
The Syrian Community in Turkey: Perspectives, Prospects, and Policies

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Cover Image

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Place of Publication

UZMAN DİJİTAL BASKI VE BÜRO MAKİNELERİ LTD. ŞTİ.
Fahrettin Kerim Gökay Caddesi No:13/B
Hasanpaşa, Kadıköy, İstanbul
+90 216 700 10 77 (pbx)

Print Run

200

PODEM PUBLICATIONS

ISBN 978-605-67530-4-6
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This report is supported by the Raoul Wallenberg Institute as part of PODEM's research project entitled "Refugee Protection in Turkey." The viewpoints in this publication do not reflect the official opinion of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute as an organization.

PODEM would like to acknowledge the significant support of RMTTeam to the report.

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About PODEM

Center for Public Policy and Democracy Studies (Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi alıřmaları Derneđi, PODEM) is an independent think tank established in February 2015 in Istanbul, Turkey.

At PODEM, our vision is to contribute to the building of an environment in Turkey where the institutional and legal foundations for democracy are established, a democratic mind-set, social peace and justice are embedded, and one that yields greater credibility to Turkey to facilitate regional and global peace and justice. Our mission is to understand and analyse, through research, the changing dynamics of Turkey's society, its relations with other societies and states and to translate our insights into policy suggestions.

Contributors to the Report

This report was realized with the generous efforts and contribution of **Joullanar Darouiche** of RMTeam, who conducted the in-depth interviews with the Syrian communities in Istanbul and Gaziantep as part of the research project.

Additionally, **Bassam Al-Kuwatli**, the Managing Director of RMTeam, actively involved in all research activities and contributed to the report with his insightful comments.

The report was also facilitated by the efforts of PODEM's Research Director **Sabiha Senyücel Gündoğar** and Project Officer **Gülşah Dark**, who both took part in the overall management of the research project and contributed to the preparation of the current report.

Acknowledgement

PODEM would like to acknowledge the support of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute's Turkey Programme and its team throughout the management and realization of the research project.

With regards to the methodology and research principles, the identities of the interviewees are confined to the records of the researchers. However, PODEM would like to thank all the research participants for making the time to join this research project and providing their valuable insight.

Finally, PODEM would like to thank everyone, who took part in the research process and the preparation of the report.

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Foreword

This report, entitled “The Syrian Community in Turkey: Perspectives, Prospects, and Policies”, centers on the environment accommodating the Syrian community in Turkey by understanding and analyzing the policies made to regulate the influx of Syrians fleeing from the civil war and to facilitate their social integration into society.

As the civil war in Syria reaches its seven-year mark, the conflict is a continuing cause of suffering for millions in need of humanitarian assistance. Since its onset in 2011, the number of Syrians fleeing their homes has continuously grown, resulting in the largest refugee crisis since World War II. The conflict has torn apart the lives of the Syrians now taking shelter in neighboring countries including Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, as well as in Europe. Among all the other countries, Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees and shoulders a heavy responsibility in ensuring their protection, safety, residence, and access to basic services. This has had a sizeable impact on the country’s domestic and foreign policy and also, affected public perception towards Syrians. Therefore, introducing effective policies at the domestic level is key to facilitating the integration of Syrians into Turkish society under good conditions.

To examine how the policies targeting Syrians have tended to address the process of integration on legal, economic, and social levels, a fieldwork study was conducted from September 2017 to December 2017 with Syrians in the cities of Gaziantep and Istanbul. Additionally, two workshops—the first in Gaziantep and the second in Istanbul—were organized with Syrians in October 2017 and December 2017, respectively. The interviews were held in Gaziantep and Istanbul by Joullanar Darouiche of Gaziantep-based research center RMTeam, and Assistant Professor Fulya Memişoğlu of Çukurova University. Dr. Memişoğlu, who specializes in migration studies, authored this report using the data collected from the fieldwork study.

Throughout the fieldwork, in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 40 Syrians from diverse professional backgrounds including educators, journalists, legal experts, civil society representatives, business owners, physicians, and students. It should be noted that the goal of this qualitative study is not to generalize but rather to provide an up-to-date understanding of a case that is relevant to the context of Turkey. The main motivation while building the sample was therefore to capture the insights of Syrians as to what extent domestic policies and regulations have facilitated an efficient integration process, and how they affect the lives of members of the Syrian community in public space.

Using the findings derived from in-depth interviews and workshops, this report presents Syrians' key insights and assessments on the integration process from different angles including, but not limited to, legal status and the implications of the Temporary Protection Regulation; employment and education opportunities; and relations with the local community and institutions. The report also surveys the challenges facing the Syrian community in the public space as well as their prioritized demands and expectations for the future, offering an enriched, detailed look into the issue from the eyes of Syrians.

The report aims to contribute to the policy-making process pertinent to migration management and social integration of the Syrian community with actionable policy recommendations. We hope that these insights inform the relevant decision-makers and officials on their policy actions and raise awareness towards Syrians among the public to foster positive relations between both sides.

Aybars Görgülü
Research Director, PODEM

1. Background

The ongoing war in Syria has forced more than 5.5 million people to flee their homes and seek asylum in the neighboring countries, while over 6 million people remain displaced within Syria.¹ As a country with past experiences of mass refugee influxes, Turkey declared an open-door policy for those fleeing the war as early as June 2011. Within a few months, the number of Syrian refugees admitted into the country surpassed 10,000, followed by the government's announcement of the Temporary Protection Regulation in October 2011. This meant protection against forcible returns and assistance for all Syrians, Palestinians from Syria, and stateless people from Syria. It also guaranteed unlimited stay and access to reception arrangements. Since then, Turkey has become the largest refugee hosting country in the world, with over 3.5 million registered Syrians under temporary protection, as of February 2018 (See Figure 1). In addition to this number, Syrians (at nearly 65,000) constitute the second largest group of foreigners with residency permits in Turkey, second to Iraqis (See Figure 2).²

For a considerable period of time, the Turkish government regarded the Syrian refugee situation as temporary. Its response was therefore, to adopt ad-hoc policies and provide generous humanitarian assistance to the displaced population despite the lack of effective and fair global responsibility sharing mechanisms. Nevertheless, the prolonged presence of Syrian refugees—of whom over 90 percent currently live in urban areas—brought new challenges and the necessity of addressing socio-economic integration issues. The scope of protection and assistance for Syrians has kept expanding over the years, introducing, on one hand, regulations facilitating access to education, health services, and the job market, and on the other, new restrictive measures concerning mobility, due to the Turkish government's mounting national and regional security concerns.

Turkey is also new to policy mechanisms dealing with protracted refugee situations, such as the option of local integration. The country maintains a geographical limitation to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and grants refugee status only to 'persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe'.³ Thus, temporariness is an underlying feature of the country's refugee legal framework; durable solutions for refugees

¹ According to the UNHCR Syrian Regional Refugee Response, the total number of registered Syrians in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and North Africa is around 5.59 million as of March 2018. More data available at: <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

² Up-to-date migration statistics of Turkey are available at the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) website, available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik

³ 'Declarations and Reservations Chapter 5: 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees', United Nations Treaty Collection, 20 March 2016. <http://treaties.un.org/Reservations/573dc82d4/resettlement-other-admission-pathways-syrian-refugees.html>

from non-European countries seeking refuge in Turkey have been largely managed through voluntary repatriations and resettlement to third countries.⁴ However, resettlement and other legal admission pathways for Syrian refugees have been strikingly limited. According to the UN Refugee Agency figures, countries outside the region have pledged to receive nearly 255,000 Syrians in mid-2017, which comprises less than 5 percent of the total Syrian population hosted by the three neighbouring countries: Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey.⁵ So, as the Syrian conflict soon enters its eighth year, Turkish policy-makers continue to devise strategies for Syrian refugees until returning to Syria becomes a safe and viable option. Syrians are also increasingly curious to know what their mid- to long-term prospects in Turkey will look like.

This report is an outcome of a joint research study conducted by PODEM and RMTTeam. One key objective of the report is to increase the available knowledge on the situation of Syrians in Turkey by outlining some key challenges and opportunities as narrated by Syrian refugees living in Gaziantep and Istanbul.⁶ It mainly relies on qualitative data collected through fieldwork in these two-major refugee-hosting cities. 40 in-depth interviews were conducted with Syrian humanitarian actors, journalists, legal professionals, activists, university students, educators, and representatives from civil society and business circles. Considering the high numbers and diversity of groups involved, we are aware of the limits to build a sufficiently representative sample of refugees. Bearing this in mind, the selection of interviewees involved purposive and snowball sampling methods, with a specific focus on professionals and university students belonging to the age group 18 to 45. Despite the limitations, we tried to maintain a gender-balanced approach in the selection of interviewees and include individuals with various legal statuses.⁷

Our aim in this report is to reflect upon some of the research participants' general insights and perceptions on their experiences of settlement and integration and the factors that have shaped their sense of belonging in Turkey. The report also incorporates notes and policy recommendations obtained during two workshops held in Gaziantep and Istanbul on October 24 and December 18, 2017, respectively. During these events, Syrian participants (not only limited to the interviewees) had the opportunity to discuss and exchange views on the problems and prospects of integration. The workshop in Istanbul also initiated a discussion between Syrian participants, officials from local bodies, and relevant experts. While there is an abundant body of policy-oriented research addressing multiple aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis, refugee perspectives and attitudes remain largely absent from discussions. This report, therefore, aims to highlight this gap so that the relevant stakeholders can better address, plan, and target their policy initiatives.

Following a brief overview of the legal framework for refugee protection, we will discuss and summarize the fieldwork data on key thematic issues concerning legal protection; general

⁴ For comprehensive studies on integration prospects in Turkey, see Şimşek and Çorabatır (2016) 'Challenges and Opportunities of Refugee Integration in Turkey', Research Centre on Asylum and Integration (IGAM); Yavçan, B (2018) 'Politics of Integration in Turkey', Analysis and Argument, 278/2018. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung-Migration and Integration Series.

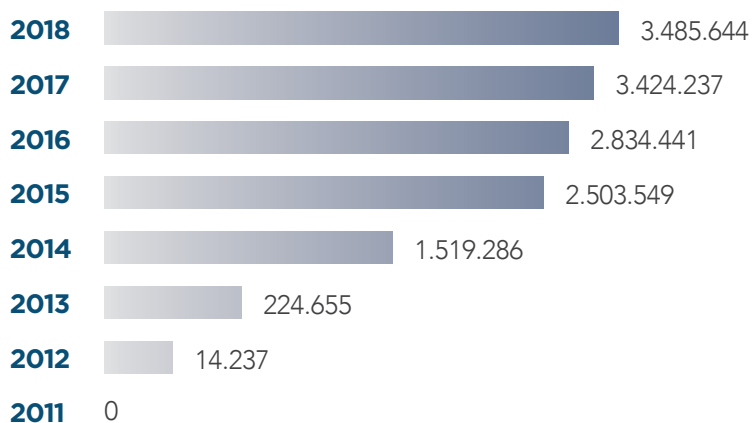
⁵ UN Refugee Agency, 'Resettlement and Other Admission Pathways for Syrian Refugees', 30 April 2017. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/protection/resettlement/573dc82d4/resettlement-other-admission-pathways-syrian-refugees.html>

⁶ As of February 2018, Gaziantep hosts 359,194 registered Syrian refugees under temporary protection and an additional 24,215 camp refugees. Istanbul hosts 542,842 registered Syrians under temporary protection. These figures do not include unregistered Syrians and Syrians with residence permits in Gaziantep and Istanbul. Source: DGMM website.

⁷ During the fieldwork in both cities, the researchers interviewed 23 male and 17 female respondents. The majority of the respondents were residence permit holders, some had temporary protection status and two had obtained Turkish citizenship.

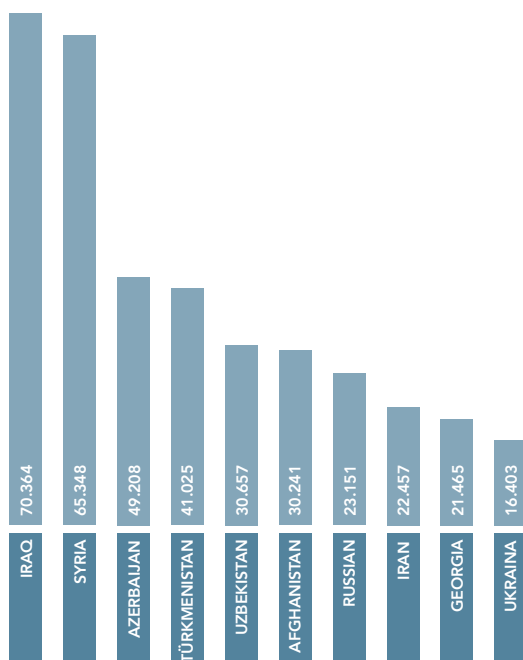
perceptions and challenges on building a sense of belonging; socio-economic integration, including relations with the host community; and access to the job-market. The report concludes with policy recommendations highlighting the necessary future steps for better refugee protection and social integration.

Figure 1. Number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection, 2011-2018



Source: Directorate General of Migration Management, 01 February 2018.

Figure 2. Foreigners in Turkey with residence permits, 2017 (Top 10 countries)



Source: Directorate General of Migration Management, February 2018.

2. Legal Framework

2.1. Legal Framework of Refugee Protection in Turkey

Since the mid-2000s, Turkey's migration and asylum legal framework has been undergoing comprehensive reform to meet the challenges of transforming into a country of emigration, immigration, and transit migration. The onset of the Syrian crisis and the following refugee influx coincided with two core outcomes of this reform process: the adoption of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013; and the establishment of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) in 2014. The LFIP created regulations to manage the entry and exit procedures of foreigners,⁸ and also, set out four international protection categories: refugees, conditional refugees, subsidiary protection, and temporary protection.⁹ As Turkey's new migration authority under the Ministry of Interior, the DGMM's provincial organization also became fully operational in May 2015, taking over the majority of foreigner-related responsibilities from the provincial police departments.

Given that the LFIP maintains Turkey's geographical limitation to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, and grants refugee status only to 'persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe', Syrians were not granted an official refugee status. Instead, the 'temporary protection status' was offered as a group-based protection scheme in times of mass influxes of displaced persons. The scope of the temporary protection regime was specified further in the Temporary Protection Regulation (hereafter Regulation) issued by the Council of Ministers in October 2014, addressing Syrians' admission to Turkey, registration, access to social services, social aid, interpretation services, and the labor market. In order to set the procedures and conditions for Syrians' access to the labor market, the Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection came into force in January 2016. According to the figures provided by the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 13,290 Syrians obtained work permits in 2016 (See Table 1). As indicated in secondary sources, the total number of work permits granted to Syrians from 2011 to 2016 is 20,981.¹⁰

⁸ In the Turkish legal context, the terminology differentiates between a 'foreigner' (i.e. "yabancı" in Turkish) and a 'migrant' (i.e. "göçmen" in Turkish). However, the two terms are increasingly used interchangeably except when referring to a specific legal context. Foreigner is defined as a person who has no citizenship bond with the Republic of Turkey (see, Law on Foreigners and International Protection No. 6548, Article 2). Meanwhile, migrant is a person of Turkish descent and attached to Turkish culture, coming to Turkey with the intention of settling (see, Law on Settlement No. 5543, Article 3).

⁹ Law on Foreigners and International Protection, Article 91 (Temporary Protection) available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/files/eng_minikanun_5_son.pdf

¹⁰ See, İçduygu, A and Diker, E (2017) 'Labor Market Integration of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: From Refugees to Settlers', *The Journal of Migration Studies*, 3(1): 12-35.

Table 1. Number of work permits granted to Syrians by type of permission and gender, 2016

Nationality	Type of Permission			Gender Distribution		Total
	Definite	Indefinite	Independent	Male	Female	
Syria (Syrian Arab Republic)	13,288	2	-	12,145	1,145	13,290

Source: Work Permits of Foreigners, Labor Statistics 2016, Ministry of Labor and Social Security

While in line with the core principles of the European Union’s 2011 Directive on Temporary Protection, Turkey’s temporary protection regime also contains some key differences.¹¹ Whereas the EU Directive sets a maximum duration of three years for temporary protection and allows individuals to lodge individual asylum applications anytime during their temporary protection, Turkish law sets no limit of stay for those under temporary protection. And yet, Turkey’s temporary protection status does not automatically pave the way for directly acquiring other international protection types specified in the LFIP. The specifics and implementation framework of temporary protection are determined by the Council of Ministers. As stated in the Regulation, when the Council of Ministers decides to terminate this status, the following decisions may be taken: (1) to fully suspend the temporary protection and return temporary protection beneficiaries to their countries; (2) to collectively grant a status which the temporary protection beneficiaries satisfy, or to individually assess the applications of those who applied for international protection; and (3) to allow persons benefiting from temporary protection to stay in Turkey subject to conditions to be determined within the scope of LFIP.¹²

Opening pathways to citizenship has also been on the national agenda following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s public announcement in July 2016 of plans to grant citizenship to Syrians. According to officials from the Ministry of Interior, over 12,000 Syrians have been granted citizenship as of September 2017, and with the applications currently being processed, the numbers will reach 50,000.¹³ Among Syrians being granted citizenship, around 6,500 of them are reported to have either a mother or a father with Turkish nationality, or both.¹⁴ Additionally, nearly 4,500 Syrians were married to Turkish citizens after 2011, and granted citizenship following

¹¹ EU Council Directive (2001/55/EC) ‘On minimum standards for giving temporary protection in the event of a mass influx of displaced persons and on measures promoting a balance of efforts between Member States in receiving such persons and bearing the consequences of thereof’, available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2001:212:0012:0023:EN:PDF>

¹² See, Temporary Protection Regulation, Part 3 (Scope of Temporary Protection) and Part 4 (Provisions on Temporary Protection Decision and Termination of Temporary Protection), available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/_dokuman28.pdf

¹³ See, ‘Turkey processing citizenship for 50,000 Syrians’, Daily Sabah, 23 September 2017, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2017/09/23/turkey-processing-citizenship-for-50000-syrians>

¹⁴ See, ‘Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, İnsan Haklarını İnceleme Komisyonu, Mülteci Hakları Alt Komisyonu, Göç ve Uyum Raporu’ [The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Human Rights Inquiry Committee Migration and Integration Report] March 2018, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/insanhaklari/docs/2018/goc_ve_uyum_raporu.pdf

three years of the marriage.¹⁵ Thus, the future legal status of Syrians in Turkey remains largely a matter of political discretion, rather than being solely based on the legal framework for refugee protection. Against this background, as will be discussed below, the fieldwork findings show that the most frequently mentioned challenge in assessing prospects in Turkey is the lack of certainty felt by Syrian refugees towards their current and future legal status.

2.2. Legal Protection from the Perspective of Syrians

The perceived ambiguity over the legal status of Syrian refugees is triggered by several factors. First and foremost, the common labeling of Syrians as ‘guests’ has nurtured their sense of uncertainty, making it difficult for refugees to comprehend the scope of their actual legal rights and obligations, especially for those benefiting from temporary protection. Second, the lack of general awareness among the public about refugee legal framework and temporary protection, frequent changes in procedures, and discrepancies between central-level policies and local-level implementation blur their sense of legal stability in Turkey. Third, and in relation to the above factors, the lack of effective communication channels between the Syrian refugees and local authorities obscures their access to reliable information, notably on their legal rights.

As expressed by Syrian interviewees, the puzzling question of ‘are we refugees or guests?’ creates challenging situations in their daily lives when accessing social services, or opening a bank account, for instance. They mention encountering local service providers¹⁶ who are unfamiliar with the scope of temporary protection and question the validity of their authorized legal documents. In cases where they become subject to arbitrary practices and discrimination, some respondents said they refrain from speaking up and defending themselves, because their legal status is ‘not firm enough’. A research participant outlined the options they have and discussed the dilemma:

“We have three options: to go back to Syria, move to Europe, and third, have a life in Turkey. We like to opt for the third option and live in Turkey, but the current status leaves us in limbo, we cannot feel secure enough.”¹⁷ Another participant raised the dilemma they are facing: “We are grateful to Turkey, you embraced us so warmly. However, what if this warm welcome ends one day? Can we rely on this without a sufficient legal protection?”¹⁸

To highlight the perceived ambiguity of the Turkish legal framework in contrast to the European procedures applied to refugees, one interviewee commented: “All steps are clear on the first day of your arrival as a refugee in any European country: you learn the language, send your kids to school, know the rules of the work permit, start working, pay taxes, and so on.”¹⁹ It was also

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Local service providers here refer to counters at the banks, telecom companies, electricity companies, migration office bureaucrats, etc.

¹⁷ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Interview, Gaziantep, September 2017

indicated in one of the workshops that the uncertainty in the legal framework has led Syrians in Turkey to interpret the procedures and their legal rights differently,²⁰ leaving them with questions on their minds, the foremost being, “Are we going to belong to Turkey one day?”, as put by another research participant.

Syrians with residence permits also emphasized the uncertainty in maintaining their status due to the financial and administrative burdens of meeting the conditions, such as renewing passports and paying for private annual health insurance. While explaining the difficulties to get appointments at the Syrian Consulate in Istanbul through official channels, they added that only a small percentage of the population are able to afford the \$325 fee per passport (which is issued in three months) and the \$825 fee for an accelerated process. A Syrian refugee who is working as an accountant in Gaziantep said, “I have to renew my passport and my family’s passports. This means I need to pay for flight tickets, hotel, and passport fees for five. This is a fortune. I cannot afford it, but there is no other choice.”²¹ Those on short-term residence permits require having a bank account but opening one in most cases requires holding a residence permit.

The lack of effective communication with immigration authorities also adds up to the Syrians’ feelings of uncertainty and at times, may lead to the collection of inaccurate information. For instance, several respondents who have crossed the borders without their passports, ID cards, marriage, and birth certificates expressed concerns that their information may not be accurately registered on a system similar to UNHCR’s refugee database. In their view, failure to do so could risk a faulty documentation of their stay in Turkey. The DGMM first attempted to address this issue in May 2015 by setting up GOC-NET, a comprehensive national database for all foreigners, including international protection beneficiaries, which stores their information since the day they are registered in Turkey. However, the database had shortcomings in its initial registration process that needed to be fixed. To do that, the DGMM partnered with UNHCR Turkey in early 2017 and launched a project to update the records of Syrians under temporary protection.

When asked about their relations with public officials, it was also revealed that poor communication mainly stems from the language barrier, especially within a bureaucratic system which they consider to be more advanced and complex than that of Syria. Some complained about the arbitrary behavior at the local level. They said, “We do not want to break the law, but most of the time it is very difficult to stay updated about the law we need to follow.” The lack of knowledge on how to navigate and get reliable information on a particular situation, or where to seek certain services, obliges them to pay for the services of informal mediators—people who are fluent in both Turkish and Arabic—working as facilitators between the refugees and the authorities. Although the DGMM’s website and helpline 157 (Communication Center for Foreigners in Turkey) are useful tools for disseminating such information, some Syrians expressed that help desks at local public institutions would be useful to obtain timely information regarding laws and procedures.²² In the words of a Syrian NGO representative:

²⁰ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

²¹ Interview, Gaziantep, November 2017.

²² Some interviewees also suggested that the Arabic version of DGMM website could be updated more frequently in order to maintain awareness on the changing procedures.

“Access to public authorities is not easy. And we have empathy for them, they used to serve 50 Turks, and now [they serve] 100 with the arrival of Syrians, and the person has to do the job for the same salary. The relevant authorities, such as AFAD, can facilitate communication between Syrian and Turkish communities.”²³

3. Integration of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Progress and Complications

3.1. Building a Sense of Belonging: General Perceptions and Challenges

The majority of Syrian interviewees spoke about the long-lasting psychosocial effects and trauma of the war, losing their homes, and loved ones. For those who still have family members and friends in Syria, feelings of depression and anxiety had become an integral part of their daily lives. Despite the challenges and legal uncertainties of settling into a new country, the fieldwork findings indicate that the Turkish state's flexible response, especially from early 2011 to mid-2015, has been one of the most influential factors in helping refugees develop a sense of belonging and sense of identity continuity. Turkey's Middle Eastern and Muslim identity, along with the host community's tolerant attitude were mentioned among factors facilitating this process. With particular reference to those settled in Istanbul, the city's cosmopolitan, foreigner-friendly character, and its large job market apparently also played a positive role in stimulating belonging for refugees. As an interviewee put it, "Istanbul had much to offer to people who had fled a traumatic conflict."²⁴ As for Gaziantep, the city's geographical proximity to Syria, long-standing family and business ties, similar climate, and similar cultural habits were cited among factors making Syrians feel at home.²⁵ An additional factor that can influence the sense of belonging among the Syrian community appears to be able to speak the language of the host country, as raised by a research participant from the Syrian CSO community in Gaziantep, saying, "Because I cannot speak Turkish, I feel less [of a sense of] belonging to the society here."²⁶ Similarly, learning the language of the host country is believed to facilitate social integration, especially among the Syrian youth, who are trying to continue their education in Turkey. A young Syrian university student in Istanbul, who has studied both language and international relations, pointed out that the knowledge of Turkish is crucial because she can more easily express herself in society, adding that the lack of communication between the local community and Syrians can result in prejudice.²⁷

²⁴ Interview, Istanbul, November 2017

²⁵ Interview, Gaziantep, September 2017.

²⁶ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

²⁷ Workshop notes, Istanbul, December 2017

The fact that most respondents migrated with their families and close relatives has also fostered a sense of belonging to their new environment. While sharing such positive experiences of rebuilding lives, some interviewees referred to the early years of the conflict and relative easiness when renting houses, setting up new businesses or transferring their businesses from Syria, and travelling abroad and within Turkey. Others also mentioned the positive impact of the increase in numbers of INGOs and Syrian NGOs on Syrian refugees, especially in Gaziantep, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Istanbul within that period, creating plenty of job openings, as well as giving them the opportunity to work cross-borders for sending humanitarian assistance to Syria.

Nonetheless, the unforeseen scale of the refugee movement coupled with the growing security concerns of the Turkish authorities from mid-2015 onwards—due to the changing dynamics of the conflict in Syria, the emergence of ISIS and other terrorist threats, and the start of the so-called European refugee crisis—led to the introduction of a certain set of restrictive policies, especially concerning the mobility of refugees. Among these were the requirement for Syrians under temporary protection to obtain a travel document from the provincial directorates of DGMM prior to travelling within Turkey, the visa requirement imposed on those arriving to Turkey from third countries, stricter border regulations, and the building of a wall alongside the border. As told by some passport-holding Syrians, obtaining, or renewing short-term residence permits also became more difficult due to the introduction of additional conditions, leading many to switch to temporary protection status.

Syrians under the temporary protection regime, on the other hand, cannot apply for residence permits if they do not meet the conditions. Additionally, their right to freely travel both within Turkey and abroad depends on prior permission. The ability to have mobility, according to Syrian refugees, cultivates a sense of normalcy. And circumstances associated with restricted mobility hinder their sense of belonging and desire to have a normal life in Turkey.

3.2. Integration into the Host Community

The majority of Syrian respondents believed they share close cultural ties and values with Turkish people.²⁸ They expressed their appreciation for the strong solidarity and empathy shown to them by the local communities of their new neighborhoods both in Istanbul and Gaziantep, help offered for the new arrivals, and provision of housing and other basic needs. A Syrian NGO worker based in Istanbul since 2012 explained that he intended to go to Europe in 2015 but decided not to after seeing that he had better chances for a new life in Turkey: “You think you can integrate better if you speak the same language or have better rights, but that’s not always the case. Many of us decided to stay in Turkey, not only because the government showed hospitality and provided facilities, but [also because] the society treated us with dignity, they showed tolerance, especially when we compare the situation with other countries.”²⁹

²⁸ For a comprehensive study on the subject see, Erdoğan (2017) ‘Syrian Barometer 2017: A Framework for achieving social cohesion with Syrians in Turkey’, Hacettepe University Migration and Politics Research Centre.

²⁹ Interview, Istanbul, November 2017.

Syrians further believe that their presence is negatively perceived by the host community, affecting the latter's lives socially and economically. As a result, Syrian respondents think they are stereotyped in the public sphere, hindering progress towards their social inclusion: "There are two major stereotypes about Syrians: first, we are uncivilized, uneducated, and conservative; and second, we receive money from the Turkish government to pay rents and meet other needs. But in reality, the Syrian community is as diverse as the Turkish community."³⁰ Several respondents also addressed the escalating discontent with the Syrian refugees' prolonged stay, mainly for socio-economic reasons: "We are aware that the host community considers us as a heavy burden, as people who [negatively impact] rents, and that the Syrians are competing with the Turks in the job market."³¹ Such negative attitudes and reactions are reflected in daily life, according to a respondent, especially when renting houses: "It became harder than previous years. The Turkish tenants started asking for higher deposits from Syrians or simply asking for higher rents than what they would ask from a Turk. When the real estate agent knew that we were Syrians, he said 'yes, no problem, but you have to pay for one year in advance'."³²

The role of the Turkish media in reinforcing stereotypes against Syrian refugees was also highlighted. It could be further noted that in both print and online media outlets, there are examples³³ of generalizations and stereotypes targeting the Syrian community, which can result in a negative perception towards Syrians among local people. Two interviewees, a professional photographer and a journalist, shared that they did not manage to get the media's attention on a large-scale civil society initiative that intended to create a dialogue between Syrian and Turkish artists.³⁴ At the Istanbul workshop, a university student and member of a CSO working on women's rights added:

"The media has a great responsibility. The way Syrians are represented in the media leads the Turkish people to look at Syrians with fearful eyes. As a Syrian I feel bad, but I cannot blame them. If the media adopts a more positive approach, if success stories are given more space, it will greatly help to build social bridges between the two communities."³⁵

For a number of Syrian interviewees, the hope to return home in the early years of the crisis remained strong, making their perception of staying in Turkey also a temporary situation. As some noted, they did not exert the effort to learn the language in order to communicate and create ties with the host community, which they also considered to be a crucial factor impeding their progress towards social integration. In the words of a respondent, "Knowing that we would go back to Syria soon was a reason for not investing in learning Turkish language or sending my children to Turkish schools."³⁶ Those who opened businesses, grocery stores, and restaurants acknowledged that they targeted Syrian clients and customers, and continue to live in their

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Eg: (1) "Mülteciler Türkiye'yi istemiyor: Bunun adı nankörlük/ Nankörlük yaptılar" [Refugees do not want to live in Turkey; This Ingratitude/They show ingratitude], 05.04.2016, Available: <https://www.gazeteoku.com/gazete-mansetleri/2016-04-05/sozcu-gazetesi.html>; (2) "Suriyelilerin Gürültü Yapmayin Cinayeti" [Murder committed by Syrians because of noise], 16.05.2017, Available: <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriyelilerin-gurultu-yapmayin-gundem-2451109/>

³⁴ Interview, Istanbul, November 2017

³⁵ Workshop notes, Istanbul, December 2017

³⁶ Interview, Gaziantep, September 2017

closed circles. Some respondents noted that Syrians prefer to go to Syrian doctors, Syrian barbers, and Syrian grocery stores. For those working at NGOs or foreign companies, their circle is limited to colleagues at work and their interaction with the local community remains limited to service sector employees, such as taxi drivers and shop-owners.

And yet, it was interesting to observe the commonalities in the perceptions of integration among the respondents of both low and high income. Respondents from these two income categories expressed that they find it relatively easier to learn the language and better integrate into their new living environment. Low-income respondents who live in relatively more disadvantaged neighborhoods mentioned that they managed to create cordial relations with their neighbors, who have shown solidarity, which in return helped them learn the language faster than others. The other group of respondents—most of whom were either investors or business-owners—noted that their business partnerships with their Turkish counterparts has helped them learn the language faster, which has also enabled them to establish better ties with their neighbors.³⁷

A research participant, who returned to Turkey after spending two years as a refugee in Germany, emphasized the knowledge of the local language as a necessity for social integration: “No matter where you go in Europe, or how long you stay, you have to learn that country’s language. You cannot get a residence permit without learning the language. The Turkish government also needs to make Turkish language learning compulsory for us [Syrians]. We need to have at least a basic knowledge of Turkish; that is the only way to bring Turkish and Syrian societies closer together.”³⁸

When comparing the two cities, the positive impact of Istanbul’s cosmopolitan character on social integration is often emphasized. This aspect helped Syrians create more tangible personal relationships with host community members than in Gaziantep: “People are friendlier in Istanbul. They are used to meeting foreigners and tourists.”³⁹ Yet, some interviewees also brought up the uneasiness they felt in certain neighborhoods in Istanbul, and the negative experiences they had in restaurants and public spaces. They believed these sentiments and encounters stem from the host community’s disapproving political attitudes towards the government’s open-door policy for Syrian refugees. Some female respondents noted that they wear their hijab ‘the Turkish way’ to not be labeled as ‘Syrian’⁴⁰.

When asked about particular challenges female respondents experience in integrating with the host community, most highlighted the invisibility of Syrian refugee women in the public sphere.⁴¹ Limited access to employment, limited access to education, unfair wages and working conditions, and other critical social issues such as early marriages, forced marriages, and unregistered marriages with Turkish citizens were among the difficulties addressed by the interviewees. Some workshop participants also raised an additional need on rendering psychological support services

³⁷ Interviews, Istanbul and Gaziantep, September-November 2017

³⁸ Workshop notes, Istanbul, December 2017

³⁹ Interviews, Istanbul, December 2017

⁴⁰ Interview, Istanbul, November 2017

⁴¹ Interviews, Gaziantep and Istanbul, September-November 2017

to Syrian women,⁴² notably those unable to cope with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the war trauma and forced displacement. A significant portion of Syrians suffering from psychological problems has been offered treatment at community mental health centers.⁴³ The psycho-social support has been provided to Syrians in need, especially women, children, elderly, and disabled people residing in both camps and city centers with the initiatives of the Ministry of the Family and Social Policies. In 2015, more than 70,000 Syrians received psychological assistance.⁴⁴ Changing gender roles due to displacement was also stressed as a challenge facing Syrian refugee women who have become sole breadwinners or caretakers of their households, working for 14-16 hours and making 150-250 TL per week. A Syrian CSO representative accentuated the role of civil society organizations to alleviate these hardships:

“There are Syrian women facing challenging conditions, and they should have representation. Local women’s solidarity groups should be encouraged to organize meetings with Syrian women to discuss what can be done. Professional training of Syrian women is one of the issues; if a woman can work, this will add value to the community.”⁴⁵

3.3. Integration into the Job Market:

“The strong presence of Syrians is an opportunity for Turkey. However, they are not given enough opportunities. I know Syrian lawyers and doctors; they are not allowed to work here. We just need channels; we are a potential human resource.”⁴⁶

Considering that the working-age population makes up a significant portion of the total Syrian population in Turkey, access to legal employment remains one of the most critical issues.⁴⁷ The interviewees listed the most common problems as being the language barrier, difficulties in finding jobs in specific fields of expertise (or any steady job), wages lower than the minimum allowed, and excessive working hours.⁴⁸ A Gaziantep-based Syrian businessman, stressed the unfavorable working conditions of some Syrians in Istanbul, explaining that it is possible to come across a Syrian working over 12 hours a day. He added, “The monitoring of such workplaces is important; Syrians are an added value for Turkey’s economy.”⁴⁹

⁴² Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

⁴³ See, “Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, İnsan Haklarını İnceleme Komisyonu, Mülteci Hakları Alt Komisyonu, Göç ve Uyum Raporu” [The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Human Rights Inquiry Committee Migration and Integration Report] March 2018, https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/insanhaklari/docs/2018/goc_ve_uyum_raporu.pdf

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ According to the 2016 Report by the Directorate General of Migration Management, the working-age population composes more than 45 percent of the total population, available at: http://www.goc.gov.tr/files/files/2016_goc_raporu_.pdf, page 76. Those who were granted work permits comprise a very small percentage of the total working age population. See, page 4.

⁴⁸ Also see, See, İçduygu, A and Diker, E (2017); TISK (2015) ‘Perspectives, Expectations and Suggestions of the Turkish Business Sector on Syrians in Turkey’, December.

⁴⁹ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

As the respondents of this study were predominantly professionals, one research finding is their urge for the recognition of the economically and professionally diverse profile of Syrians. As the above statement highlights, the Turkish government is strongly expected to facilitate economic integration by establishing a set of support mechanisms for the diversely skilled workforce. Most interviewees, for instance, referred to the introduction of work permits for those under temporary protection as a progressive step for promoting their economic independence.⁵⁰ However, certain conditions and restrictions in the regulation remain inadequate and problematic for those with professional or vocational qualifications.

First, as several respondents asserted, the 10 percent quota system at the workplace and the requirement to be employed in the city of registration both make it difficult to find jobs in cities like Gaziantep and Istanbul, which host sizeable populations of refugees. These requirements limit refugees' options to sectors with large numbers of workers, such as factories or the agricultural sector. Second, the respondents mentioned that employers may not legally employ Syrians to avoid paying minimum wages and social security benefits. In most of these cases, Syrians feel they cannot complain due to fear of losing their jobs and hence, continue working informally in order to sustain their livelihoods. One respondent commented that, "A Turkish citizen would never accept such treatment from their employers." A humanitarian worker also added, "I meet women every day; they don't have the luxury to attend social awareness sessions or PSS activities unless you give them something tangible to encourage. They work for 12 hours and some work even more."⁵¹

Third, refugees are finding it difficult to access jobs in their fields of expertise and receive recognition for their professional qualifications due to language and bureaucratic barriers. Work permits in health and education sectors require approvals from the Ministry of Health, Ministry of National Education, or Higher Education Council (YÖK), and respondents generally lacked information on these application procedures. For medical doctors, who find it especially difficult to legally practice their profession, the Ministry of Health has recently set up 91 immigration health centers to regulate work permits, which have so far hired 617 Syrian doctors and health workers.⁵² A Syrian running a consultancy firm in Gaziantep pointed to the lack of a proper mechanism that would regulate the recognition of Syrian professionals' higher education diplomas.⁵³ In a similar context, a Gaziantep-based Syrian dentist noted, "As a group of Syrian dentists, we referred to the local dentist association with a petition requesting work permission, to continue our profession, yet we are still waiting. We do not properly know how and to whom we should officially address to express our demand."⁵⁴

Another group expecting support from the government is Syrian entrepreneurs. According to the figures provided by the Human Development Foundation in October 2017, Syrians have set up approximately 8,100 firms in Turkey, with an investment approaching nearly \$500 million and

⁵⁰ Regulation on Work Permit of Foreigners under Temporary Protection (No 29594), 15 January 2016. Available at: <https://www.csgeb.gov.tr/en/announcements/0054/>

⁵¹ Interview, Istanbul, November 2017

⁵² See, 'Suriyeli sağlıkçılar yurttaşlarına hizmete', Milliyet, <http://www.milliyet.com.tr/suriyeli-saglikcilar-yurttaslarina-hizmete--yerelhaber-2468583/>

⁵³ Workshop notes, Gaziantep, October 2017

⁵⁴ Ibid.

provided employment for nearly 100,000 people.⁵⁵ The Syrian entrepreneurs we interviewed expressed a desire for better integration into the financial system in Turkey and improved ties with Turkish business groups and private sector actors. Syrians are also seen to contribute to the national economy and labor force. For example, there are Syrian-run businesses in Turkey's southeastern region that export products to Middle Eastern countries through their large network. There are also Syrian businessmen that have partnerships with Turkish companies; one example is a company based in the city of Balıkesir which specializes in marble production and export.⁵⁶

Syrians who have started businesses in Turkey asserted their intentions to expand over the next few years. However, the uncertainty caused by the various factors discussed above has made them feel unsafe about the future and its prospects. One interviewee suggested that being able to buy property instead of renting, for instance, may help them overcome such uncertainties and to develop a stronger sense of belonging.

3.4. Opportunities and Challenges for Syrian Refugee Children and Youth

The number of Syrian refugees belonging to the age group 5-24 in Turkey is around 1.69 million,⁵⁷ highlighting the critical educational needs at all levels. Attending Turkish public schools or temporary education centers (TECs) are the two main options available for school-age Syrian children. According to the latest figures from the Ministry of National Education, a total number of 606,796 Syrian students are enrolled at temporary education centers (in and outside camps) and public schools (see Figure 1). Most respondents welcomed the Turkish government's decision to eventually transfer all Syrian students into the public schooling system, although some voiced concerns that their children may forget their mother language and that adaptation to the Turkish schools will take time. Major limitations raised by the Syrian respondents on the TECs were the poor quality of education, isolated schooling environment for children, and lack of experienced teachers who have the ability to deal with refugee students, who often require psychological support.

They noted their positive experiences of Turkish schools, but highlighted certain issues that remain unclear for many. First, although the central-level policy on education is clear, local-level implementation is at times problematic; some families faced resistance or refusal from school principals when registering their children. As one research participant put it, "At the schools it is not rare that they treat us impolitely and ask for additional documents on purpose. Our kids suffer

⁵⁵ See, "Syrian businesses in Turkey provide 100,000 jobs," <https://www.dailysabah.com/economy/2017/10/21/syrian-businesses-in-turkey-provide-100000-jobs>

⁵⁶ See, "Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, İnsan Haklarını İnceleme Komisyonu, Mülteci Hakları Alt Komisyonu, Göç ve Uyum Raporu" [The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Human Rights Inquiry Committee Migration and Integration Report] March 2018, page 259, available at https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/insanhaklari/docs/2018/goc_ve_uyum_raporu.pdf

⁵⁷ As of March, 2018 - See, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik

from the same type of behavior during school times and do not want to go again”⁵⁸. Syrian families worry that such kind of behavior hurts children’s sense of belonging and further creates an obstacle for social integration.

Second, the language barrier is a challenge for both teachers and students until students become fluent in Turkish. The same problem applies to the families as well. Third is the discrimination and bullying of Syrian refugee children at public schools; and it is a social issue that necessitates authorities’ immediate attention. A respondent working as a lawyer in Gaziantep explained that his daughter cries every day after returning from school because a Turkish student told her that her father had asked her not to talk to Syrians, “because they are bad.”⁵⁹

For refugee parents with children attending the 9th grade, they want their children to have more options than continuing general high schools, as they want them to pursue more ambitious futures. Despite their high academic performance, some asserted a lack opportunity to continue to prestigious Turkish public high schools, such as the Science High Schools. In general, doing so is regarded as a positive step that would help students integrate into the host community and receive high-quality education, which will help them attend Turkish universities.

The number of Syrian students at the university level in Turkey reached more than 15,000 in the academic year of 2016-2017, with the highest distributions being in Gaziantep University and Istanbul University.⁶⁰ Among the total number, 83 percent are undergraduate students, 8 percent are post-graduate students, only 2 percent are doctoral candidates, and 7 percent pursue associate degree programs. When university students were asked to reflect on education, they said it has helped them become part of the Turkish community, especially through learning the language and making friends.

A young university student highlighted generational differences on perceptions of returning to Syria, saying “My dad keeps saying that he would go back the day the war ends. I don’t think many young people like myself who are studying in Turkey would agree with him. We would not go back immediately. I need to improve myself if I am going to rebuild my country, I need this education and training opportunity in Turkey.”⁶¹

⁵⁸ Workshop, Gaziantep, October 2017

⁵⁹ Workshop, Gaziantep, October 2017

⁶⁰ See, “Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, İnsan Haklarını İnceleme Komisyonu, Mülteci Hakları Alt Komisyonu, Göç ve Uyum Raporu” [The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Human Rights Inquiry Committee Migration and Integration Report] March 2018, pages 138-145, available at https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/komisyon/insanhaklari/docs/2018/goc_ve_uyum_raporu.pdf

⁶¹ Interview, Istanbul, December 2017

3.5. The Role of Syrian Civil Society

Since the early years of the crisis, the emergence of Syrian NGOs and INGOs working with refugees has given many Syrians the opportunity to work and actively participate in social life. Some of the challenges—as explained by the Syrian NGO worker respondents—could be summarized as follows. The lack of cooperation between Turkish and Syrian NGOs was the first challenge highlighted. Syrian NGO representatives mentioned that there was more of willingness at the beginning but that now the local NGOs are more hesitant to engage with Syrian ones. This is particularly problematic to small organizations that have limited funds and require partnerships with larger national NGOs. Second, despite being registered as local Turkish organizations, the participants said they faced barriers in carrying out activities. In the words of a respondent, “We need an official approval to organize an activity. We have been working on organizing a Syrian-Turkish culture week recently. We are undergoing security clearances, we get them, but in the end, we cannot get approval.”⁶² Third, NGOs found it difficult to get work permits for their employees. While Turkish NGOs, in their view, can start working relatively easy, their multiple requests—including those on work permits—were denied on grounds of being incomplete. Some respondents expressed the need to overcome mistrust issues with Syrian NGOs and believed it would help them work more effectively.

Self-critique was voiced by a research participant as well: “We have been living in this society for five years and are still not able to unite and organize unofficial but efficient platforms to raise our needs.” There was consensus that Syrians in Turkey need an umbrella platform, at least one in each city, to facilitate societal integration. It was also thought to be ideal if such a body could function under municipalities so that refugees could work together with local authorities and build trust with the local population for joint initiatives.

4. Policy Recommendations

In light of the fieldwork findings and reflections from the workshop activities, the following recommendations target the Syrian community in Turkey and could contribute to a policy-making process which improves their protection and social integration:

Social inclusion:

- Solution-oriented and sustainable policies are crucial to addressing the long-term needs and expectations of the Syrian community.
- To improve social integration, the Syrian community should, as much as possible, be encouraged to join decision-making processes.
- To provide more opportunities of interaction with the host community, the establishment of social spaces—such as community centers in different neighborhoods—would be beneficial.
- The language barrier remains a prevalent factor that impedes social inclusion. The Syrian respondents emphasize the importance of further efforts to offer Turkish language courses for both children and the adult-age community.
- It is important to utilize the effective use of media tools in raising awareness towards Syrians among the local community. This would help avoiding negative perceptions or stereotypes against Syrians.

Legal status and representation:

- The Syrian community expressed sincere gratitude for Turkey's continuous support and hospitality towards them yet highlighted the need to eliminate ambiguities in their legal status, which have a direct impact on their sense of belonging and lives in the public space.
- Effective communication channels can be established between local authorities and the Syrian community to improve Syrians' general awareness of the legal procedures and their rights. Official or semi-official bodies at the local level—which can directly address Syrian community's inquiries and requests—may sometimes avoid communication due to the language barrier within the bureaucratic system.

- The role of local governments is essential to facilitate the interaction between the Syrian community and local authorities. Encouraging the participation of Syrians in local government platforms—like refugee councils operating in certain municipalities—would have a positive effect on the communication between both sides.
- Access to updated information on legal procedures—including residence and work permits as well as those related to legal rights—is a main expectation among the Syrian community for which user-friendly online information platforms could be promoted.

On youth and women:

- Syrian women and children appear to be in greater need of protection, and the establishment of local units to which they can turn to for support and assistance should be encouraged.
- Further initiatives that can broaden the employability prospects of Syrian women, especially through vocational trainings and income-generating activities, are recommended.
- Syrian parents appreciate the education service provided to their children. To improve dialogue between children, parents, and school administrations, well-designed school integration strategies, such as training of teachers, are helpful to ensure the positive experience of Syrian students.
- Another expectation of Syrian parents is the provision of Turkish language courses to their children before they start school, as they believe this would help children build better relations with their peers, teachers, and school administration.

Integration into the Job Market:

- To enable the economic integration of the Syrian community, inclusive strategies are needed for two reasons: first, to facilitate Syrians' access to legal employment; and second, to establish support mechanisms which can address the diverse needs of skilled professionals, and therefore, facilitate their entry into the work force. Such economic initiatives might also contribute to Syrians' social acceptance and inclusion.
- The Syrian community's needs are expected to be considered in the regulation of the work permit scheme. Overcoming the challenges in diploma equivalency for Syrian professionals, notably those in the health and education sectors, would help them find employment. Lifting restrictions on labor market access for certain medical occupations, such as dentistry, could also be taken into consideration.

- The law on the international workforce (2016), which introduces the 'Turquoise System' for high-skilled foreigners, does not include Syrians under temporary protection. To strengthen the existing labor force, Syrians—notably those whose qualifications are expected to make significant contribution to national economy, investments as well as science and technology—could be incorporated to this system, or similar incentives could be formed.
- Syrian entrepreneurs and investors can receive more support to do business in Turkey with the support of the private sector and international stakeholders.

Empowerment of civil society:

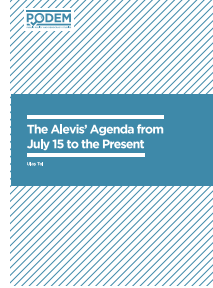
- There is a visible need to empower the Syrian civil society groups in Turkey that try to support the Syrian community and voice their challenges. Joint activities between local civil society organizations and Syrian CSOs are encouraged to foster a sense of trust towards the latter and improve their recognition among the public. Through enhancing their capacities, Syrian CSOs can also contribute by improving the dialogue among Syrians, the host community, and the local authorities.

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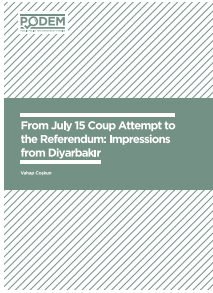
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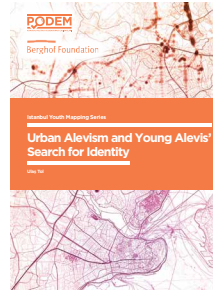
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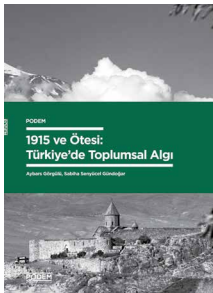
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Kamusal Politika ve Demokrasi alıřmaları
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ISBN: 978-605-67530-4-6

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