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Data Brief:

The EU-Turkey Deal as a successful Blueprint?

New Data on the Wellbeing of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the escalating humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, the 2016 EU-Turkey Deal is again being discussed as a possible blueprint for the European management of humanitarian displacement. This brief seeks to provide context to this discussion by shedding light on the group most affected by the existing agreement between Turkey and the EU – Syrian refugees in Turkey, using new data on the wellbeing of Syrian refugees in Turkey gathered by the TRANSMIT project. Focusing on the four key dimensions of employment, livelihood, education and healthcare access it provides evidence that five years later, the EU-Turkey deal is far from the universal success some want to perceive.

PREFACE

In March of 2016 the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Turkey published a Joint Statement regarding the heightened migration dynamic in the region. The explicit goal of the statement was the curbing of irregular migration of asylum seekers towards Europe. This was to be achieved by increasing Turkish border enforcement, mutual return and repatriation arrangements and a commitment by the EU to contribute 6 billion Euros to ensure humane conditions for the more than 2.5 million – primarily Syrian – refugees residing in Turkey.

The agreement that came to be known as the EU-Turkey Deal was widely criticized at the time and remains controversial over five years later (Düvell et al., 2020). Despite this criticism, the central tenants of the agreement – externalizing the burden of providing refuge to forcefully displaced populations to countries neighboring the conflict in exchange for financial contributions – appear to maintain their status as a blueprint for EU migration management in the minds of many European policy makers. This was made evident once more by a statement published by the EU following an emergency meeting of the union’s ministers of home affairs on August 31st 2021, in response to the withdrawal of all western forces from Afghanistan and the subsequent seizure of power by the Taliban (Council of the EU, 2021).

Info Box: TRANSMIT – Transnational Perspectives on Migration and Integration

TRANSMIT is a migration research project of the DeZIM-Forschungsgemeinschaft and funded by the German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The project studies the complex interplay of migration dynamics, migrant wellbeing and integration processes by building a transnational data-infrastructure that collects and links quantitative and qualitative data and knowledge on origin-, transit-, and destination countries.

In addition to Turkey, TRANSMIT collects data in Lebanon, Morocco, Italy, Nigeria, Senegal, the Gambia, and Germany

Much has been written about the EU-Turkey Deal and its potential as a blueprint for European migration management (Düvell et al., 2020; Haferlach & Kurban, 2017; Terry, 2021). But whether critical or supportive of the deal, these discussions focus predominantly on the perspective of European and Turkish policy makers, on whether migration was truly curbed, sufficient political leverage was gained and on the political price paid.

In contrast, this data brief seeks to illuminate the discussion on the merits of the EU-Turkey Deal by shedding light on the life and wellbeing of those most affected by it: The Syrian population in Turkey. It does so by presenting novel data on four dimensions in which the EU-Turkey Deal and the transfer

of European funds it entails were supposed to afford great support to displaced Syrians: Employment, livelihood, education and healthcare access.

DATA

The data presented in this brief was collected in a quantitative face-to-face survey in late 2020 and early 2021 as part of the TRANSMIT project.¹ The data collection targeted a representative sample of the Syrian population in Turkey, as well as of the Turkish communities they resided in at the time of the interview. To this end, a stratified random sample was drawn of 3045 households across 23 Turkish cities (selected based on share of Syrian population), evenly split between the two strata of Syrian (1533) and host population (1512). In addition to the 3045 main respondents, the survey includes information on 8,007 household members as well as 5,301 additional close family members living outside the sampled households.

EMPLOYMENT: HIGH MALE EMPLOYMENT BUT PRECARIOUS CONDITIONS

To achieve self-sufficiency and a sustainable economic perspective for displaced Syrians, access to gainful employment is nothing short of essential. A superficial look at the employment rate among Syrian respondents may give rise to a carefully optimistic view in this regard. Yet, the breakdown of employment statistics provided in Table 1 reveals a severe gender inequality in labor market participation that is even more pronounced among Syrian households than their Turkish counterparts.

Table 1: Employment Statistics by Strata

Employment statistics	Republic of Turkey		Syrian	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Currently Employed	69.0%	34.7%	74.6%	27.8%
Average hours worked per week	47.81 hrs (SD=18.95)	41.74 hrs (SD=17.16)	49.30 hrs (SD=19.15)	41.44 hrs (SD=21.92)
Employment Type				
Private Sector	62.7%	69.6%	18.0%	14.4%
Public Sector	14.4%	15.0%	3.2%	1.7%
Self-employed	16.0%	9.4%	18.8%	22.2%
Daily wage worker	7.0%	5.9%	59.9%	61.7%
Type of Labor Predominantly Manual Labor	34.4%	15.6%	51.0%	13.9%

Source: TRANSMIT Turkey Wave 1 (2020/2021)
 Note: N=3045, with 49 refusals, 2 individuals reporting gender as ‘other’ omitted, Average hours worked and employment type only for employed respondents

Fundamental differences in labor market outcomes between Syrian and Turkish respondents become evident when taking a closer look at the type of employment performed by the two groups. While the vast majority of Turkish respondents finds employment in the formal private or public sector, Syrian

¹ All data presented in this brief is preliminary and remains subject to final cleaning and approval.

respondents rely predominantly on self-employment and daily wage work; both employment categories that provide little security and that are commonly associated with informal work. This informal nature of Syrian employment in Turkey is further evident in the fact that 81.8% of employed Syrians lack employer-provided social-security insurance. Whereas only 22.5% of employed Turkish individuals lacked these benefits typically tied to formal employment.

While a 2016 Regulation on Work Permits of Refugees under Temporary Protection Status (TPS) allows Syrians registered with the Turkish government to apply for work permits through their potential employer, the process is widely regarded as exceedingly complex and restrictive (Siviş, 2021). Consequently, only a small fraction of working-age Syrians has successfully applied for such a permit (Rottmann, 2020). The large number of Syrian workers reliant on informal work lack any form of legal protection and are commonly exposed to maltreatment, undercutting of the Turkish minimum wage and wage theft (Baban et al., 2017).

Informal employment also renders a large fraction of the Syrian population in Turkey exceedingly vulnerable to further disruptions and crises. For example, 45% of Syrian respondents reported that they lost their job or another source of income as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas only 9.9% of Turkish respondents reported the same.

LIVELIHOOD: INCOMES TOO LOW TO MEET BASIC NEEDS

The precarious nature of employment of many Syrians helps explain the fact that, five years after the EU-Turkey Deal and a decade into the civil war, Syrian livelihood in Turkey remains severely threatened. As illustrated in Figure 1, over 40% of Syrian households in the sample lack sufficient income to meet basic needs, including 15.2% that reported not being able to afford food. This renders the Syrians population twice as likely to suffer from deprivation than their Turkish counterparts.

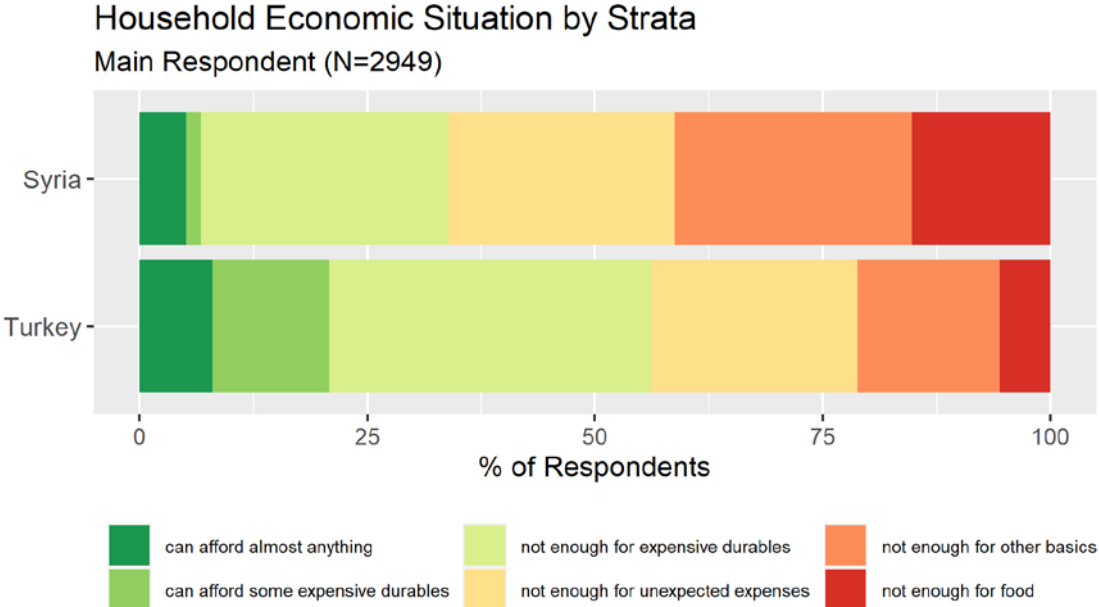


Figure 1: Household Economic Situation, Population Shares by Strata

Furthermore, 72.7% of Syrians respondents reported living with a monthly household income of less than 3000 Turkish Lira.² In September of 2020, according to the Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions (TÜRK-İŞ), the poverty line for a family of four stood at 7973 Turkish Lira.³ For reference, the average Syrian household in the sample has 4.8 members.

The Facility for Refugees in Turkey (FRIT) program, funded by part of the 6 billion Euros the EU committed to supporting the refugee population in the EU-Turkey Deal, was intended to prevent such deprivation. Key instruments of the EU funding program to provide direct cash transfers to Syrian households most in need are the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN), and Conditional Cash Transfers for Education (CCTE) (Kirişçi, 2021). These programs in particular have resulted in the widely held belief among Turkish citizens that all Syrian refugees live entirely off of generous stipends provided by the Turkish government.

Yet, the data reveals that less than a third of Syrian households (28.0%) report receiving any aid or government transfers and among the households that do receive aid or transfers, 66.1% report at least one additional source of income.

EDUCATION: ECONOMIC BARRIERS TO ACCESS REMAIN

Ensuring children’s access to age-appropriate education must be considered an essential tenant of any sustainable displacement management framework and features prominently among the goals of the EU funding programs in the wake of the EU-Turkey deal. TPS formally grants Syrians access to education at any level and programs such as CCTE aim at elevating any remaining economic barriers.

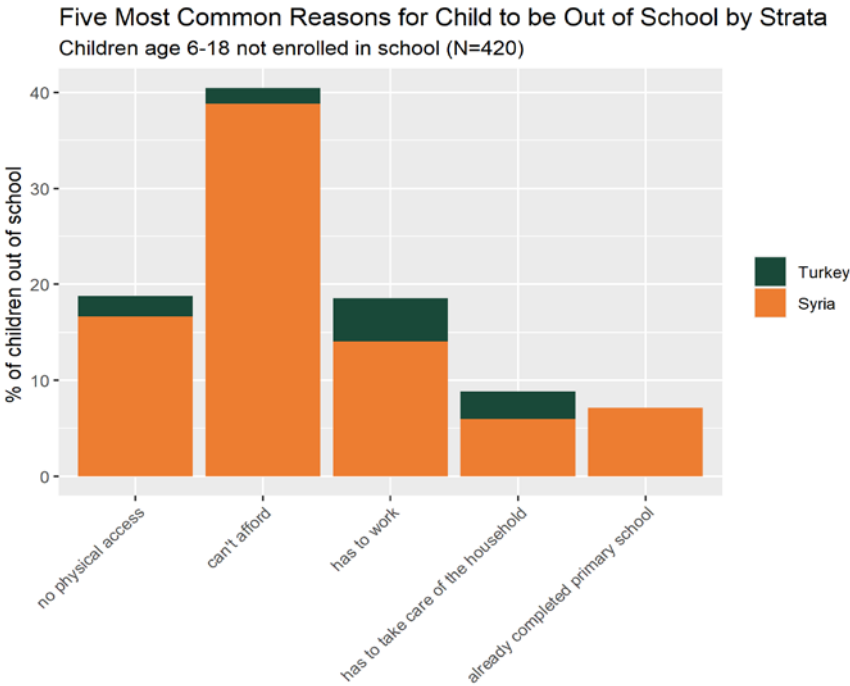


Figure 2: Top five reasons for school-aged Children (6-18 years) to not attend school by strata

² Note: exact household income numbers are not reported due to nonresponse of 23.2% of Turkish and 9.3% Syrians respondents likely biasing results

³ <http://www.turkis.org.tr/default.asp?lng=1>

Yet, our analyses suggest that substantial barriers to school access for school-aged Syrian children remain. Of the 1,388 Syrian children between the ages of 6 and 18 included in the survey, about a quarter (355) was reported as not currently attending school; an incidence rate roughly four times higher than among Turkish households.

As Figure 2 illustrates, financial constraints are the most commonly cited reason for this disproportionate school absence of Syrian children. 40.4% of households with at least one school-aged child not currently enrolled in school, the vast majority of whom are Syrian, cite a lack of affordability as a reason. The next-most commonly cited reasons – no physical access and the need for the child to contribute to the household or family income – are also clear signs of economic constraints at the household level.

Gaps also remain in the area of adult education, where lack of Turkish proficiency is commonly reported as a central barrier to integration and well-being of Syrians in Turkey. One in four Syrian respondents to the TRANSMIT survey rated their ability to speak Turkish as less than satisfactory. That rate climbs to one in three when asked about written Turkish proficiency.

HEALTHCARE ACCESS: FREE PROVISION SHOWS SIGNS OF MODERATE SUCCESS

In the wake of conflict-related migration, the provision of emergency care and treatment of acute mental and physical conditions resulting from violence and deprivation are undoubtedly critical. However, the protracted displacement of Syrians in Turkey also calls for long-term access to regular care. Turkey responded to this need by providing free access to healthcare to all Syrians registered under TPS through the Ministry of Health. This provision, though, is limited to migrants residing in the province they are registered in. Unregistered migrants are only eligible for free emergency care (Alawa et al., 2019). Starting in 2015 and supported by EU funds the Turkish government established dedicated Migrant Health Clinics to further improve access to primary care (Alawa et al., 2019).

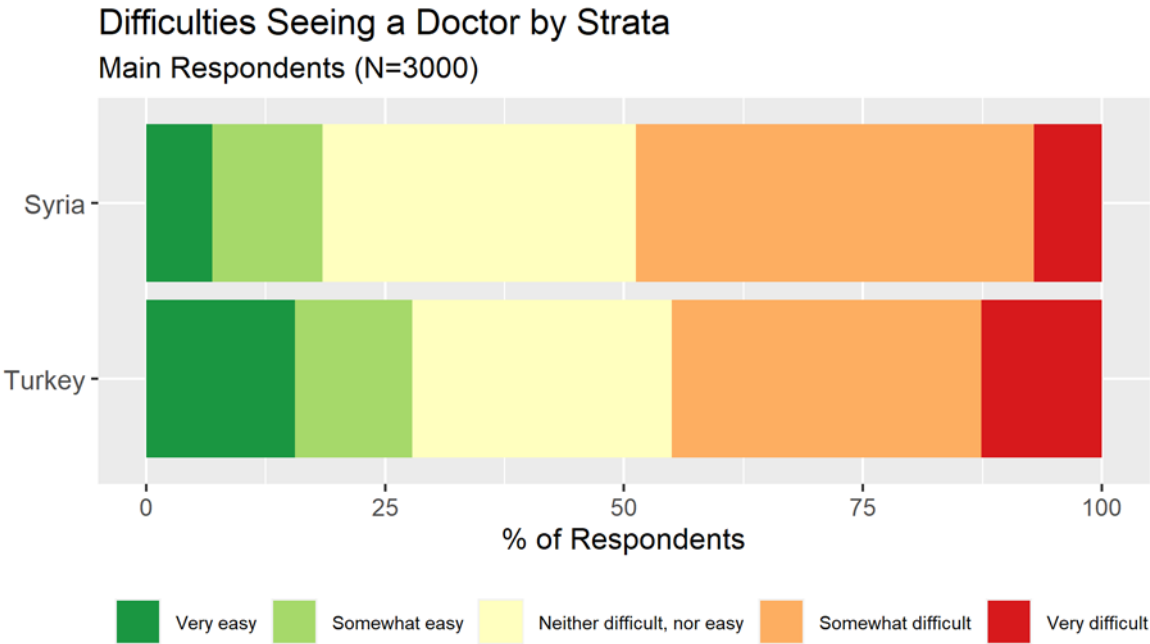


Figure 3: Perceived Difficulty Seeing a Doctor, Population Share by Strata

Figure 3 suggests that these efforts to ensure healthcare access for Syrians were moderately successful. 6.9% of Syrian respondents rate their ability to see a doctor as “very easy” (compared to 15.6% of Turkish respondents). Yet, at 7.1%, Syrians are also considerably less likely than their Turkish counterparts to report their access as very difficult. Not captured in this study, but frequently reported as an area of considerable unmet need is the access to mental health services for the Syrian population (Chen, 2021).

CONCLUSION

The data presented in this brief cautions against a blanket endorsement of the EU-Turkey Deal as a successful blueprint for the management of future displacement crises. Despite laudable efforts to improve the status of Syrians in Turkey in the dimensions of employment, livelihood, education and healthcare access, crucial gaps remain. Five years after the agreement and a decade into the Syrian civil war, many Syrian households remain in a highly precarious position in Turkey.

Despite a legal possibility of receiving a working permit, most Syrian workers remain in unstable informal employment, leaving them vulnerable to loss of income and abuse. These labor market conditions undoubtedly contribute to the large number of Syrian households that find themselves without the means to meet even basic needs. The provision of cash transfers and other EU-funded programs have not been able to prevent severe deprivation among the Syrian population. Economic constraints also prevent many Syrian children from taking advantage of the access to education their protected status is supposed to ensure, putting both their current and future wellbeing at risk. Of the studied dimensions, healthcare access is the only one where Syrians do not significantly lack behind their Turkish counterparts. Syrian and Turkish perceptions of ease of access to a medical doctor appear comparable across the sample.

These lived realities of Syrians in Turkey should be considered when deriving “lessons learned” from the EU-Turkey deal, as the challenges described in this brief are very likely to be encountered in other regional migration contexts, such as the newly sparked humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan.

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ABOUT MERGE

The cross-border movements of migrants, particularly across the Middle East, have recently been a signifier of the urgency for a transnational approach in social sciences. Indeed, several countries in the region have undergone multidirectional migration patterns across different geographies. Therefore, a nascent scholarship has emerged to espouse a transnational perspective to analyze social, economic, and cultural facets of major developments beyond the state-centric logic of territoriality.

However, a great deal of scholarship still appears to portray the Middle East region merely as a “migration sending” heartland, mostly in the direction of Europe and thus overlooks the broader picture. We rather adopt a multidimensional and multidisciplinary approach, seeing societies as dynamic and fluid communities.

As a research network based in the Berlin Institute for Integration and Migration Research (BIM), the MERGE aspires to harness the power of collective thinking to expand the scope of conventional approaches and explore the burgeoning dynamics of migration and mobility within the Middle East.

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The word "MERGE" is written in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font. Each letter is filled with a white, intricate network of lines and dots, resembling a complex web or a molecular structure. The lines connect various points, creating a sense of interconnectedness and movement.