

Chapter 16. Crisis or Opportunity? Public Debate and Perception on Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Introduction

Since 2011, millions of Syrian refugees have left their countries due to ongoing civil war in Syria. Almost three million of them are now a part of Turkish community. Despite several problems affecting culture, economy, and security, Syrian refugees and Turkish people have achieved to live together without any significant social crisis and moral panic. Düvell (2013) argues that unlike Western countries, where it would create a moral panic, Turkey surprisingly showed a social acceptance towards huge number of refugees.

In fact, the number of refugees in Turkey enormously increased in the last few years. The rate of Syrians was only 0.02% in 2012, while it increased to 0.29% in 2013, and 1.96% in 2014. In 2015, the rate sharply doubled (Table-1). This unusual change in Turkey's foreign population is the one that has never been experienced in Turkey.

Table 1. Turkey's Population and the Rate of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

	2012	2013	2014	2015
Turkey's Population	75,627,384	76,667,864	77,695,904	78,741,053
Syrian Refugees	14,237	224,655	1,519,286	2,503,549
Rate of Refugees (%)	0,02	0,29	1,96	3,18

Source: TUIK (2016); Directorate General of Migration Management (2016).

Table 2. The Number of Syrian Refugees vs. All Other Foreign Nationals in Turkey

	2012	2013	2014	2015
Syrian Refugees	14,237	224,655	1,519,286	2,503,549
Other Foreign Nationals ²	351,226	344,003	413,916	487,127

Source: Directorate General of Migration Management (2016).

The change was not limited to natives vs. foreigners. There has been a significant shift in the rates of foreign population as well. For example, Turkey's (registered) foreign population was dominated by residence permit owners and

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² It only includes foreign nationals with valid residence permit (i.e. work permit owners, conditional refugees). Unregistered, unauthorized, and/or irregular migrants are not included since no data are available for that population.

asylum-seekers until 2013. Syrian refugee population exceeded the number of all other foreign nationals in 2014 and 2015 (Table-2). This is also an interesting picture for several other nationals who have been living in Turkey for many years.

Touching upon current debates on refugee issue and analyzing the findings of a most recent public survey, this paper discusses to what extent Syrian refugee issue can be handled successfully, and whether refugee crisis can also be an opportunity both for Turkey and Syrian refugees.

Public Debate

Syrian civil war the mass influx of people from Syria has been an interesting issue in Turkey. Some argued that Turkey has to protect people from ongoing war and conflict. This humanitarian perspective has sometimes been challenged by discriminative view that argued Turkey does must not secure these people in its territories since they are burden on economy and threat to security. However, this discussion has never been a major, common political debate until state authorities declared that “if Syrian refugees would like to become Turkish citizens, then Turkish state would naturalize them” (BBC, July 2016).

After this declaration, as the first time, Turkish public loudly started to discuss the refugee issue, mostly in a negative way. Social media outlets have been widely used to criticize this decision. For instance, several hashtags were opened in the first days of July 2016 such as #ÜlkemdeSuriyeliİstemiyorum (I don't want Syrians in my country), #SuriyelilerGitsin (Syrians Go Home!), #SuriyelilereHayır (No to Syrians), #VatanHaininden VATANdaş olmaz (A Traitor cannot be a citizen).

While proponents of refugees opened rival hashtags such as #SuriyelilerDinKardeşimizdir (Syrian are our brothers and sisters). Even in platforms like “change.org” where petitions are signed to be referred to state authorities, petitions were opened up such as “Suriyeli Mültecilerin Vatandaşlığa Alınmasına Hayır!” (No to Citizenship for Syrian Refugees)³ that has been signed by almost 300.000 people. However, all these discussions did not help the well-being of refugees but increased the tension against them in Turkey (and foreign nationals in general).

Public Perception

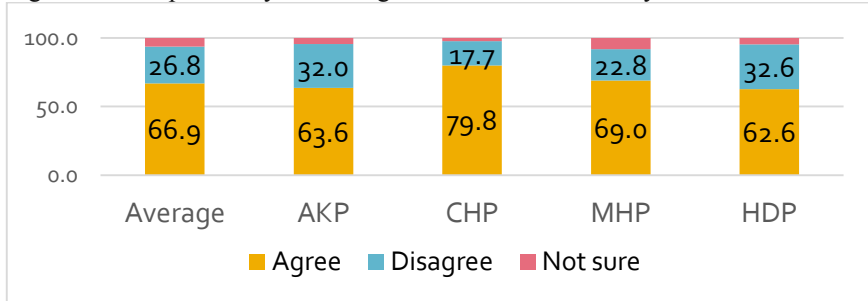
Turkish people and refugees are used to get together in public spaces without any significant confrontation, public perception towards Syrian refugees is not much positive. Several surveys have been made to learn how Turkish people perceive refugees and immigrants (see for example, The German Marshall Fund, 2014; EDAM, 2014; 2014; Erdoğan, 2015). Global Policy and Strategy's Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016)⁴ is one of these surveys that asked questions on perception towards refugees.

³ <https://www.change.org/p/suriyelilerin-t-c-vatanda%C5%9Fl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1nahay%C4%B1r-suriyelilerintcvatanda%C5%9Fl%C4%B1%C4%9F%C4%B1nahayir>

⁴ It was conducted on November, 7-21, 2015 in 28 provinces of Turkey, representing 26 regions according to the NUTS 2 system. The survey interviewed 1,515 participants selected through a stratified sampling and weighting method.

Following figures show how perceptions are differed according to political party affiliation. The figure-1 shows the views on the statement of “Syrian refugees take our jobs away”. On average, almost 70% of people think in this way. CHP supporters are keener on that view (79.8%), while almost 32% of AKP and HDP supporters do now think the same way.

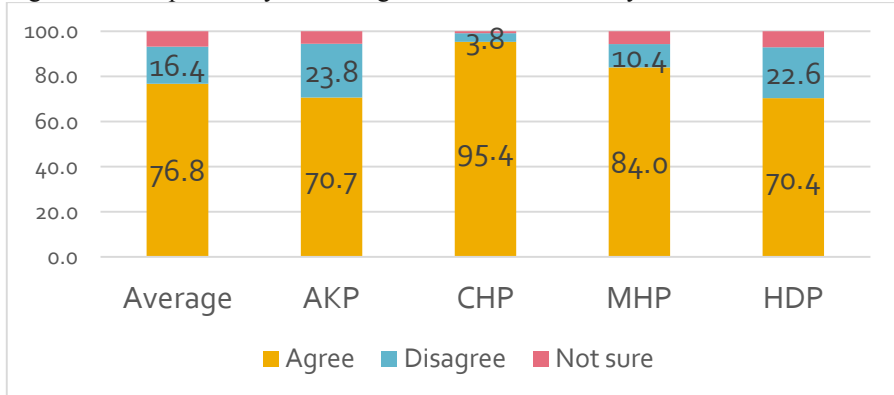
Figure 1. Perception: “Syrian Refugees Take Our Jobs Away”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

The figure 2 shows people’s views on the statement of “Syrian refugees harm the economy”. On average, almost three in every four people agree with this statement. CHP supporters predominantly (95,4%) think this way.

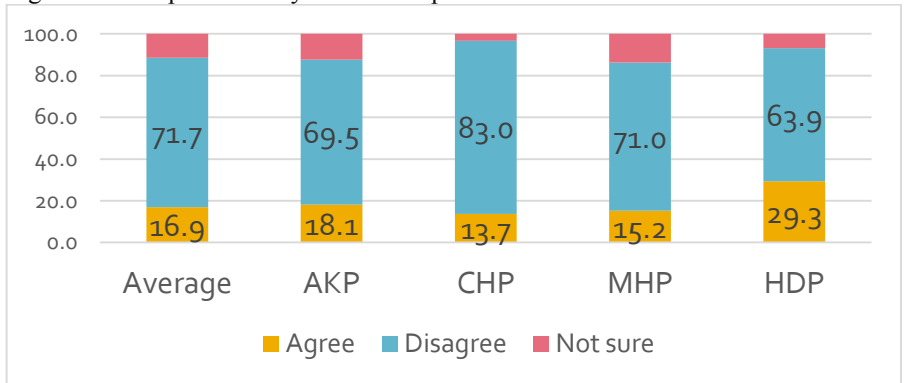
Figure 2. Perception: “Syrian Refugees Harm the Economy”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

Although there have been negative views on refugees, one can claim that new population wave contributed to the economy with its labor force. The survey participants were asked about their views on the statement of “They give a fillip to the labor market.” Interestingly, except for 16.9% of participants, all other disagree with that statement. The views are almost in a similar way between AKP, CHP, and MHP supporters, while HDP supporters have a more positive view than all others.

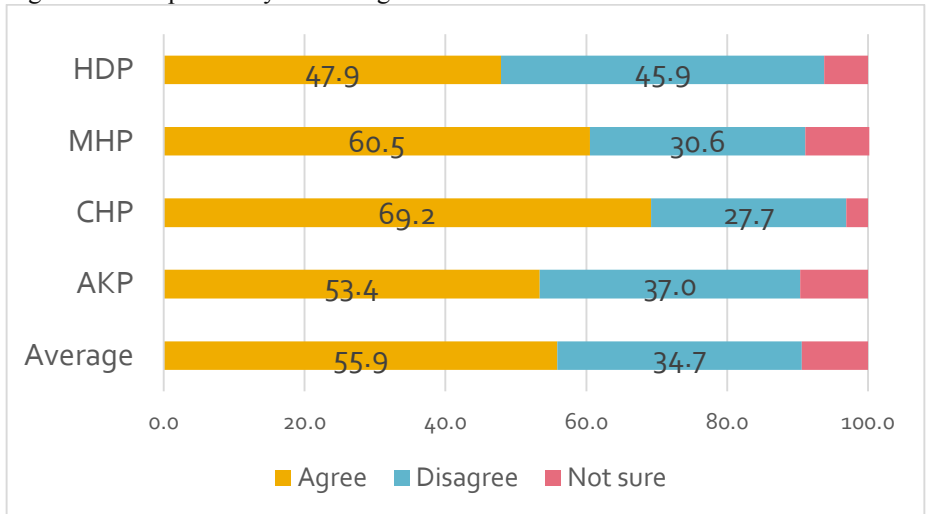
Figure 3. Perception: “They Give a Fillip to the Labor Market”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

People were also asked about their views on refugees and security issues. The statement of “Syrian refugees increase terror threat” was agreed by almost 56% of all people, while 35% disagree with that. Again, CHP supporters are more negative about the threat level of refugees.

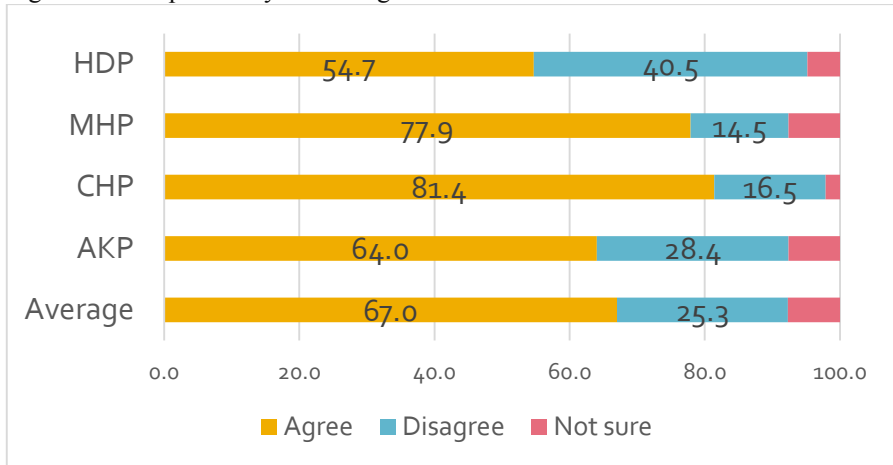
Figure 4. Perception: “Syrian Refugees Increase the Terror Threat”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

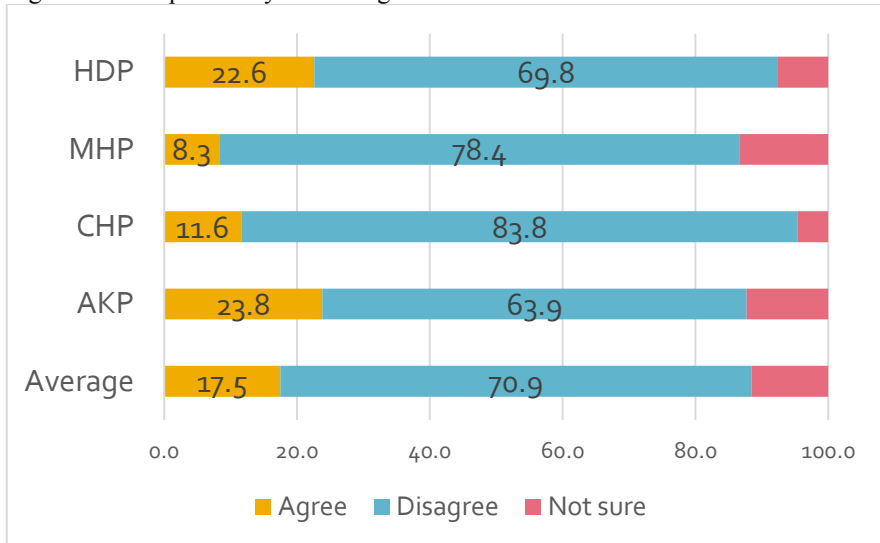
Participants were asked about their views on the statement of whether “refugees cause crimes and disorder.” Interestingly, CHP and MHP supporters showed a very negative opinion about that statement, while AKP and HDP supporters had a less pessimistic view. On average, 56% of Turkish people believe that Refugees increase crime and disorder in the country (Figure-5).

Figure 5. Perception: “Syrian Refugees Cause Crimes and Disorder”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

Figure 6. Perception: “Syrian Refugees Enrich the Culture”



Source: Global Turkey Public Trends Survey (2016).

Despite economic and security related negative views, Syrian people are from different backgrounds. One can claim that if Turks and Syrians live together without any important problems for a while, it could be because of the common cultural points. In order to understand the role of culture in that regard, participants were asked about their views on the statement of “Syrian refugees enrich the culture.” However, the results are not that promising (Figure-6). On average, 17.5% of people

believe that Syrian enriched our culture. Again AKP and HDP supporters and CHP and MHP supporters have similar views on that issue.

Positive Perception

Based on the above results as well as the results of previous surveys, it can be claimed that people are sharply divided on refugee issue. There seem positive and negative perceptions that are fed by different motives. One of the drivers of positive view on refugees are pragmatic. Some people believe that they have positive contribution to the economy because they are cheap labor force, and therefore, they embrace the economy. From another viewpoint, refugees have been used as tools in the international political relations as a bargaining instrument both by Turkish and EU authorities.

Another way of positive view is protective and receptive. These people pre-accept that Syrian refugees will not go back to their countries, and will be a part of this community. Further, they are the victims of war and conflict, and their lands and estates are occupied and/or damaged. This view argues that refugees can enrich our culture and be an added value to sports, arts, music, and literature. Positive perceptions are also widely nourished by the religious discourse. Most Syrians are Muslims. Turkish political figures several times addressed the Turkish nation to act as exactly what “Ensar” (host community) did to “Muhacir” (migrants) during the Muslims’ holy migration from the city of Mekka to Medina. Many people, with the religious institutions and NGOs, helped Syrian refugees with this motivation.

Negative Perception

The negative view on refugees are exclusionist and discriminatory. Many people, as found in the surveys, think that refugees are burden on the state economy, and that’s why they harm the economy. In fact, Turkish state authorities announced that more than 12 billion dollars were spent from the state budget for the expenses of refugees (Sözcü, 6 August 2016). Many people believe that refugees that their jobs away. In addition, they cause crimes and disorder. The exclusionist view gets worse when it becomes discriminatory. Many people also believe that refugees create a threat for national security. Despite not based on valid data, this view is usually triggered by the media accounts. Some people are not happy with their Arabic speaking and even find them disturbed being from another nation. The prototype of a Syrian refugee sometimes identified as “dirty beggars, diseased people, criminals and even mistresses”.

Public Policies and Integration

In a 5-year period, Turkey has become the world’s first country to host the highest number of refugees. Turkish authorities, as all other countries around Syria and even EU, were not well prepared in the beginning of this exodus. Turkey provided Syrians a temporary protection status and gradually provided several rights such as free basic health services, education services, and right to work.

All these were not well planned and widely discussed steps towards the integration of Syrians in Turkey. The legal status was given within the scope a new law on foreigners and international protection. This legislation outlines “cohesion”

as a way of integrating foreign nationals in Turkey. All other rights were given through regulations and circulars.

Scholars studying refugee problem in Turkey addressed a need for an integration plan (See for example Erdoğan, 2015; İçduygu, 2015, Kaptı, Akgül, & Demir, 2015). The Turkish government has not yet announced an integration plan; however, the authorities mentioned about the possibility of granting citizenship status to “qualified” Syrians. The questions of “who, when, and how will be qualified” remained unanswered while these pages were written.

Conclusion

Current negative public debate and perception on refugees (and migrants in general) in Turkey shows that the crisis around refugee issue has potentials to turn into a major problem. Turkey’s limited integration capabilities and facilities support this opinion. Migration Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) estimated migration integration scores in 2015. Turkey is one of 38 countries included in the survey together with all EU Member States, Australia, Canada, Iceland, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. Turkey’s Integration Scores estimated by MIPEX are well below the average of all other countries included in this index. Turkey’s overall score is 25 out of 100, and it has the worst scores among all other surveyed countries. All categories and scores are follows: Labor Market Mobility Score: 15/100; Education: 5/100; Family Reunification: 49/100; Political participation: 11/100; Permanent Residence: 27/100; Access to Citizenship: 34/100; Preventing Discrimination: 26/100 (MIPEX, 2015).

The refugee issue has also potentials to bring about more opportunities than crisis if a well-planned macro level integration plan starts immediately. Further, better identification of the quality and quantity of refugees should be provided. Turkey needs a country-wide education campaign including Turkish language education. There is an urgent need to encourage cultural and functional cohesion. Finally, and very importantly, negative public discourse against refugees should be eliminated.

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