



UPINION - BASMEH & ZEITONEH - 11.11.11

Policy Brief - Assessing the Current Status of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

May 2023



Introduction

As of 2023, more than 13.5 million Syrians are living in displacement, including 6.8 million refugees and 6.9 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Türkiye hosts more than half of all Syrian refugees (3.7 million), in addition to approximately 330.000 refugees and asylum-seekers from other countries (mainly Afghanistan, Iraq and Iran). As such, Türkiye is the country with the largest refugee population in the world. 1 in 23 persons in Türkiye is a refugee, the fifth largest ratio of refugees relative to the national population across the globe.¹

As already outlined in a research report published by Upinion² and 11.11.11 in March 2022, since 2011 the political and economic situation in Türkiye has undergone drastic changes, which has resulted in an increasingly hostile public opinion against refugees.³ Since 2018, the Turkish economy has been characterised by high levels of inflation, a rapid depreciation of the Turkish lira, a sharp rise in poverty and a widening current account deficit. Whereas Turkish people initially had a very welcoming attitude towards Syrian refugees, since 2019 public opinion surveys have documented a notable deterioration in the level of social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Turkish communities. This change in attitude was influenced, among other things, by the increased competition for limited informal employment opportunities, rising costs of living, and the increasingly hostile political discourse that emerged in the run-up to the March 2019 local elections. Consequently, since the summer of 2019 there has been a significant increase in the number of raids, arrests and deportations of Syrian refugees in Istanbul and beyond.⁴ In the years that followed, many cases where Syrian refugees were forced to sign ‘voluntary return’ forms at removal centres in different parts of the country have been documented. Turkish president Erdoğan is under increasing domestic pressure to take a tougher stance on the refugee issue, with general elections taking place on 14 May 2023 and with Türkiye’s main opposition bloc (the “Table of Six”) campaigning on an anti-refugee platform.

¹ See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unhcr-mid-year-trends-2022>

² Upinion has developed an online platform that allows it to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalised and hard-to-reach communities and people in crisis and displacement-affected countries. The in-house developed platform enables Upinion to engage real-time with people in the same way they connect with their friends and families, using messaging apps like Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. This enables Upinion to send tailored information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. Upinion has the ISO/IEC 27001 Certification, which is the international best practice standard for Information Security Management Systems (ISMSs), and follows GDPR regulations.

³ See <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2022-03/202203-11paper-Upinion-Syrian-Refugees-in-Turkey.pdf>

⁴ See in this regard also a recent report by Human Rights Watch: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>

Against this backdrop, the current policy brief summarises the main findings of two recent online conversations that Upinion conducted with Syrian refugees across Türkiye, which both took place after the 6 February 2023 earthquakes that devastated large parts of Southern Türkiye:

- The first conversation, which took place between 10 and 27 March 2023 with 419 Syrians, specifically asked about the **impact of the earthquakes on the situation of Syrian refugees living in Türkiye**. Questions focused on the access of Syrians to post-earthquake aid, issues of discrimination, and access to relevant information, tailored to individuals affected by the earthquakes (67%, n=419), and those that were not directly affected (33%).
- The second conversation, held between 19 and 27 April 2023 among 421 Syrian respondents, included questions about **feelings of safety, the pressure by Turkish authorities on Syrians to return to Syria, social tensions, onward migration plans, and perceived risks of being deported back to Syria**. Throughout the conversation, respondents were also specifically asked about the extent they think the upcoming elections are having an impact on these issues.
- In addition to the data from these two online conversations, this policy brief is also informed by a research trip that 11.11.11 conducted in March 2023, during which **11.11.11 staff interviewed 31 Syrian and Turkish individuals affected by the 6 February 2023 earthquake**. Locations visited included Gaziantep, Nizip, Kahramanmaraş, Pazarcık, Nurdağı, Reyhanlı and Antakya (Hatay).

Conversation one: Earthquake response, discrimination and access to reliable information

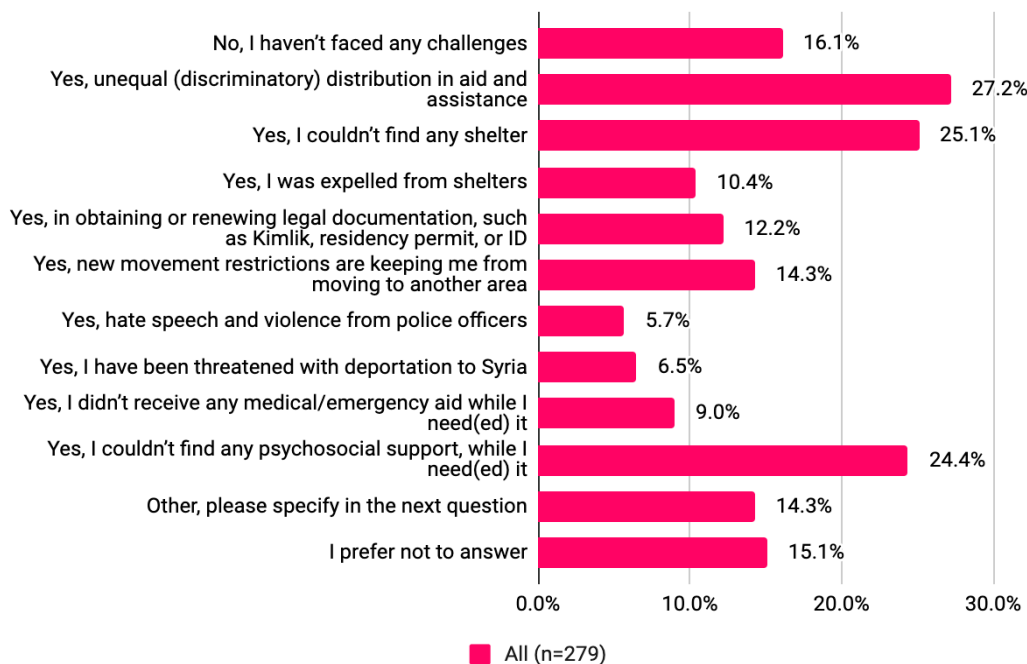
419 Syrian respondents started the conversation, of whom 409 completed the entire conversation. There were equal groups of male respondents (49%) and female respondents (46%), resulting in a male:female ratio of 1:1. Most respondents were between 26-45 years old (68%), with small groups of people aged between 18-25 (14%), 46-55 (10%), and 55-65 (7%). Only 6 people in the sample were aged older than 65. The individuals in the respondent sample were mostly residing in the Southeastern Anatolia Region (33%, n=419), Marmara Region (29%), the Mediterranean Region (27%), and Central Anatolia Region (6%). These regions are host to relatively the largest numbers of Syrian refugees.

Key findings:

- **Insufficient access to earthquake response:** All Syrian respondents who indicated to be directly affected by the 6 February earthquake were asked whether they had sufficient access to support services following the 6 February earthquakes, **67%** (n=282) answered ‘No’. Only **one-fifth** of respondents reported they obtained sufficient access, **13%** did not know or preferred not to answer the question. Disaggregation by gender shows that relatively more women (74%, n=124) reported not having been able to access sufficient aid, compared to men (64%, n=142).
- **Various challenges post-earthquake:** When respondents who indicated to be directly affected by the earthquake were asked “*Have you been facing any challenges recently, following the February 2023 earthquakes? If yes, what kind of challenges?*” **84%** (n=279) reported having faced challenges. A plurality of respondents emphasised the unequal (discriminatory) distribution of aid and assistance (**27%**), followed by the inability to find shelter (**25%**) or psychosocial support (**24%**), movement restrictions (**14%**), difficulties in renewing legal

documentation (12%), or the fact that they were being expelled from their shelters (10%). A significant group of respondents (14%) also reported to have faced ‘other’ issues, primarily concerning financial difficulties related to increasing house rents and utility bills, being unable to work, and the lack of compensation for material damages.

Figure 1. “Have you been facing any challenges recently, following the February 2023 earthquakes? If yes, what kind of challenges?” - 279 respondents



Interviews that 11.11.11 conducted in Southern Türkiye in March 2023 highlighted similar issues. Syrian interviewees reported cases of unequal aid distribution, verbal and physical harassment during aid distributions (resulting in a tendency among many Syrians to not queue and thus forego distributions), cases in which Syrian refugees were expelled from their temporary shelters to make place for Turkish citizens, and a further increase in anti-Syrian rhetoric and hate speech on Turkish social media. Cases of aid discrimination, physical abuse, verbal harassment, hate speech and evictions from emergency camps have also been reported by Amnesty International⁵ and the Syria Justice and Accountability Center (SJAC)⁶.

Moreover, Syrian refugees in Türkiye continue to face issues around their freedom of movement. On 13 February 2023, the Turkish government announced that people who are under international or temporary protection and who are living in one of the five worst-hit provinces (Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, Gaziantep, Adıyaman and Malatya) would be given a 90-day exemption on a pre-existing prohibition to travel outside the province where they are residing. As such, Syrian refugees living in these provinces would be allowed, for a period of 90 days, to travel to another province without seeking prior permission by the authorities. Although a positive development in the short term, critics have warned that this 90-day respite is largely insufficient and not realistic, given that no longer-term solutions will be in place after the expiration of this exemption. Moreover, the circular clarifying this has not been widely

⁵ See <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/campaigns/2023/02/turkiye-syria-earthquakes-a-human-rights-approach-to-crisis-response/>

⁶ See <https://syriaaccountability.org/as-rescue-efforts-wind-down-syrian-survivors-face-discrimination-amidst-desolation-in-turkey/>

published by the immigration office. Lastly, people living in other quake-stricken provinces (Adana, Osmaniye, Şanlıurfa, Kilis and Diyarbakir) are still required to seek a travel permit before leaving.⁷

All people interviewed by 11.11.11 also emphasised the enormous psychosocial impact of the earthquakes. Interviewees reported a high level of anxiety and post-traumatic stress. This mental impact has also been highlighted by the World Health Organization (WHO), which has warned that the scale and impacts of the February 2023 earthquakes in Türkiye and Syria have created “*almost unimaginable psychological stressors for individuals who survived the disaster. From being caught up in the quakes and often injured, to seeing their homes badly damaged or destroyed and their cities flattened and emptied, to losing friends, family members and colleagues – the mental health effects on communities are immense.*” According to the WHO, an estimated 1 in 5 of the affected populations will have a mental health condition in the next decade. “*This makes good-quality mental health and psychosocial support essential for the recovery of those caught up in emergency situations*”, the WHO has further stated in this regard.⁸

- **Access to reliable information:** Both affected and non-affected individuals of the online panel were asked “*Do you feel like you have sufficient access to up-to-date information about the 2023 February earthquake events and what happened after in Türkiye?*”. The majority of respondents (56%, n=414) indicated they have had sufficient access to this kind of information, with younger people (aged 18-25, 61%, n=56) reporting this relatively more than older people (aged 36-45, 52%, n=114). Amongst all respondents, 27% (n=414) reported that they do not have sufficient access to up-to-date information, with more male respondents indicating this (32%, n=203), than females (22%, n=188). Almost 17% said they did not know how to or preferred not to answer the question.

Conversation two: Safety, deportations and social tensions

421 Syrian respondents started the conversation, of whom 349 completed the entire conversation. There were more male respondents (64%) than female respondents (36%), leaving a male:female ratio of 3:2. Most respondents were between 26-45 years old (63%), with equal groups of people aged between 18-25 (14%), 46-55 (11%), and 55-65 (9%). Only 9 people in the sample were aged older than 65. The individuals in the respondent sample were mostly residing in the Southeastern Anatolia Region (33%, n=296), Marmara Region (31%), the Mediterranean Region (22%), and Central Anatolia Region (10%). These regions are host to relatively the largest numbers of Syrian refugees.

⁷ See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/24/syrian-refugees-in-turkey-face-return-to-quake-stricken-areas>

⁸ See <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/09-03-2023-dealing-with-the-psychological-aftershocks-of-the-t-rkiye-earthquakes--why-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-are-so-desperately-needed>

Key findings:

- **General feeling of safety:** All respondents were first asked whether they feel safe with the way things are in politics and society - to gauge people's perceptions and the tensions they experience a few weeks ahead of the Turkish elections. Almost equally sized groups indicated 'Yes' (37%, n=421) and 'No' (35%, n=421), while 20% answered 'somehow' and 8% preferred not to answer.

Respondents who reported not feeling safe or feeling somewhat safe were asked to explain the reasons behind their feelings. The following key reasons emerged:

- Fear of being forced to return to Syria was reported by a large majority of 71%.
 - A hostile environment was also highlighted as a main reason, with 41% reporting the unwelcoming atmosphere in the host community, and a similar group of 43% reporting anti-Syrian violence by the Turkish host community.
 - 53% of respondents indicated that hateful language in the (social) media was a significant factor. Additionally, 44% of respondents reported experiencing mistreatment or discrimination by political parties or government officials.
 - 41% mentioned the uncertainty linked to the upcoming elections.
 - Lastly, the current economic situation played a significant role: 43% cited economic instability as the primary reason for feeling unsafe, with 31% reporting the lack of employment opportunities as a key factor.
- **Fear of deportation to Syria:** When asked explicitly whether they fear deportation to Syria, 92% of respondents (n=172) reported such fear, of which the majority of 57% (n=158) say this fear is extreme rather than somewhat (24%) or a little (19%). Only 7% of respondents indicated that they are not afraid of being deported.

When asked whether they think the risk of deportation to Syria has **increased since the February 2023 earthquakes**, 63% of Syrian respondents (n=171) think this risk has increased since these events. 28% of respondents did not think that the earthquakes are having a specific effect on the level of deportations, while 9% preferred not to answer this question.

Moreover, when respondents were asked the question "*What kind of impact do you think the February 2023 earthquakes have had on social relations between Turkish host communities and Syrian refugee/migrant communities?*", the largest share of respondents (40%, n=360) reported that social relations will stay the same, with relatively more women (48%, n=94) indicating this than men (36%, n=175). More than a quarter (28%) think the relations will worsen, while 17% of respondents foresee a positive impact on social relations.

In addition to the above findings, interviews by 11.11.11 in Southern Türkiye also highlighted significant concerns regarding de facto deportations. Indeed, most Syrians interviewed by 11.11.11 expressed the sentiment that the earthquakes did not just destroy their home, but also their last glimmer of hope on a better future in Türkiye. As a result, in the first three weeks following the 6 February earthquakes an estimated 40.000 Syrians decided to (temporarily) return to Syria.⁹ Although the Turkish government has announced a 3-6 months exemption - through which Syrians who decide to (temporarily) return to Syria could still decide to move back to Türkiye again within this timeframe- it remains unclear if this exemption will be

⁹ See <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/47187/tens-of-thousands-of-refugees-return-to-syria-after-earthquake>. In a similar vein, a REACH assessment published on 9 March 2023 reported 29.733 cross-border movements from Türkiye into Northwest-Syria. See <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/northwest-syria-earthquake-response-displacement-monitoring-factsheet-09-march-2023>

effectively implemented, in particular if the Turkish opposition would win the 14 May 2023 elections. If not acted upon, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees who returned temporarily following the earthquake could find themselves stuck in Syria, where conditions for safe and dignified return are still not in place, as again confirmed in a March 2023 report by the UN Commission of Inquiry for the Syrian Arab Republic.¹⁰

- **Increased pressure by Turkish authorities:** When Syrian respondents were asked whether they think there is pressure by Turkish authorities on Syrians to leave Türkiye, only **13%** indicated they *don't* think there has been any pressure. Amongst those that perceive pressure, the majority reported increasing restrictions on freedom of movement (**66%**)¹¹, followed by Syrians not being allowed to apply for temporary protection legal status (**46%**), and delaying residency or citizenship applications (**41%**).
- **Increase in social tensions:** **84%** of respondents who were asked whether they think there are tensions between Syrian refugee/migrant communities and host communities in Türkiye, confirmed that such tensions do exist. The remaining **11%** stated that this is not the case and **5%** preferred to not answer the question.

Those indicating 'Yes' to the question if social tensions exist, were additionally asked if such tensions have increased in the past six months (since September 2022). **85%** (n= 327) of these respondents confirmed that tensions have indeed increased, with **40%** reporting that tensions 'somewhat' increased, **28%** of respondents stating that tensions increased a 'little', and **17%** reporting that tensions increased 'very much'.

- **Reasons for social tensions:** Those who indicated that tensions exist were subsequently asked for the reasons. A majority of **57%** (n=316) reported the worsening of the economic situation as the main reason for existing social tensions between Syrian refugees and Turkish host communities, followed by social media posts (**49%**), miscommunication or a language barrier (**46%**), and mainstream media reports/news (**42%**). Lack of jobs/job competition was mentioned by **24%** of the respondents. Nearly one-third of respondents also indicated the overall urgent needs following the 6 February earthquakes, with relatively more men (33%, n=155) reporting this than women (20%, n=84).

Disaggregation by area of residency shows that relatively more people in the Marmara region (including İstanbul) indicated social media posts and mainstream media reports/news as reasons for the existing social tensions between refugee and host communities, compared to people in other regions. Not surprisingly, individuals residing in the Southeastern Anatolia Region and the Mediterranean Region reported relatively more overall urgent needs following the earthquakes.

- **Specific impact of Turkish election campaign:** All respondents were asked whether they have noticed any changes in their (legal) protection and personal safety in the immediate run-up to the election campaign of 2023. The large majority (**66%**, n=402) reported they did not experience any changes, followed by **20%** of respondents who thought their protection and safety got worse in the run-up to the elections, and **3%** who stated that it got better.

¹⁰ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/iici-syria/report-coi-syria-march2023>

¹¹ For more background on movement restrictions, see also <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/22/turkey-suspend-time-limit-travel-outside-quake-zone>

- **Future plans, including migration to Europe:** All respondents were asked about their future plans regarding their stay in Türkiye in the next six months. **38%** (n=349) of respondents expressed they plan to stay in the same place, while **35%** intended to move to a third country. Breakdown by gender reveals that while the largest share of female respondents (49%, n=92) opted for staying in the same place, the plurality of male respondents (41%, n=172) plan to relocate to a different country. A mere **2%** of all respondents indicated they plan to return to Syria, while **20%** of respondents reported they don't know what their future plans are.

Those reporting a plan to move within or outside Türkiye were also asked whether they are moving because of the 6 February earthquakes and their impact. While the majority (**66%**, n=142) indicated to have other reasons, one-third of respondents (**31%**) reported this is indeed one of the main reasons for which they are planning to move.

Additionally, those who indicated plans to move to a third country were asked whether they plan to go to an EU or non-EU country. The large majority (**80%**, n=121) answered they are planning to move to an EU country, with relatively more women (92%, n=25) indicating this than men (75%, n=71).

In addition, those who planned to move to a third country were asked how they are planning to go. The largest share of respondents (**42%**, n=121) indicated that they are planning to move through the UN resettlement programme, with relatively more women (60%, n=25) reporting this than men (41%, n=71). In addition, **15%** of all respondents reported planning to go irregularly with the support of a smuggler, with a significantly larger proportion of men (20%) than women (4%) indicating this. 12% of women indicated family reunification. A considerable portion (**26%**) of both men and women also reported they don't know yet how they will go to the third country.

Finally, to gauge whether these respondents are able to make an informed decision about travelling to this third country, they were additionally asked: '*Do you feel like you have sufficient information on travel routes/options to the third country?*'. A majority of **65%** (n=121) indicated 'No', with relatively more female respondents (76%, n=25) reporting this than male respondents (61%, n=71).

Recommendations

International donors, including the European Union (EU) and EU member states, should use the upcoming Brussels VII Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (14-15 June 2023), as well as the Senior Officials Meeting (SOM, 10-11 May 2023) and Syria Envoys' meeting (12 May 2023), to take the following actions:

- Develop and implement a **human-rights based relief and recovery response** that takes into account the particular needs of displaced persons. They should put in place the necessary mechanisms to closely monitor that all people in need have equal access to the earthquake aid response and are not discriminated against on the basis of their nationality or status.
- Urge the Turkish authorities to **extend the 90-day exemption** that allows Syrian refugees to travel to another province without seeking prior permission by the authorities. In addition, donor countries should urge the Turkish authorities to **extend the 6-month waiver** that allows Syrian refugees who temporarily returned to Syria, to move back to Türkiye.
- Support **Syrian refugees' access to verified and accurate information** regarding civil documentation, special procedures following the February 6 earthquakes and other relevant issues, rights, and duties governing their stay in Türkiye, by widely disseminating unambiguous and up-to-date communication materials across all sectors of the community. This information should be made available in Arabic and be disseminated using a variety of communication channels to ensure broad coverage.
- **Publicly call on the Turkish government to put an immediate end to deportations**, either directly or indirectly, of Syrian refugees to Syria. In case deportations continue, the EU and its member states should also explore the possibility of using the **EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime** to impose sanctions on individual officials involved in the deportation of Syrian refugees.
- Support the mandate of UNHCR to structurally **document and monitor cases of forced deportation** of Syrian refugees, and return movements in general, allowing the UNHCR to detect and mitigate protection risks that could arise.
- **Support the work of local rights groups to document and report** on the developments affecting the rights of refugees and host communities, and support interventions that could increase the protection of these groups.
- **Put in place an independent investigation** into allegations that EU-funded “removal centres” across Türkiye have been used to force Syrian refugees to sign “voluntary return” forms, before being deported to Syria.¹²
- **Demand immediate, full and unhindered access of the UNHCR and other independent observers to Turkish detention and removal centres**, in order to verify the voluntary nature of return movements. The EU should make any funding for Turkish “removal centres” conditional on full and unhindered access of UNHCR monitoring staff and other independent observers.

¹² See <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2022-03/202203-11paper-Upinion-Syrian-Refugees-in-Turkey.pdf> for more background.

- Accelerate efforts to put in place an objective assessment, including a **human rights impact assessment**, of the EU-Turkey Statement and of cooperation on refugees, asylum seekers and migration (as already requested by the European Parliament in May 2021¹³).
- Increase **resettlement numbers** and other safe and formal routes to Europe for Syrian refugees. They should also fully respect the principle of non-refoulement, and **immediately put an end to all practices of pushbacks** of people who exercise their right to apply for asylum, including push backs on all Mediterranean Sea routes, and on land routes to Europe. Finally, they should **increase search and rescue capacity in the Mediterranean** and provide predictable ports of safety to allow swift disembarkation of people rescued at sea.
- Commit to and accelerate the **provision of sufficient, predictable, flexible and multi-annual humanitarian, development cooperation and peacebuilding funding**, taking into account the 2019 OECD DAC recommendation regarding the “triple nexus”, to refugees from Syria and host communities, through dedicated funding mechanisms, and with a particular focus on the needs of female refugees. Particular attention should be given to projects aimed at providing legal assistance to Syrian refugees in Türkiye, initiatives around Turkish language training, and public campaigns towards Turkish citizens that counters prejudices about Syrian refugees, xenophobia and discrimination.

¹³ See https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0243_EN.pdf