

A More Effective Refugee Policy: Reinvestigating the Socio-Economic Composition of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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ABSTRACT *This paper analyzes the socio-economic composition of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the potential it offers for facilitating the planning of refugee policy. The most severe humanitarian crisis since WWII, the Syrian conflict has already lasted for more than 10 years. Turkey is hosting almost four million Syrians –more than any other country. Given the prolonged nature of the conflict and the slim hope of a quick resolution, various studies and reports have suggested that Turkey should develop a policy of integration. While most of the literature on Syrian refugees has categorized them as homogenous people in need, the findings from this study suggest that the socio-economic composition of Syrian refugees is diversified and can affect the kind of refugee policy that could be implemented. This paper argues that reinvestigating the group's diversified socio-economic composition could facilitate the planning of an effective refugee policy in Turkey.*

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Turkey, Integration, Socio-Economic Composition, Policies of Inclusion

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Introduction

After the eruption of the Syrian uprising in 2011, millions of Syrians were forced to flee to neighboring countries. Turkey hosts almost four million Syrian refugees –the highest number of any country¹– yet the hospitality of the Turkish government and its people have created many internal issues. Various studies and reports have identified the challenges the country has encountered as a result of the arrival of the Syrians; these include economic deterioration, environmental damage, and cultural confrontations.² Because all hope has been lost for seeing a mass return of Syrians to their home country in the near future, many studies have suggested that the Turkish government should focus on developing a long-term strategy for integrating the refugees into Turkish society.³

Refugees, by definition, are people who flee their countries due to domestic disaster to seek refuge in another place. They are widely considered to be in an inferior socio-economic position relative to citizens and are typically depicted as people who lack resources and must accordingly seek assistance from host countries or other organizations. Nevertheless, we should not forget that before becoming refugees, most were professionals in different fields. This is certainly true for many of the Syrians now living in Turkey. While they are portrayed by the mainstream media and studies homogenously as unfortunate people, one-fourth of these individuals (more than 800,000) are working in the labor market; others include businesspeople, doctors, teachers, and university students with various types of capital.⁴ More than 10,000 Syrian-owned companies have been established in Turkey since 2011; 23,000 Syrian teachers, 27,000 Syrian students registered at Turkish universities, and another thousand Syrian doctors have arrived in Turkey as part of the refugee wave.⁵ Furthermore, Syrian professionals have established various organizations or websites, for example, the Syrian International Business Association (SIBA) for Syrian businesspeople, Association of Syrian Engineers in Turkey for Syrian engineers, and Doctors Directory for Syrian doctors.⁶ These organizations can facilitate the local authority's communication with their members.

The total number of these groups constitutes only an estimated 2-3 percent of the Syrian refugee population, and they can be considered socio-economic elites. Members of this relatively small but significant segment of the Syrian refugee society have rarely been studied by scholars, nor have they been considered by local governments planning integration policies. One exception is the recent, limited literature on the emergence and challenges of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs.⁷ Therefore, to gain a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities the Turkish government has encountered, this paper examines how these refugees –in particular businesspeople, teachers, students, and doctors– could potentially make a positive contribution to their host

country. The paper does not judge whether refugees have a positive or negative impact on host countries; instead, it argues that acquiring a deeper understanding of the diverse socio-economic composition of the refugee population can help to counter the view that refugees are simply a burden. It may also facilitate the planning of an effective refugee policy.

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Methodology

The data in this article are based on two sessions of fieldwork conducted in Turkey; these consisted of 129 semi-structured, open-ended interviews with Syrian refugee businesspeople in İstanbul, Mersin, and Gaziantep in 2014 and 2015. Later, in January-February 2020, I revisited İstanbul to interview 21 İstanbul-based Syrian refugee businesspeople. During both fieldwork sessions, I had the opportunity to interact with another dozen Syrian non-businesspeople and to engage in deep conversations with them. Approvals were gained from the universities' ethics committee and the names of the interviewees were anonymized as per their requests.⁸ Despite the six-year time span between the two sessions of fieldwork, since we did not witness a massive re-emigration of Syrians from Turkey to other countries in that period, the continuation of Syrians living in Turkey and their further settlement indicate that the data still reflect the general situation of Syrians in Turkey. Each interview took between one and two hours, and some interviewees were interviewed more than three times. Among all the interviewees, only two were Syrian businesswomen. As a male researcher, it was not easy for me to arrange interviews with businesswomen. The lower representation of businesswomen among the interviewees may also be attributed to the greater difficulties they encounter in Arab countries compared to their male counterparts, resulting in the fact that there are far fewer of them.⁹

The criteria for the Syrian sample of refugee businesspersons in this research were as follows: those who formerly worked in business and had been registered in the Syrian chambers of commerce prior to relocating to Turkey, and who are currently registered in the relevant local Turkish organizations. A snowball recruitment approach was applied to achieve an expanded data set. In addition, I visited the local chambers of commerce and industry in both İstanbul and Gaziantep. Through introductions from the chambers' staff members; I reached other Syrian businesspeople outside of the snowball recruitment. Additionally,

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I attended a social event with SIBA in Turkey in 2020, as a result of which I interviewed an additional two businesspeople. I conducted the interviews with Syrian businesspeople mostly in standard or Levantine Arabic. The interview questions related to the interviewees' relocation and settlement, the scale of their businesses and business practices, their challenges, and their strategies for living in Turkey. Because the situation in Syria is still unstable, all the interviews were anonymous for the safety of the interviewees. During the interviews, I immediately wrote down the responses and then transcribed them onto a laptop using Evernote software. Again for reasons of confidentiality, when quoting or referencing the businesspeople's words, I identify the respondents only by their cities of origin, the business sectors in which they work, and their current cities of residence. A thematic analysis was used to analyze the raw data. After coding the data, four key themes emerged: their decision-making in undertaking a relocation, the establishment of their businesses, the challenges they are encountering in Turkey, and the strategies they have applied to address these challenges.

The Context of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: A Rapid and Unselective Flight

An unprecedented revolution took place in Syria at the beginning of 2011. Toward the start of the revolution, people took to the streets in peaceful protest, demanding the basic rights enjoyed by citizens elsewhere in the world. However, the brutal suppression of these unarmed civilians by the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad ignited their long-term dissatisfaction with an authoritarian regime. The peaceful demonstrations escalated into armed conflict between the government forces and opposition fighters, which quickly increased in intensity. In mid-2012, the Assad regime's top officials were bombed in a government building in the capital of Damascus in the South, and the opposition took control of an industrial area in the second biggest city, Aleppo, in the North.¹⁰ The situation worsened and, after the intervention of foreign governments both in the region and beyond, the revolution became a civil war. The lack of safety gave many Syrian citizens no choice but to leave their country.

The question of where to flee from their war-torn homeland was the most crucial consideration in the minds of these innocent civilians. At first, most Syrians thought the conflict might end soon, and some decided to move to neighboring countries such as Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon to remain nearby.



Others chose to flee to Egypt, an Arabic country with an acceptable cost of living. It is not difficult to understand that geographic proximity dictates higher numbers of refugees; most Syrians followed a natural route. Turkey drew a higher number of Syrians from the northern provinces, and Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt received more from the southern provinces. As of January 2022, the officially registered number of Syrian refugees was 5,684,672, with Turkey hosting more than 3,700,000, Lebanon almost one million, Jordan almost 700,000, Iraq more than 250,000, and Egypt around 150,000.¹¹

Although the neighboring countries seem to be a safe haven, regulations there shook the faith of the young in being able to remain. At the same time, there were reports of Syrians being smuggled into Europe since many of them no longer had any hope of going back to their homeland in the immediate future. Yet, while the European countries promised to provide asylum to refugees, only a very few refugees have been successful in this aim –those who can afford to pay the smuggling fees and who are in good enough health to survive the arduous journey to Europe. Even worse, in 2016 the EU reached an agreement with the Turkish government to prevent the arrival of refugees in Europe, which has led to international criticism of the EU's unwillingness to take responsibility for Syrian refugees.¹² The European countries combined have accepted only around one million Syrians in total, the same figure as Lebanon.¹³ As a result, many Syrians began to consider their relocation to neighboring countries to be permanent, or at least greatly prolonged. For those who have remained there, pursuing a stable livelihood has become their main goal.

Thousands of children, who had to leave their education to migrate, cannot read or write in Turkish. With Turkey and UNICEF, the Accelerated Education Program provides children under temporary protection with the opportunity to have an education.

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The phenomenon of emigration from Syria to Turkey was characterized by the rapid relocation of an enormous population; the relocation itself was unselective in terms of the migrants' socio-economic background. The numbers of registered Syrians in Turkey grew rapidly in mid-2014,¹⁴ which suggests that many wanted to stay for the long term. Indeed, especially in the case of Turkey –which has received almost one-fifth of the entire Syrian population– the phenomenon of a 'transplantation' of Syrians has emerged. For instance, Fatih and Aksaray districts of İstanbul have been given the nicknames 'Little Syria' and 'Little Damascus',¹⁵ respectively, while Gaziantep province has been dubbed 'Little Aleppo'.¹⁶ Furthermore, in both Fatih and Aksaray, Syrians are participating in various activities, including establishing businesses or employment in companies, restaurants, groceries, barbershops, and educational institutes. This transplantation indicates that people from a variety of socio-economic classes have relocated and that the socioeconomic composition of Turkey-based Syrian refugees is diversified and deserving of further analysis.

The Challenges that Refugees Present to Host Countries and Their Implications

Various studies and reports have indicated the extreme need for the Turkish government in the integration process and in formulating policy to support the integration of refugees in the long term.¹⁷ One of the main factors in successful integration is the refugee-host relationship;¹⁸ it has been argued that this is influenced by the impact refugees have on the host society.¹⁹ Thus, understanding the impact of refugees on the host society may be helpful in the integration process, and in formulating and implementing successful policies to benefit both refugees and indigenous citizens.

The arrival of refugees leads to various security, environmental, economic, and social impacts on the host society. Previous studies have presented various arguments concerning this issue. Some scholars have pointed out negative effects, contending that once refugees enter a host country, crime rates can rise, the local environment can be damaged, the refugees can become an economic burden, and the local traditional culture can break down as a consequence of social interaction between the refugees and the host population.²⁰ Other reports have stated that refugees can bring positive economic benefits to the local economy through the human resources and economic capital they can contribute to host societies.²¹ Additionally, it has been argued that other factors determine whether the impact is positive or negative; these include the hosts' access to power or resources.²²

The economic impact of refugees on host countries can be seen at both the local and national levels. Refugees can influence competition, the labor market,

and the prices of local goods. The impact of Syrian refugees on local labor markets is contested, and several studies have examined the impact of Syrian laborers on local markets.²³ Some studies point out that refugees can cause locals to lose their jobs because refugees are more willing to accept lower wages, while others argue that refugees do not negatively affect the labor market, or that they may have a negative impact on the lower classes only.²⁴ Studies do agree that the cost of basic goods and housing rent increases in refugee districts.²⁵ At the national level, refugees are usually blamed for increasing the national budget because governments fund the settlement of new arrivals.²⁶ It has been claimed that the relocation of refugees may boost host countries' trade with the refugees' home countries, a statement supported by the rise in exports from Mersin in 2013.²⁷

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Other studies have focused on certain socio-economic groups among migrants and refugees –mainly workers, women, and children. The issue of how social class affects migrants pre-and post-migration has been studied widely.²⁸ These scholars argue that class plays an important role in migrants' departure and relocation.²⁹ Şimşek argues that the integration of refugees into the host country goes through a process of 'class-based' integration, by which those who are better off can integrate more easily than those with fewer economic resources.³⁰

According to Bourdieu, the distinction between classes can be discussed according to different levels of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital, and these four types of capital may be interchangeable.³¹ In studies of migrants and refugees, the concept of capital is used to analyze how immigrants and refugees use their capital to promote their new life in the host country.³² The literature exploring the forms of immigrant capital shows that the various types of capital they bring to and accumulate in the host country promote their integration into the host country's society.³³ Some scholars believe that refugees' capital is similar to that of immigrants and that it can simplify the process of integrating them into the host country; however, the difference between immigrant capital and refugee capital is that the latter's four types of capital depreciate due to the conflict-driven background of the immigration and that it cannot even be taken to the host country.³⁴

In discussing how refugees can settle in the host country, most studies argue that their success can be attributed to refugees' support from family or friends at home and abroad, or from the networks they establish with locals.³⁵ Cultural and symbolic capitals are the other two types of capital that are believed to

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group of individuals who need help or who create problems in the host country, without differentiating the various socio-economic characteristics of the group. Research that does take into account such demographic features has focused mostly on workers, women, and/or children.³⁷ This focalization reinforces the notion that refugees categorically need assistance and are in a weaker socio-economic position than citizens. More recent studies have shown that some refugees become entrepreneurs after they have relocated and that this leads to competition with existing small businesses.³⁸ Most of the literature on refugee entrepreneurs has concentrated on this point (and their emergence in general) rather than on the effect their businesses have on the host society. This again tends to imply that refugees are all in a more or less similar socio-economic situation, which directly affects the results of any analysis of the influence they might have. More importantly, research that contends that refugees are a burden might contribute to discrimination on the part of locals against the refugees. Finally, since there is an underlying assumption that one of the main presumptions regarding refugees is that they went through a devaluation of their capital due to conflict, i.e., that their cultural and symbolic capital may not be transferrable, almost no literature has discussed their possible possession of economic capital, and therefore their potential to contribute to the host society.

Unlike previous studies, this paper attempts to examine the situation of Syrian refugees with a focus on their socio-economic composition and what possible or potential resources they could contribute to their host countries. By doing so, this study seeks to provide a different picture of the refugees that goes beyond their depiction as a burden or as inherently disadvantaged persons. The present study does not aim to discuss whether refugees' input is of benefit to host countries since such an undertaking would require further quantitative and qualitative research; rather, it argues that the demographic and socio-economic composition of the population of Syrian refugees living in Turkey should be examined more closely because this might offer an alternative to their image as poor, resourceless, and homogenous.

strengthen the negotiating ability of refugees in the host society.³⁶

This brief review of the literature on refugees' impact on host societies and refugees' class indicates that the impact of refugees on host countries remains debatable. More importantly, studies that attempt to analyze the impact of refugees usually describe them as poor or resourceless people, a homogenous



The Demographic and Socio-Economic Composition of Turkey-Based Syrian Refugees: Opportunities

The large numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey might lead to demographic pressure on locals, who may feel that the refugees are taking their jobs and squeezing their living space. This perspective is common in countries that accept refugees or immigrants. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the ages and socio-economic composition of Syrian refugees might show that it is exaggerated.

Around 17.4 percent of Turkey-based Syrians are ages 0-4 and above 60.³⁹ Thus, among the huge wave of Syrian refugees in Turkey, around 630,000 are not of working age and are likely to require state assistance. Around 30.6 percent are aged 5-17. This means that around 1,114,993 individuals would ordinarily be in school. Yet the data suggest that there are an estimated 612,000 Syrian students in Turkish schools, so approximately half a million Syrians who should be enrolled in schools are not.⁴⁰ This group of Syrians might also require support (e.g., from the local education ministry). However, the story should not end at the 48 percent of the population ages 0-17 and above 60 who are a 'burden,' since 51.9 percent (around 1,891,116) of the Syrians in Turkey are between 18 and 59. Of these, 30 percent have higher education degrees.⁴¹ This age group of people will contain numbers who are in higher education or who are working. In other words, more than half of the Syrian refugees in

A research competition, which was organized with the cooperation of Boğaziçi University, TÜBİTAK, and Türk Telekom, produced 110 project proposals aimed at improving the living conditions of the Syrians refugees in Turkey.

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Turkey currently are or will be the breadwinners in their families. A further discussion of the socio-economic composition of this group is warranted.

According to data from 2017, of the 51.9 percent of the refugees referred to above, 662,797 are working in Turkey in the areas of agriculture, manufacturing, construction, transport, commerce, trade and hospitality, and other services.⁴² However, as suggested by the concept of forms of capital, capital is convertible and may be of various types. This implies that the socio-economic composition of refugees may also be diversified; and the refugees who belong to different socio-economic classes may possess distinct forms of capital that can be used for their living. Thus, in addition to workers, there are at least four groups of people, around 100,000 in total, who do not fit into the 'poor and disadvantaged' refugee category. They include businesspeople, doctors, teachers, and university students. The situation of each of these groups will be considered in more detail below.

Several thousand Syrian businesspeople are living in Turkey. This estimated number derives from data on Syrian-owned companies in Turkey. Since 2011, more than 10,000 Syrian registered companies have been established in Turkey and, at a conservative estimate, they deposited more than \$4 billion in Turkish banks in 2014.⁴³ The number of companies in Turkey with at least one Syrian partner has been suggested to reach 15,159 in 2019.⁴⁴ Not only has this economic elite invested their capital in Turkey, but they have also created jobs. Some might argue that they compete with local Turkish enterprises; their economic contribution to local markets in terms of job creation, capital inflows, and business skills is clear, but it is too early to judge whether the consequences are ultimately positive or negative. Also, as shown by Turkish regulations concerning foreign enterprises' employment practices, owners are required to recruit local workers for their businesses. Furthermore, as many have suggested, Syrian businesspeople continue to trade with their customers in other Arab countries via Syria once they have registered their companies in Turkey.⁴⁵

Given the massive influx of Syrians into Turkey, providing medical services is a major issue for the government. The Turkish government provides free medical care for Syrians who possess governmental identity cards. However, various complaints have been made both by locals and Syrians. Locals complain that they cannot access medical resources because the Syrians have them for free; the refugees complain that the language barrier does not readily allow this, and local doctors say that they cannot provide proper medical assistance to refugees because of the language barrier.⁴⁶ Syrian refugee doctors previously belonged to an elite class in their homeland, and the Turkish government has granted Turkish citizenship for most skilled Syrians including medical professionals who remained in Turkey. Although they are highly adaptable to local society, they are unable to work legally as medical professionals in Turkey

since only Turkish citizens can work at public services according to the laws.⁴⁷ Most Syrian doctors who wish to provide services to their communities open informal clinics in their houses, and many of them have contemplated moving to another country.⁴⁸ An Aleppan doctor I interviewed stated that he could not work officially and therefore decided to flee to Europe to continue his work there.⁴⁹

There is little doubt that education is an indispensable element of society. There are currently thousands of Syrian teachers and university students in Turkey. The teachers seem to be in a better position than the doctors. The Turkish government, cognizant of the importance of providing Syrian schoolchildren with education, has recruited a great many Syrians for that purpose. Although the teachers have a better opportunity to work than they did before, discrimination (e.g., lower salaries than those of their Turkish counterparts) has been reported.⁵⁰ This may have a negative effect on the quality of the teaching. In addition, 27,000 Syrian students are currently studying in Turkish universities, with both government funded Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB, Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar) and other NGOs have been supporting Syrian students on an unprecedented scale.⁵¹ Syrian students like all other international students need to take the Foreign Student Examination (YÖS, Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı) for university entrance.⁵² The government used to generously waive tuition fees for Syrians who are engaging in regular daytime studies in public universities. This has led to complaints from local students, who wonder why the Syrian students' fees should be paid for them, or why they have to be accepted at all.⁵³ However, Syrian students have had to pay tuition fees at private universities all the time. But apart from tuition fees, all other living expenses (e.g., housing, food, and entertainment) have to be paid for by the students themselves. Some Syrians are studying in private universities in Turkey and are paying international students' fees. More importantly, after they have completed their higher education they will immediately join local labor markets. With their Arabic mother tongue, fluency in Turkish, and a major degree, they will be able to contribute to society in a different way than local students.

The discussion of the four groups presented above shows that they are quite different from the stereotypical refugees as presented in the media or the scholarly literature. Their presence and activities in the host country demonstrate that they could or do contribute to and have a positive influence on local society in terms of capital inflows, human resources, and the expansion of international networks. The economic initiatives of Syrian businesspeople can make the most important contribution in the first instance. As mentioned



If the Syrian companies' owners establish and operate their businesses in Turkey following the local employment regulations, this can create job opportunities



Turkish refugee camps stand out among similar facilities in the world with their well-organized shelter centers, infrastructure, social facilities, health and education services provided by Turkey for Syrians fleeing the civil war.

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above, they have not only brought a great amount of capital into the country but have also invested in local markets. In addition to generating capital and engaging in economic activity, they are also required to pay taxes annually to the government. Furthermore, according to the local business regulations for foreign investors, one local worker has to be employed for every five foreign workers. This suggests that if the Syrian companies' owners establish and operate their businesses in Turkey following the local employment regulations, this can create job opportunities.

Doctors, teachers, and university students can also make an economic contribution to the local economy, albeit on a more modest level. Doctors, when they are working in their informal clinics, are required to purchase medical equipment and drugs, which are not cheap. University students either have financial support from their families or work part-time jobs to pay for various costs associated with their education. This means that most of their expenditure takes place inside the country. For example, their housing rents are paid to Turkish landlords. Each group spends money in the local economy on food, transportation, and so on. Although the amounts are small when compared with the large amounts of capital inflow that derive from businesspeople, they are nevertheless considerable, and none of these refugees require financial support from the government except the students' tuition fees.

The relocation of these groups of people to Turkey leads to competition with the local society in terms of human resources. Yet their possible or actual integration into the local society can be considered a brain gain for the host country. More importantly, if the Turkish government were to formulate inclusive regulations to allow Syrian doctors to work legally in Turkey, this might

Migrants' ethnic ties could be used to expand their networks not only in the host countries but also transnationally

alleviate the competition for medical resources between the locals and Syrians. Although the Syrian students might not be seen as making an immediate contribution to local human resources, over time, maximally four years, they will be able to inject new vigor into Turkish society by using the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the country's universities.

Finally, the refugees' expansion of their international networks is based on their existing ties. These networks, and the refugees' knowledge of Arab markets, could be exploited to export Turkish goods to other Arab countries. For instance, during both of my fieldwork trips, many refugees explained that they formerly had customers or partners in the Gulf and that once they settle in Turkey and rebuild their enterprises, they immediately reconnect with their previous business acquaintances in other Arab countries and export the products they now produce in Turkey.⁵⁴ Furthermore, it has been suggested that migrants' ethnic ties could be used to expand their networks not only in the host countries but also transnationally.⁵⁵ Since most of the Syrian refugees are Arabs, they have the potential to form a bridge between Turkey and other Arab countries (in terms of business and other forms of communication). Syrian university students who are proficient both in Arabic and Turkish also have the capacity to unite Arabs and Turks.

Are the Syrians in Turkey a Burden or a Benefit?

The Syrian conflict has already lasted for 10 years and although it seems less intense at present, there still is a long road ahead before refugees from the war can return to their homeland. Since the Syrian regime still uses conscription for reservists, most young males would prefer not to return. Also, many of them have already built a new life in the host country; it is not easy for them to give up what they have established and simply leave. Finally, the damage to their neighborhoods back home is another reason why they do not choose to return since they might not even have a home to return to. Thus, for the host countries, consideration of a long-term plan of integration is inevitable.

The present study does not intend to suggest that Turkish locals do not experience any negative effects from the arrival of Syrians; rather, it attempts to present a different way of understanding the so-called burden of their presence. Although the millions of Syrian refugees in Turkey have been discussed mostly

in a socially and economically homogenous manner, they are a very diverse group. More importantly, they include professionals who possess the ability to live independently and can thus contribute to the local society. The feasibility of integrating the brainpower of refugees is a matter for the local authorities to consider.

The present study suggests that it would benefit the local authorities to have a clearer and deeper understanding of the socio-economic composition of the Syrian population in Turkey. As other scholars who are working on Syrian refugees in Turkey have suggested, the lack of a clear picture of their demographic characteristics is one of the main impediments to gaining a better understanding of them.⁵⁶ A more sensitive, class-based approach that differentiates among the socio-economic strata of the Syrians living in Turkey could help local governments with regard to the allocation of resources and the integration of various capable people into suitable positions. By developing such an understanding, governments could not only alleviate their expenditure on the refugee crisis but also channel available and appropriate people and their abilities into society. This could ease the tense relationship between locals and Syrians since it is understandable that indigenous citizens consider refugees as economically poor and needful of the host government to meet their daily requirements.

The present study has discussed Syrian businesspeople, doctors, teachers, and university students. Other professionals, such as engineers and lawyers, require further analysis and should be considered in policies of inclusion. Whether the refugee issue should be considered as a crisis or an opportunity for the host country depends largely on the success of those policies. ■

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