

## ***How to Co-exist? Urban Refugees in Turkey: Prospects and Challenges***

*Birce ALTIOK and Salih TOSUN  
Koç University*

*Turkey currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world in which 3.5 million are registered Syrian refugees under temporary protection regime with access to certain welfare provisions living in the urban settings. While the level of absorbance of refugees in such mass scale into the society is high despite high public disfavour against Syrians' presence in the country, yet, this general reception of refugees leaves open space for better inclusion of refugees and to minimize public disapproval with certain policy guidelines. This policy brief reviews and assesses public tensions both at state and societal level based on the data from existing surveys and reports, and compares them with the data obtained from in-depth interviews with bureaucrats and Syrian refugees based on their experience in the urban space. The present paper focuses on three dimensions, which are found to be key elements in forming up the public disfavour: (1) perceived cultural and ethnic threat, (2) economic competition over resources and rights (3) ambiguous political agenda at state level. The brief concludes by providing key policy guidelines for state and civil society actors to better formulate mutual communication and understanding concerning future policies with the possibility of having a positive impact on lessening public tension with migrant communities.*

*Keywords: Urban tension, refugee, Turkey*

## INTRODUCTION

The seventh year of the Syrian civil war has displaced more than ten million people, including 5.6 million seeking safety in the neighbouring countries and beyond. Among which, Turkey currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world and more than 3.5 million are registered Syrian refugees under temporary protection regime with access to certain welfare provisions. Since 92% of Syrians live in urban centers,<sup>1</sup> this brings forth the importance of the prospects for and challenges to integration within the urban context. With exceptions of case-by-case incidents and against high public disfavour as mentioned below, the level of absorbance of refugees in such mass scale into the society is high and this presents an open space for better inclusion of refugees and interaction with the local community with certain policy guidelines.

This policy brief aims to unpack this dilemma of hospitality and hostility going hand in hand by putting state's intentional ambiguous refugee policy at the center. The introduction reviews and assesses the public tensions both at state and societal levels based on the existing surveys and reports, and compares it with the data obtained from in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees based on their experience in the urban space. Then, the policy brief focuses on three dimensions, as stated in *Figure 1*, which are found to be key elements in forming up the public disfavour: (1) perceived cultural and ethnic threat, (2) economic competition over resources and rights, (3) ambiguous political agenda at state level. The brief concludes by providing certain key policy guidelines for state and civil society actors by focusing on improving the ambiguous aspects of the current refugee policies to better formulate mutual communication and understanding in future policies with the possibility of having a positive impact on lessening public tension with

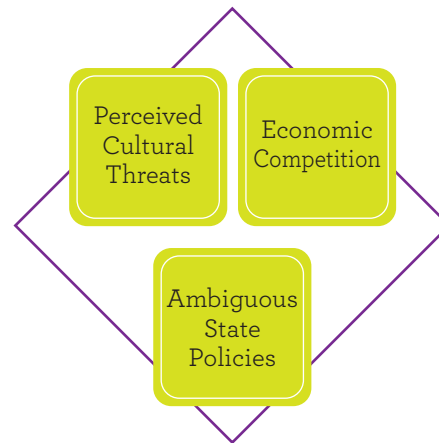


Figure 1. Main Drivers of Public Disfavour against Syrians

migrant communities.

The public debate with regards to refugees is interlinked with the politicization of the Syrian issue due to protracted nature of the crisis (Kirişci, 2014; Nielsen, 2016; İçduygu, 2017). In addition to case-by-case tensions reported by the media<sup>2</sup> (Habertürk, 2017; Diken, 2017; Cumhuriyet, 2017), public surveys and reports display that there is a rigid public disfavour against refugees' long stay (Aksoy Araştırma, 2017; Uyan-Semerci et al., 2014). Additionally, incidents of intercommunal violence between the local communities and Syrian refugees increased threefold in the second half of 2017 compared to the same period in 2016 (International Crisis Group, 2018).<sup>3</sup> While these reported violent incidents are mostly case specific, and covered in the media, it is most likely that many violent actions have gone unreported.

Therefore, by acknowledging these tensions and difficulties to overcome them, the social cohesion requires thinking within the boundaries of refugee-host community dynamics. Hence, it is important to look at public perception surveys to

<sup>1</sup> Excluding the number of unregistered and others living with residence permits, the number of Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Turkey reached 3,588,877 as of April 2018. For more detailed statistical information, please visit the website of the Directorate General of Migration Management [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-korumu\\_363\\_378\\_4713\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-korumu_363_378_4713_icerik)  
<sup>2</sup> Selected news sources: Habertürk (2017) "Suriyelilerin ev ve iş yerlerine taşlı, sopalı saldırı." [Attacks on Syrians' houses and workshops with stones and sticks] Available at <http://www.haberturk.com/suriyelilerin-ev-ve-is-yerlerine-tasli-sopali-saldiri-1699746>; Diken (2017) "İzmir'de Suriyelilere saldırı: 500 mülteci mahalleyi terk etmek zorunda kaldı." [Attack on Syrians in Izmir: 500 refugees were forced to leave the neighbourhood] Available at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/332359/kucukcekmede-suriyelilere-saldiri-2>; Cumhuriyet (2017) "Elazığ'da Şuriyelilerin iş yerlerine saldırı." [Attack on Syrians' workshops in Elazığ] Available at: [http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1074517/Elazig\\_da\\_Suriyelilerin\\_is\\_yerlerine\\_saldiri.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/turkiye/1074517/Elazig_da_Suriyelilerin_is_yerlerine_saldiri.html)  
<sup>3</sup> In total, at least 35 people died including 24 Syrians in this period. See, Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions. Europe Report. no. 248. January 28, 2018. Available at: <https://d2071andvipowj.cloudfront.net/248-turkey-s-syrian-refugees.pdf>. As a result of this increased violence, the Ministry of Interior Affairs made the following statement with regards to incorrect news: <https://www.icisleri.gov.tr/basin-aciklamasi05072017>

comprehend the scope of inherent tensions that can easily turn into violent actions or xenophobic attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as these extreme incidents cannot be generalizable, high level of absorbance of the refugees and the existing hospitality in the society should not be downplayed. In general, public surveys display mixed signals of hospitality and hostility going hand in hand towards the refugees.

To start with public opinion surveys, the Syrian Barometer conducted by Murat Erdoğan (2018) evaluates Turkish citizens' attitudes to Syrians. The results display 57.8% of Turkish citizens see Syrians as "victim people escaping war/persecution",<sup>5</sup> "religious brothers / sisters" (20.3%), "guests in our country" (20.3%), "quite different and foreign people to us" (18%), "minding their own business, harmless people" (14.6%) (Erdoğan, 2018). Yet, this is followed by a high percentage of Syrians being "liability to us" (43%), "dangerous people who will cause trouble in the future" (39%) and "beggars/living on aids" (24.4%). Erdoğan's study scrutinizes on Turkish citizens' emotional distance from the Syrians and the unreal solidarity myth presented by top-down political agenda referencing the "ensar-muhajir" relation for the Syrians (Erdoğan, 2018). While Erdoğan's survey results emphasize Turkish citizens' exclusionary and distant feelings towards Syrians, other studies from a different survey titled as "Research on Polarization's Dimensions in Turkey" also reaches similar results in which 86.2% of the survey participants who voted for major parties in Turkey finds the largest common ground for agreeing on "Syrians should be sent back to their country once the war in Syria has ended", supportive of the general public disfavour of Syrian refugees.<sup>6</sup>

Taking into account their prolonged stay in Turkey<sup>7</sup> and the on-going conflict in Syria, the long-term plans regarding harmonization and minimizing public disfavour of refugee community should be followed. Access to welfare provisions provided under temporary protection

for Syrians continue to embrace problems on a daily basis, and solution mechanisms do not target a comprehensive integration measures to overcome the problems of public tension. The root causes of these problems, such as cultural and economic competition threats are not always mutually exclusive, rather they usually exist side by side. Turkey is an example of these intertwined causes that are heavily influenced by the ambiguous political agenda containing inconsistent statements declared simultaneously such as citizenship and repatriation. As a result of such mixed signals and policies adopted simultaneously, instead of following solution-based agendas to minimize public disfavour towards Syrians, underlying causes of tensions have been greatly ignored, in which we focus on the economic competition, cultural and ethnic threats perceived by the local communities.

#### PERCEIVED CULTURAL THREAT

The first challenge this policy brief addresses is the perceived cultural threat despite both communities sharing historical ties and Islamic affinity. In general, perceived cultural threat emerges as people come across with groups whose culture, ethnicity or language differ, because they fear of losing the cultural cohesiveness or ethnic uniformity.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, people have anti-migrant attitudes to maintain their own cultures and values (McLaren, 2002; Sides and Citrin, 2007). A recent report shows that there is less tension between refugees and local community in bordering provinces such as Gaziantep, Kilis and Şanlıurfa because of cultural continuity such as speaking Arabic or Kurdish, or ethnic ties (International Crisis Group, 2018). Whereas, the report mentions the existence of more tension in major urban cities such as Izmir and Istanbul in which cultural boundaries between two communities are more rigid and apparent. Lack of interaction between two communities due to language barriers or locational conglomeration of the refugees in urban settings reinforce and reproduce these

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the spread of fake news of a rape to 5-years old girl in social media that turned into violent outbreak in the neighborhood against Syrian shops, showing hostility toward the refugees. Star (2017) "Ankara Demetevler'de gerginlik yaşandı." [Tension in Demetevler, Ankara.] Available at: <http://www.star.com.tr/guncel/ankara-demetevlerde-gerginlik-yasandi-haber-1233440/>.

<sup>5</sup> Similar results are also affirmed by Konda Barometer (2016): Perceptions toward Syrian Refugees. Available at: [http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/1602\\_Barometre62\\_SURIYELI\\_SIGINMACILAR.pdf](http://konda.com.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/1602_Barometre62_SURIYELI_SIGINMACILAR.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Hürriyet Daily News (2018) "Politically polarized Turkey finds largest common ground in Syrian refugees' return." Available at: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/politically-polarized-turkey-finds-largest-common-ground-in-syrian-refugees-return-126873>

<sup>7</sup> In addition to their prolonged stay, most people in Turkey think that Syrians will not return to Syria in the near future. (See note 5).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, the spread of fake news of a rape to 5-years old girl in social media that turned into violent outbreak in the neighborhood against Syrian shops, showing For example, see Ben-Nun Bloom, Pazit, Gizem Arıkan, and Gallya Lahav. "The Effect of Perceived Cultural and Material Threats on Immigration Attitudes." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 10 (2015): 778.

boundaries and contribute to realizations of tensional attitudes. A public survey conducted by Erdoğan (2018) mentions that 80% of the Turkish society could not find any resemblance between themselves and the Syrians. In other words, they culturally place themselves in a different position compared to the Syrians. Our fieldwork also shows public disfavour is not solely directed at the Syrians, but towards differing outlooks and cultural practices.<sup>9</sup> We observe that many of our interviewees have tendencies to react with xenophobic rhetoric when there are manifestations of distinguishing cultural practices such as speaking Arabic, young Syrian males gathering in the neighbourhoods, smoking shisha until late hours in the parks or Iranian men holding hands while walking on the street as part of their culture which symbolizes a gesture of friendship.<sup>10</sup> These examples inherently involve the possibility of turning into tensions for cases interpreted as extreme or non-acceptable behaviours by the locals.

Areas of tensions also reveal itself in the form of competition. For instance, information provided in the mother tongue to Syrians, yet, restrained from the Kurdish minority, e.g. Syrians are allowed to use Arabic in their boards interpreted by the Kurds as a competition over right to mother tongue.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, cultural threat perception can also include other forms of xenophobia, discrimination and othering. For the cultural threat, as cultural boundaries get more stratified due to the lack of interaction, negative societal perception increase towards the Syrians that reveals manifestations of Syrians not accepting Turkish norms and values (Erdoğan, 2018), therefore, the local interpretation again involves the threat element to their culture.

Perceived cultural threat is again intertwined with other underlying causes of the tension. As displayed below, cultural threat and economic

competition over resources goes hand in hand including ethnic dimension. For instance, due to the replacement of local Kurdish workers who generally work in the informal economy, by Syrian refugees in Işıkkent district in the city of Izmir, there were small incidents of clashes and two large-scale protests in 2013 and 2014 (International Crisis Group, 2018). During our fieldwork, a syndicate member also confirmed the uneasiness of Kurdish workers, who composes the majority of labour force, with the presence of Syrians in Işıkkent. There are also similar incidents reported in the towns where two communities compete for seasonal agricultural work (T24, 2017). For example, local people in Torbalı demolished Syrians' tents and forced them to leave the town after a rumour that a Syrian had beaten a child (T24, 2017). Therefore, threat perception is also applicable to cases in which conflicts of interest emerge, and interlinked with ethnicity, competition over resources as well as competition over rights.

### ECONOMIC COMPETITION OVER RESOURCES

Another underlying cause of tensions is economic competition over resources. Citizens in receiving countries perceive immigrants as a threat as they start filling positions for cheap labour, posing a risk to their employment and forcing citizens to compete for the same job for lower standards, hence, this creates tensions between the local and refugee communities (Citrin et al., 1997; O'rourke and Sinnott, 2006). Together with high unemployment rates and Syrians providing cheap labour to the informal economy (Kaygısız, 2017), it is no surprise that unemployed citizens in particularly working in sectors such as textile or seasonal agriculture feel threatened by the presence of refugees who start filling their positions. State policies in this regard overlooks at

<sup>9</sup> This study benefits from the qualitative analysis of data collected for Altıok's ongoing doctoral dissertation on state policies, civil society and refugees' experiences in Turkey between the 2015-2018 period. The fieldwork data in Fatih and Sultangazi was part of the research as they are densely populated districts with Syrian refugees. Syrian translator was present during all interviews. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with fifty Syrian respondents composed of different age groups, gender, occupation, religiosity and income levels. Additionally, interviews with twelve key political actors including nine bureaucrats and three workers at government supported organizations were also conducted during this period to comprehend the nature of state policies regarding refugees. Due to the interviewees' requests, some names and institutions are kept anonymous.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., interviews conducted with the locals in Sultangazi, Istanbul, 15 October 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Yet, studies also affiliate Kurdish cities that was long exposed to the state of emergency result in more acceptance of Syrians into their society, for the eastern provinces. See, Getmansky, Anna, Tolga Sınmazdemir, and Thomas Zeitzoff. "Refugees, Xenophobia, and Domestic Conflict." *Journal of Peace Research*, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted with the President of the Union for Leather, Shoemaker and Textile Workers, Izmir, 26 December 2017.

the issue of informal market filled with workers without social security, either previously by other citizens and immigrants, or recently by refugees. During our interviews with bureaucrats, the justification of turning a blind eye to insecure employment is referred as “flexible job opportunity” in which no other option is realistic to include refugees to the economy fully entitled to labour rights. Instead of gradual transformation, the state prefers workers’ precarious situation to persist due to pragmatic concerns instead of finding long-term solutions to the problem. Although the work permits for refugees enacted by the Turkish government in 2016, no comprehensive regulations and inspections are conducted regarding labour status and employment conditions of the refugees. On the one hand, this creates latent prospects for refugees to find jobs, though being insecure, to make a living as the state downplays their informality regardless of regulations passed; on the other hand, these so-called flexible and informal economic integration practices create significant challenges for refugees forcing them to live by precarious work conditions, producing child-labour. As this policy brief stresses, it also fuels tensions with the local community.

It is estimated that more than 600.000 Syrians currently work in the informal sector; only around 20.000 obtained work permits in 2017 (see Table 1), mostly employed in construction, shoemaking,

seasonal agriculture, textile sectors in which they can easily replace workforce of the local community (Kaygısız, 2017). As stated above, the fierce competition with local workers in a district of shoemakers in Işıkkent, Izmir, one protestor stated, “we need to find jobs, they have to go back to their countries for us to find a job” (Hürriyet, 2014). Whereas, the underlying causes of anger was misleading, because prior to Syrians’ arrival, employed local workers were already living on precarious working conditions with limited access to social security. According to interviews conducted with a leather union in Izmir, the tensions diminished as they told locals that the problem was not Syrians and but systemic, and blaming refugees would not solve any of their problems, and eventually organized a meeting together with Syrian refugees and local workers.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to economic competition, local people are likely to have negative attitudes towards refugees, and anxious about the state of national economy and rising taxes; therefore sees refugees as a burden on the welfare system (Wim, 2006; Crepez et al., 2009). For example, 72% of Turkish people absolutely agree or agree with the statement that refugees threaten the national economy (Konda Barometer, 2016) and more than 40% describe them as a burden on Turkish citizens (Erdoğan, 2018). Another report shows that about 70% of Turkish people think that Syrian refugees cause rising rent prices and unemployment of

**Table 1. Ambiguous state policies in governance of refugees**

Issue	Numbers	Percentage of the Syrian Population	Population concerned
Work permits issued	20.970 (2017) 13.290 (2016) 4.019 (2015)	5% of the estimated work-force	Estimated work-force ~ 600,000 Syrian refugees
Citizenship	~ 20,000 (2017) 7,827 (official numbers) up until 2016	1.5% of the overall population	2018 3,593,864 2017 3,426,786
Children enrolled to schools (0-18)	~ 700.000	40% enrolment rate (~400,000) (~60% not enrolled to schools, lesser percentages are child labour)	1,646,164 (0-18) (2018) 1,151,557 School Age (4-18) (2018)

**Source:** Data piled from different sources (Ministry of Labour and Social Security, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Directorate General of Migration Management, UNICEF, newspapers, interviews with bureaucrats)

<sup>13</sup> ibid.

Turkish people (Aksoy Araştırma, 2017). Herein, such negative opinions show that refugees are referred as scapegoats for the adverse economic conditions by the local people.

As these perceptions and attitudes toward the refugees laden with inherent tensions and conflict of interest, public disfavour against the refugees seems not possible to diminish and policies to promote social cohesion cannot be achieved. The main driver of tensions is actually these intentionally conducted “flexible” governance that is supposed to led refugees integrate gradually. On the contrary, while they serve short-term benefits to the local economy, they actually block real efforts for harmonization.

#### **AMBIGUOUS POLITICAL AGENDA AT STATE LEVEL**

Some human rights areas in Turkey have already had grey zones. The informal economy has always been hiring cheap labour with limited access to social guarantees regardless of them being migrants or citizens. From the state side, the already existing economic system was useful before and continues to be profitable as refugees or other migrants filling in. Yet, the overall effect of that particular ambiguity has outcomes that gradually bestow the disfavour element within the society. So, while the current flexible system of refugee governance in which certain standards are provided to refugees outside of the working space like access to health, education, meanwhile the state overlooks at the issues of child labour, sexual harassment, discrimination, or workers either fired or getting non-paid in the informal economy. This “flexible” but actually disproportional ambiguous state policy such as in issuing limited work-permits, children’s level of access to school and naturalization policies (see Table 1) actually means turning a blind eye to the existing problems with incremental costs having negative impact on social integration and societal acceptance of refugees.

Legal employment is vital component of integration in which refugees join the state economy gradually with certain guarantees and rights. Yet, the case of Turkey grants work-permits to Syrians under temporary protection regime are below 5% of the overall Syrian workforce if contrasted with the estimated 600,000. The Labour and Social Security Ministry recently stated that they secured work permits for Syrians 20,970 in 2017, and 13,920 in 2016 (Hürriyet Daily, 2018). As part of the above mentioned “flexible job opportunity”, legitimization from the state side was made through counterfactual arguments such as refugees would be starved to death if they were to check for work-permits and businesses would have been closed.<sup>14</sup> While refugees are entitled to free access to health, education, another side of this flexibility includes Kızılay Cards (i.e cash assistance 120TL/monthly) given to 1.3 million Syrian refugees (Daily Sabah, 2018) for those filling the conditions (including being unemployed).<sup>15</sup> From the refugee side, if they ask for work permits, they will loose cash assistance; therefore they prefer working informally so that they can continue getting cash assistance.

Another high disproportionality is also visible in children’s access to school which will possibly be a great issue of concern in the future if no proper schooling is provided to majority. Among the Syrian children aged between 4-18 of 1,151,557, it is estimated 40% enrolment rate to schools (UNICEF, 2017). Whereas the remaining 60% are either not enrolled, and/or part of the working force as child-labourers. This is also one of the effects of the ambiguous state policy allowing child-labour to enter the workforce. Furthermore, according to the official statements, since 2011, 270,000 Syrian babies were born in Turkey, means two new-borns every day (KDK, 2018). Considering these numbers and future of the Syrian youth, their entry into education system becomes more crucial, and inherently possesses future concerns.

<sup>14</sup> Interview conducted with an NGO president working in the field of humanitarian aid in close cooperation with the government of Turkey, Ankara, February 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Criteria of eligibility are not openly declared.

Policies of disproportionality also reveal itself in the naturalization aspect through giving citizenships. In July 2016, President Erdoğan made a statement saying that Syrians will be granted citizenship (BBC, 2016). From the state side, corrections and reservations were made right after President's statement and stressed on giving citizenship to high-skilled and educated Syrians (Al Jazeera, 2016). Although the exact numbers are not officially made public, the number of given citizenships are around 20,000 under exceptional citizenship statuses, and their families are taken into consideration, the numbers rise up to 40 to 50,000.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the numbers of citizenship granted composes less than 1.5% of the overall Syrian population in Turkey. Therefore, together with statements lacking transparency of who and under what reasoning got citizenship and as they are combined with highly limited citizenship entitlements with ambiguous statements, again, pushes for more rumours in the society. Especially when they are pumped in the social media, the disfavour shows itself in the form of Syrians will vote for the ruling party as a new source of voters, or resentment against Syrians becoming citizenship.

State initiating policies and guarantees of rights are highly valuable, yet the implementations of such policies are still vague and covers highly limited beneficiaries. These three exemplar issues of work-permits, citizenships, and children enrolled to schools are extremely limited. This uneven treatment by the state seem to be intentional due to public disapproval, election concerns, and providing rights also mean other groups to demand similar rights. Yet, the outcomes of such intentional restraining policy, instead of providing effective access to rights and statuses, actually contributes to existing public disfavour due to uncertainty and disproportionality which actually build on the existing controversies in the areas of cultural and economic rights.

## CONCLUSION

State level legitimization of the current refugee politics and policies with regards to Syrians go hand in hand with de jure regulations and de facto practices. It is the imbalance between the two fostering a great challenge to have better integration and to overcome challenges at societal level. On the one hand, these flexibilities create an open space for cheap labour force and contribute to the state economy; on the other hand, it makes refugee statuses continue to be unclear. Flexibility needs boundaries and a certain consistency. Hence, a gradual extension of regulatory practices towards regulation of the refugee policies is the main recommendation of this policy brief.

Instead of following such intentional previous policies and de facto overlooking at the existing procedures, immediate policy measures to secure guarantees of workers and children are needed to be put forward to overcome this unchecked labour market for betterment of all beneficiaries. Preliminary recommendations can be to conduct economic social entrepreneurship in such ways resulting in refugees to be included in the labour market with self-reliance, such as measures for creating incentives for employers to hire refugee. Another crucial aspect is to provide a step toward for more inclusive types of policies to the urban setting and integration through eliminating language barriers and tailoring of the available funds to foster registered employment while not distancing employers to hire refugees. Addressing integration with focus on the drivers of the tensions and to start gradual change instead of building on the already existing sectarian and socio-economic conditions in Turkey is highly critical to promote elements of social cohesion. To support grassroots initiatives in civil society and instead of following de facto policies, to assign clear directives on local municipalities to intervene in minimizing public disfavour are other suggestions. Finally, transparency, consistency and proportionality in future adopted measures will ensure to minimize ambiguity and public disfavour.

<sup>16</sup> Interview conducted with a top-level bureaucrat from the Prime Ministry of Turkey, Ankara, 13 April 2018 (See note 9).

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#### Birce ALTIOK

Birce ALTIOK is a PhD candidate at Koç University in the department of International Relations and research fellow at Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc). She received her MA in Human Rights Studies from Columbia University (2011) and BS in Global and International Affairs from Binghamton (SUNY) and Boğaziçi University (2010). She is currently working on her doctoral thesis at Koç University on forced-migration activism with a special focus on state-civil society relationships and politics of migration. She has publications on forced-migration, foreign policy, and migrant activism. She lectures in the departments of international relations and sociology on migration and human rights at Koç and Bilgi University. (baltiok@ku.edu.tr)



#### Salih TOSUN

Salih Tosun received his BA in Political Science and International Relations from Bogazici University (2017). He is a second-year master student in the department of International Relations and research assistant at Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoc). He had internships at Bahcesehir University Center of Migration and Urban Studies (BAUMUS) and Bilgi University Centre for Migration Research, where he worked in projects forced displacement and integration in Turkey. He has also worked at international projects and volunteered at non-governmental organizations in China, Sweden, and Kenya. His research interests are state responses to mass-refugee inflows, public attitudes towards refugees, xenophobia and civil society organizations. His latest article on the role civil society organizations in refugee integration in Turkey has been published in the Journal of Refugee Studies. (stosun17@ku.edu.tr)

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