, Turkey became the largest refugee hosting country

in the world far ahead of the other countries (*figure 1*).<sup>4</sup> The majority of refugees in Turkey live out-of-camp, in cities and villages, integrated with the host (Turkish) communities. Only about 62,580<sup>5</sup> refugees are hosted in camps in the South-East of the country. The out-of-camp refugees live in all 81 provinces in Turkey, and half a million of them live in Istanbul. In the provinces bordering Syria such as Kilis, the population ratios of refugees to the host community are as high as 76%.<sup>6</sup> Thus, both the refugees and the Turkish communities found themselves sharing the same environment, resources, and developments in all spheres (social, economic, etc.).

1 Erdogan, M. (2020). "Onuncu Yılında Türkiye'deki Suriyeliler" International Relations Council. Retrieved from: <https://www.uikpanorama.com/blog/2020/04/29/onuncu-yilinda-turkiyedeki-suriyeliler/>

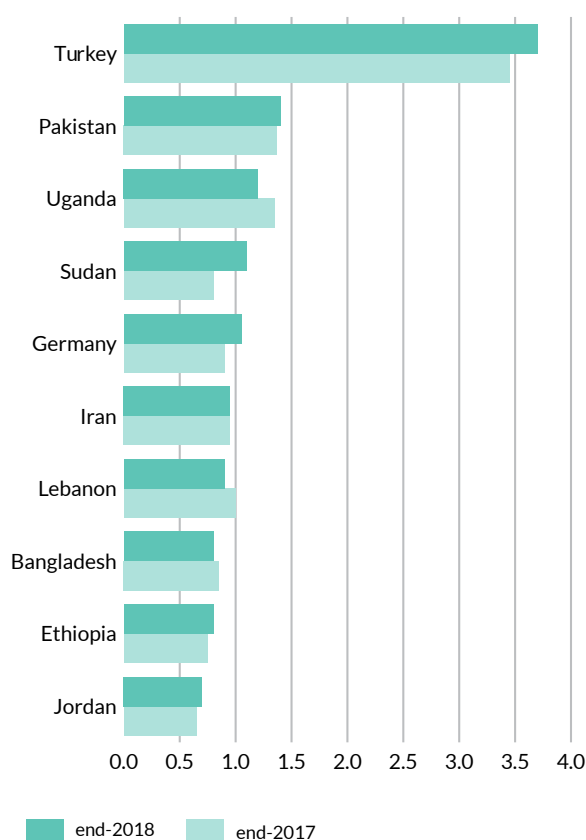
2 Directorate General of Migration Management, retrieved on June 8th, 2020.

3 Even though Turkey gives refugee status only to the people from European countries, temporary or international protection is granted to other nationalities under the Foreigners and International protection law (2013) which also provides for free access to services such as education and health once they have registered with the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). For convenience, in this report, the people under protection will be referred as 'refugees'.

4 <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

5 Migration Statistics, DGMM, retrieved on July 10th, 2020.

6 <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>

**Figure 1 Top refugee-hosting countries 2017–2018<sup>7</sup>**

Studies show that the attitudes of the host society matter significantly on the adaptation of the newcomers (Reitz, 2020). The likely changes in the labour markets, housing costs, use of public services as a result of the increased population with the influx of migrants have the potential to cause competition and therefore increase tension. Furthermore, welfare assistance or any humanitarian intervention for the vulnerable people migrated involuntarily might be perceived as favouritism and create disturbance.

In the earlier years, refugees in Turkey were widely welcomed, with empathy, and considered as guests with the expectation that the unrest in Syria would be short-lived. However, as the Syrian conflict continued (now in its 10th year), the refugees started to build their lives in Turkey.

Along with refugees' continued stay in Turkey, the host community attitude has evolved and, while many are still welcoming, some have become more reserved towards the refugees. The literature on migration does not have an agreed definition to refer to the relationship between the host-migrant communities. Therefore, the term 'social cohesion' is used in this study and defined as "absence of social tension between refugees and host communities in non-camp urban areas".<sup>8</sup>

Approximately one-third of the Syrian population are children under 10 years of age,<sup>9</sup> born and raised in Turkey without any memories of their home in Syria. In addition to that, a considerable number of Syrians (about 25%) are youths aged 10–20 who arrived at early ages have grown up in Turkey. Overall, close to 60% of the Syrian refugee population were either born in Turkey or have spent a significant part of their childhood in Turkey, and may be more accustomed to life in Turkey. Thus, in reality, majority of Syrian refugees may be less inclined to return to their home country having spent most of their lives in Turkey. In this regard, social cohesion is a fundamental aspect of refugee programming in Turkey.

<sup>7</sup> The image is retrieved from UNHCR Global Trends – Forced Displacement 2018. <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

<sup>8</sup> The definition is used by the WFP Regional Bureau of Cairo on their social cohesion studies.

<sup>9</sup> The 5–9 years olds among refugees is the largest group in age pyramid in 2020. Please see WFP Turkey Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise report for details

## Methodology

In line with the humanitarian principle of ‘do no harm’ while alleviating the suffering of the affected population,<sup>10</sup> this study aims to assess the attitudes of the Turkish and the refugee communities towards each other. WFP has partnered with Turk Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent -TK) to implement the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) programme I and II to assist over 1.7 million refugees in Turkey between December 2016 and March 2020. The ESSN programme provided monthly unconditional cash transfers (about 145 TRY per person as of August 2019) to eligible refugee households. The Turkish name of the programme “Sosyal Uyum Yardımı” which is translated as ‘social cohesion assistance’ reflects the broader purpose of the programme not as merely supporting the refugees financially for their basic needs, but also as contributing to their social relations with the host community.

This study focusses on the social cohesion between the refugees in Turkey and the host community. A mixed methods approach was adopted for the study: quantitative data was collected through five cross-sectional surveys from July 2017 to June 2019 to monitor the trends; while qualitative data was collected through two rounds of focus group discussions with refugees intended to explain/interpret findings from the quantitative analysis.

The quantitative component involved a total of 16,498 participants from both Turkish and Arabic-speaking refugee communities in all five rounds (table 1). During the sampling process, the confidence interval was determined as 90% with 5% margin of error (first three rounds) and below 3.3% for rounds 4 and 5. In each round of data collection, the surveys were representative at regional and national level for both Turkish and refugee populations.

Data collection was conducted through an online platform managed by the RiWi Corporation using their patented Random Domain Intercept Technology (RDIT) that allows random sampling of internet users in specific locations,

10 Crawford, N. Pattugalan, G. & Simmons, L. (2013). Protection in Practice: Food Assistance with Safety and Dignity. World Food Programme, Rome, Italy.

**Table 1** Sample size of participants in each round of survey

Locations		Participants		
		Turkish	Refugee	All
<b>1st Round</b> July 2017	Istanbul	578	140	718
	Aegean & Central Anatolia	179	140	319
	Southeastern Provinces	396	141	537
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1153</b>	<b>421</b>	<b>1574</b>
<b>2nd Round</b> October 2017	Istanbul	482	216	698
	Aegean & Central Anatolia	617	136	753
	Southeastern Provinces	391	149	540
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1490</b>	<b>501</b>	<b>1991</b>
<b>3rd Round</b> January 2018	Istanbul	685	154	839
	Aegean & Central Anatolia	907	96	1003
	Southeastern Provinces	315	124	439
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1907</b>	<b>374</b>	<b>2281</b>
<b>4th Round</b> February 2019	Istanbul	1046	223	1269
	Aegean & Central Anatolia	2211	190	2401
	Southeastern Provinces	1410	564	1974
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4667</b>	<b>977</b>	<b>5644</b>
<b>5th Round</b> June 2019	Istanbul	747	216	963
	Aegean & Central Anatolia	1467	568	2035
	Southeastern Provinces	1818	192	2010
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4032</b>	<b>976</b>	<b>5008</b>



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enabling a nationally representative sample. As indicated in Table 1, the provinces in Turkey were categorized as Istanbul, South-East region and the rest of Turkey (Aegean and Central Anatolia), based on the characteristics of both the refugees (e.g. nationality) and provinces in those regions in terms of geographical, socio-cultural, and economic aspects. The most populated provinces in each region were selected, and sample selection distributed representatively.

Survey questionnaires were self-administered through the online platform which assured anonymity and allowed both the host and refugee communities in Turkey to honestly express their true feelings towards each other. The surveys included four main categories of questions: Interpersonal relationships, Economic Implications, Safety and stability, as well as demographic information. The questions were designed as statements and respondents were requested to rate their agreement level on a 5-point Likert scale; 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree” to allow respondents to express their true opinions even if these opinions are socially undesirable (*annex 1*).

### The focus group discussions

A total of 18 focus group discussions (FGDs), involving 155 refugees, were conducted in 9 provinces in June 2018 and November–December 2019. The discussions explored intergroup interactions, workplace and neighbourhood interactions, children’s relationships and the barriers to social interaction (*annex 2*).

### Limitations

The languages used for the surveys were limited to Turkish for the host community and Arabic for the refugees, in-line with the study focus on the interaction between the Turkish and Syrian refugees. The study does not therefore capture the perspectives of non-Arabic speaking refugees. Note that

more than 95% of the refugees in Turkey are Arabic speakers from Syria (91%), Iraq (3%), and Somalia (1%).<sup>11</sup>

Other limitations include the literacy of participants as a precondition for this self-administered survey. According to Turkish Statistical Institute (TurkStat), the literacy rate for adults in Turkey is 96%, meaning only about 4% of the Turkish population was excluded<sup>12</sup> compared to an estimated 15% and 25% among male and female refugees respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Online surveys are often criticized for not including the people who do not use internet. TurkStat data indicates that in 2019, about 75% of the Turkish population used the internet,<sup>14</sup> compared to 73% and 67% in 2018 and 2017 respectively. While the coverage is increasing nationwide, there are still more male than female internet users (81% vs 66%). Among the refugees, the data from WFP’s Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise (CVME) Round 5 shows that 58% have access to the internet either through mobile data or Wi-Fi. Unlike the Turkish population however, there is less disparity in internet usage among refugees (59% among men and 57% among women).

During the study, it was not possible to organize Focus Groups with the Turkish nationals. The report therefore relies on the responses given to the open-ended question in the survey round 4 (February 2019) for the Turkish perspective.

11 Calculation is based on the number of refugees retrieved from Directorate General of Migration Management.

12 National Education Statistics, 2019: <https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/medas/?kn=1&locale=tr>

13 WFP (2020). Comprehensive Vulnerability Monitoring Exercise: Round 5 (CVME 5). World Food Programme, Turkey Country Office.

14 National Computer and Internet Usage Statistics, 2019: <https://biruni.tuik.gov.tr/medas/?kn=1&locale=tr>

# Findings

## Demographics

### Respondent age and gender

Among all the participants, the majority were 18–36 years old (*figure 2*). This is in line with research findings which show that even though 92% of the people in Turkey have mobile data on their phones, the youth are still the most active internet users.<sup>15</sup> Across all five surveys, the ratios remained around the same levels for both the refugee and the host community members. Throughout the text, the age group 18–34 is referred as the youth, the age group 35–64 years olds are called the middle aged, and people over age 65 are considered as the elderly.

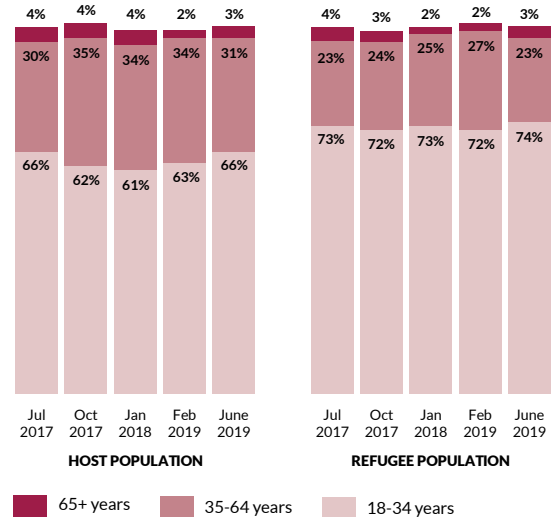
There were consistently more male participants in the surveys for both communities (*figure 3*), also reflecting the internet user population. Effectively, the findings in the survey may lean more towards the views held by young males, both among the host and refugee communities.

### Education<sup>16</sup>

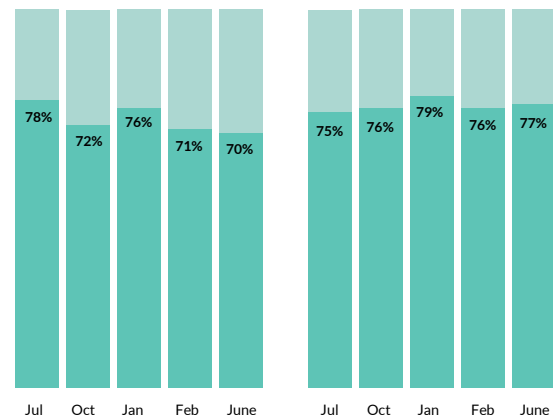
The education levels were grouped in 4 categories: (1) Literate; who do not have any formal education, yet able to read and write (2) Low level; representing people completed elementary or middle school, (3) Medium level, for people who have a high school or equivalent degree, (4) High level; any university education including any 2-year vocational/associate degree.

Expectedly, the majority of respondents among refugees and the host community had medium to high education

**Figure 2 Age of participants per round**



**Figure 3 Sex of participants per round**



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