

# ***Syrian Refugees' Engagement in the Local Labour Market in Izmir, Turkey: Perspectives of Employers and Evidence - Based Policy Recommendations***

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*This policy brief explores the perceptions of Turkish employers regarding Syrian refugees across various economic sectors in Izmir (Turkey) and reports the key issues raised by local actors concerning local labour market integration practices. The study is based on fieldwork carried out in Izmir between July and December 2017. It includes 40 semi-structured interviews conducted with Turkish employers, policy-makers, practitioners and NGO members. It provides an analysis particularly regarding Turkish employers' perspectives at sectoral and local levels, towards employing Syrians. Finally, the study integrates employers' perspectives into local actors' broader labour market integration practices and makes some policy recommendations based on conclusions from evidence-based field research. In broader terms, the policy brief intends to contribute the literature and advise policy makers on how to effectively integrate refugees into the labour market through local level practices and interventions.*

*Keywords: Syrian refugees, employment, labour market integration.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Izmir, located on Turkey's western coastline and just a few miles away from the Greek islands of Chios and Lesbos, is a "transit migration hub" for many international migrants and refugees (Yıldız and Uzgoren 2016). It is also a destination city for domestic migration from south-eastern Turkey, especially for Turkish citizens with Kurdish or Arabic ethnic backgrounds. In addition, over the last seven years, Izmir has hosted various groups of Syrians: a) Syrian refugees in transit; b) Syrians mainly stranded after the implementation of the EU-Turkey Statement (2016); and c) Syrians settled in the city. They tend to join the local labour market, with almost all working in the informal economy in different sectors, mainly textiles, shoe-making, agriculture, construction and services. Thus, as a transit hub on the Eastern Mediterranean migration route to Europe, Izmir constitutes a case which shows how local and sectoral employment practices regarding Syrians operates in an ad-hoc way with unique characteristics.

This micro-level ethnographic study provides an analysis on the labour market practices of Syrians in Izmir by taking into account not only Turkish employers' perspectives with Syrian workers, but also local actors' approaches. The paper proposes a constructive and effective labour market integration policy that needs to respond the local needs. The research is based on fieldwork and 22 semi-structured interviews conducted between July and December 2017 in Izmir with Turkish employers, with a specific focus on their perceptions about the engagement of Syrian refugees in Turkish labour market. Additionally, 18 interviews were conducted with stakeholders, local actors, policy-makers, practitioners and civil society members in Izmir and Ankara to map out constructive recommendations for better labour market integration practices.<sup>1</sup>

## **LEGAL CONTEXT: ACCESS AND INTEGRATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES INTO TURKEY'S LABOUR MARKET**

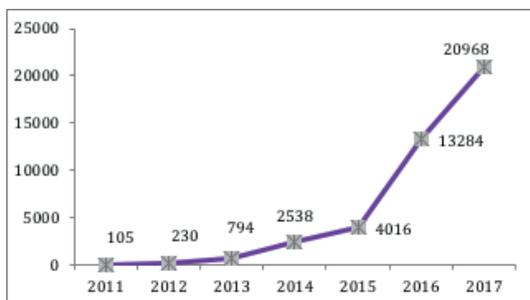
The Regulation on Provision of Work Permits for People under Temporary Protection, introduced in January 2016, allows Syrians registered under temporary protection to obtain work permits in Turkey. These depend on various eligibility criteria and administrative procedures.

First, those under temporary protection are only eligible to apply for a work permit after legally residing six months in Turkey. Second, any application must be made to the Ministry of Labour from the province where applicant first registered to get his/her temporary identity card. Third, the number of working Syrians under temporary protection must not exceed 10% of employed Turkish citizens in the workplace for which the work permit is requested, except for the agriculture and livestock sectors. Fourth, Turkish employers intending to employ Syrians under the temporary protection regime must offer an employment contract which guarantees a minimum wage and register them with the Turkish social security system. The application for the work permit must be submitted by the employer unless self-employment is the case. Lastly, foreigners are prohibited from working in certain job categories in Turkey due to relevant national legislation: (I) dentist, nurse, midwife, pharmacist, (II) veterinarian, (III) lawyer, public notary, (IV) security at a private or public institution, (V) director of a private hospital, (VI) customs consultant, (VII) sea captain, seaman, fisherman, diver and similar jobs within territorial waters.

Turkey's efforts to ensure working rights for refugees, both those under international protection and Syrians under temporary protection, is noteworthy in reflecting Turkey's inclusive approach to its currently evolving integration policy. While in 2015 only 4,016 work permits were issued for Syrians in Turkey, this number increased to 13,284 in 2016 and after the new regulation it reached to 20,968 in 2017 (Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services,

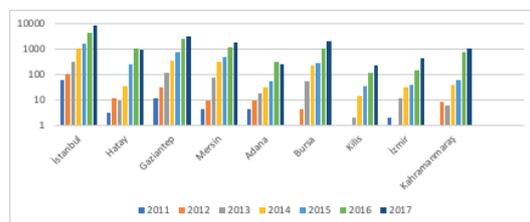
2019). It should be noted that the number of issued work permits includes both the “first time applications” and “extended permits” for each year. The number not only includes Syrians under temporary protection status but also those with residence permits. Nevertheless, the total number of issued work permits for Syrians has remained rather low considering that by March 2019 there were more than 2,184,555 Syrians of working age (15-64) in Turkey (DGMM 2019).

**Figure 1. Number of work permits issued for Syrians in Turkey**



Source: Data compiled from Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, 2019

**Figure 2. The number of work permits granted to Syrian nationals by Turkey's top ten cities**



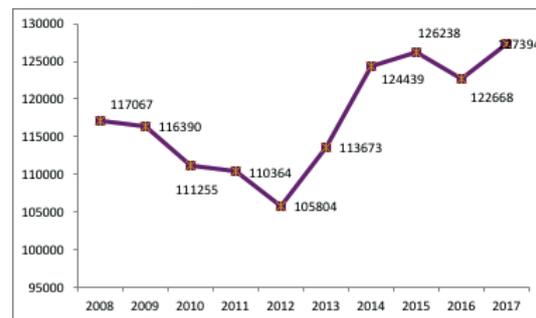
Source: Data compiled from Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, 2019

## PARTICIPATION OF SYRIANS TO LABOUR MARKET IN IZMIR

As of March 2019, there were 143,322 registered Syrians in Izmir (DGMM, 2019), constituting 3.3% of the city's total population, and reflecting an increasing trend since 2015. Although the Syrian border was closed in 2016, various factors may account for this continued rise: 1) unregistered Syrians started to prefer registering with the Turkish authorities to access and benefit from welfare services; 2) some Syrians were stranded in Izmir after the EU-Turkey Statement of March 2016, prolonging their transit intentions or turning it into permanent settlement; 3) an increased number of new-born babies; 4) the arrival of some Syrians from other cities in Turkey, from where they transferred their registrations.

Izmir is also a destination city for domestic migration, especially for those from the south-eastern provinces of Mardin and Diyarbakir. According to the Turkish Institute of Statistics, Izmir's net migration rate increased from 2.4 % in 2012 to 5.6% in 2016 (TURKSTAT, 2018).

**Figure 3. Domestic Migration to Izmir**



Source: TURKSTAT 2018

The migration of Turkish citizens with mainly Kurdish and Arabic ethnic backgrounds to Izmir is not a new issue since it began in the 1980s. The data shows that Mardin and Diyarbakir remain two of the top source cities (Table 1). These migrants mainly concentrate themselves in specific districts of Izmir, such as Kadifekale, Gediz, Karabağlar, Çimentepe and Yeşildere. Finding the same ethnic identity and ethnic networks are attractive pull factors for Kurdish and Arabic Syrians to come and settle in Izmir in these districts.

**Table 1. Population by residence in Izmir and place of birth in another city, 2014-2016**

	Place of Birth	Number of People
1	İstanbul	22,318
2	Manisa	19,512
3	Ankara	15,546
4	Mardin	10,435
5	Diyarbakır	10,318

Source: TURKSTAT, 2017 Migration Statistics

Unemployment rate in İzmir is always used be higher than national average in İzmir and according to 2017 data, its official unemployment rate was 14.2%, which again was above Turkey's average of 11.1 % for that year (TURKSTAT, 2017). Services constitute the highest share of the economy (58%), followed by industry (32 %) and agriculture (10%).

**Table 2. Unemployment rate in Izmir (15-64 years old)**

Years	Percentage
2014	14
2015	15
2016	14,1
2017	14,2

Source: TURKSTAT, 2017 Migration Statistics

One of the main structural problems of Izmir's labour market in Izmir is the high rate of informal economy/employment. According to the Social Security Institute, Izmir's informal employment rate was 24.44 % in 2017, although this has fallen since 2011, following the first mass arrival of Syrians in Turkey (Table 3). Thus, although a most Syrians in Izmir work in the informal economy, there is no evidence that their arrival has caused a significant increase in the informal economy.

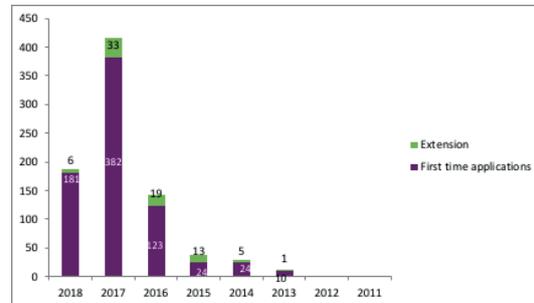
Regarding work permits issued to Syrians, the number of first-time applications increased from only 24 in 2015 to 382 after the 2016 regulation was issued, although this is still quite low when compared to the current number of Syrians in Izmir. Since the DGMM does not publish the age distributions of Syrians by province, it is not possible to estimate the percentage of Syrians of working age and enrolled in labour market with work permits. However, it would not be wrong to make a rough estimation based on our field observation that that the number of issued work permits is far lower than the actual working population of Syrians, who mostly work without applying for a work permit as part of the informal economy.

**Table 3. Informal Economy Rate in İzmir**

Region	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
İzmir	28.97	30.47	32.91	30.13	30.38	27.48	23.47	25.93	24.44
Turkey	43.84	43.25	42.05	39.02	36.75	34.97	33.57	33.49	33.97

Source: Social Security Institute, 2018

**Figure 4. Number of work permits issued for Syrians in Izmir**



Source: Data compiled from Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, 2019

Regarding the economic sectors of work permit applications, unskilled workers constitute the biggest share with 42%, followed by artisans/craftsman and service/sales persons with 15% each.

The number of enterprises opened by Syrians in Izmir has also increased significantly from only 19 enterprises in 2015 to 188 in 2017. This demonstrates the entrepreneurial potential that Syrians have in terms of contributing to the local economy.

**Table 4. Number of work permits granted to Syrians by economic sector in İzmir**

<b>Economic Sectors</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2017</b>
Office workers		1	1	6	11	8	22
Service and sales persons			1	4	5	26	64
Unskilled workers			2	4	1	39	176
Skilled workers in agriculture forestry and fisheries				1	1	1	1
Professional workers			2	3	4	9	12
Artisans and craftsman	1			1	3	18	62
Technicians	1		3	4	2	13	19
Machine operators and montage workers	1			2	2	16	25
Managers			2	4	8	12	34

Source: Data compiled from Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, 2019

### KEY FINDINGS OF THE FIELD RESEARCH

Syrians in Izmir mainly work in Izmir's informal economy in the following sectors (regions in brackets):

- Seasonal agriculture (Torbalı, Menderes, Bayındır, Gümüldür)
- Textiles (Bornova, MTK, Yeşilova, Çankaya, Karabağlar)
- Shoe-making (Işıkkent)
- Manufacturing, construction, food (Basmane, Pınarbaşı, Buca)
- Furniture and transportation (Karabağlar, Buca, Kısıkköy)
- Electronics as technicians (Çankaya)
- Wastepaper collecting
- Back-of-house jobs with low skill qualifications

Izmir constitutes a slightly different case when compared to Turkey's southern border cities in terms of the dynamics of its economy and the host population's socio-economic characteristics. The other border cities have fewer cultural and language differences since many locals can speak Kurdish or Arabic while kinship relations between locals and Syrians are more widespread. Syrians are also more able to find jobs in enterprises opened by Syrians themselves or in the rural

economy on farms or in low-skilled jobs. In contrast, as an industrialized city, Izmir requires qualified labour while the immigrants' lack of Turkish is a critical barrier to social and labour market integration. Syrians also lack the pre-established network connections in Izmir that they have in the border cities. Referring to their work experience, employers in border cities are far more familiar with working with Syrians. Finally, the local authorities, such as municipalities in some southern border cities are actively engaged in offering training and assisting Syrians to access the labour market. In Izmir, however, political divergence among local actors has hindered the provision of practical strategies for increasing the employment of Syrians employment and their labour market integration.

### Divergent perceptions of employers across sector-based employment

Concerning Izmir employers' perceptions, most mentioned in the interviews that they perceive Syrians as permanent rather than temporary residents in Turkey. However, they were also concerned about whether Turkey has a comprehensive, overarching national integration strategy or not. Most defined Syrians in Turkey as unqualified, low-skilled and with low education levels.

The research reveals that, in Izmir, employers' experiences and perceptions of Syrians' employment vary significantly depending on the economic sectors. While it is completely impossible to employ Syrians in the export and import sectors or in large companies because of their more institutionalized structures, Syrians work in the informal market as cheap labour in small and medium-sized firms, especially in textiles and manufacturing. That is, rather than creating new informal sectors, Syrians join Turkey's existing informal labour market, where Turkish labours are also highly exploited.

In the wedding dress sector, employers mentioned that they prefer Syrians because they have brought new customers for international trade and extended their market into many Middle East countries. Syrian workers not only use their language advantage but also bring their existing business connections. Similar statements were repeated by the employers in electronics and mobile phone retailers. These employers have also mentioned that Syrian employees have brought new Syrians customers and they increased the sales. Conversely, in hair dressing and beauty salons, Turkish employers strongly reject Syrian entrepreneurs, who they perceive as competitors due to recently opened hair dressing and beauty salons by Syrians in İzmir.

### Child labour

Syrian child labour (7-15 years old) is widespread, especially in shoe making, textile and street waste paper collecting. Some employers highlighted their concerns that these Syrian children may engage in criminal activities in the future unless they are fully integrated into the education system. Interestingly, some employers prefer to hire Syrian children out of compassion, believing that they thereby improve their well-being through a chance to work and survive.

### Ethnic identity and the employers' migration background

Those employers that migrated to Izmir themselves from south-eastern Turkey years before and who ethnically identified themselves as Arab or Kurdish perceive Syrians' culture as close to Turkey's. They prefer to hire Syrians for their businesses. One of the main reasons is they perceive Syrians as sharing the similar destiny with them in terms of being migrant. These employers mentioned they very well understand the difficulties that Syrians are encountered as they have also had many problems due to their ethnic identity. However, those employers born in Izmir or who despite their migration experience identify as being from Izmir, described Turkish and Syrian society as being very different. While these employers were not preferring to hire Syrians, they also considered Syrian labour as a substitute for Kurdish workers who migrated to Izmir years ago from south-eastern Turkey.

### Lack of relevant skills; different working culture

Employers highlighted that most Syrians lack relevant skills, experience and technical knowledge for the jobs that demand labour, although this varies across sectors. For example, Syrians are in high demand and their manual skills are appreciated in shoe-making whereas they are not considered skilled enough for textiles. As one employer noted, *"They are familiar with the machines we use; they saw them back in Syria maybe; but they do not know how to use them properly"*. Similarly, in the agriculture sector, many Syrians are preferred as cheap labour on fig farms. However, because they lack experience on harvesting figs, they damage the figs trees, which prevents them from fruiting the next year. Many employers have therefore regretted hiring them because they have lost tons of produce.

Some employers complained about the working culture of Syrians, which is quite different to that of Turkish people. They described Syrians as not being very hardworking, starting work late in the morning and lacking experience in serial

production. Some employers explained the Syrians' economic contribution as supporting high production but low quality, whereas some described them as increasing consumption.

### Lack of intermediary workers from vocational schools

Employers grumbled that the Turkey's new compulsory education period of 12 years and the 4+4+4 education system have accelerated the need for intermediary workers as it is no longer possible to continue on-the-job learning and training, which was the traditional relationship between master and apprentice. They claimed that teaching a trade must start at an early age because it is ineffective to begin teaching an apprentice at the age of 18. Moreover, they complained about the low number of vocational school graduates and the irrelevant skills of many graduates, which do not match the skills needed for the labour market. Employers therefore fill this gap with Syrians, who are ready to learn any kind of job because of their urgent survival needs.

As one employer who owns a business in the textile sector put it, *"In the textile sector in Izmir, companies try to survive with a deficit of 10-15 per cent of the labour force. We are not able to find labour. For example, if today 400-500 textile operators came to MTK (Izmir's textile site), they would immediately find a job, because we need them"*.

Another employer in the textile sector said, *"Syrian people whose profession was in textiles before do not get low wages here. We are not able to find any local labour and we have to recruit Syrians. If we offer them low wages, they do not agree anymore because they know we need them. They know the average wages in this sector and they only agree to these rates"*.

An employer of Izmir's Işikkent's shoe-makers' site stated, *"If Syrians are sent back to Syria, shoe-making and also the textile sector might have to halt production or shut down businesses. We need the Syrian labour force"*.

### Lack of knowledge among employers about working permit legislation and procedures

Employers are not aware of how to recruit Syrians or how to apply for working permits, partly because Turkish SMSs are not experienced in recruiting foreign labour. Thus, some employers claimed that they all obey legislation since they regularly pay the social security payments of the Syrians they recruit. However, they have not requested working permits or submitted any permit applications for their Syrian employees. They were unaware of the working permit legislation or the procedures to follow. They also misunderstand the social security aspect of the issue as they have not been properly informed about work permit processes.

Mobility restrictions and related bureaucratic procedures are also highlighted as a vital challenge to employing Syrians. As one employer clearly explained, *"The Syrian boy working in my business had been registered in Aydın, but he then moved to Izmir. For months, he was not able to transfer his residence to Izmir. Without the renewed residence permit, we are not able to submit his working permit. We tried a lot but we could not achieve it. These procedures should be facilitated"*.

### POLICY SUGGESTIONS

#### Labour market needs analysis and vocational training

Table 6 shows the jobs with highest demand in Izmir while Table 5 provides the top three most needed jobs in each sector. However, these figures need to be updated and sector-based current labour market analysis needs to be conducted concerning the number of workers required for each job type and the needed qualifications. The labour profile of Syrians should also be explicitly analysed.

This analysis indicates which skills might be improved among Syrians through offering them relevant vocational training. In addition, most international organizations focus on training in border cities while having few vocational training

projects in Izmir. The bureaus of these organisations track the irregular mobility of migrants or assist with international protection procedures. However, beyond its transit hub function, Izmir also hosts a significant number of settled Syrians who need to be integrated into the labour market. The Izmir Chamber of Commerce has also failed to engage with the issue as we observed during our field research. It has paid no attention nor developed any concrete initiative concerning the challenges or opportunities in Izmir regarding Syrian workers.

**Table 5. Labour demand in Izmir**

Sectors of labour demand in Izmir	Number of workers needed
1- Textile Operator	1,765
2- CNC Operator	570
3- Waiter/waitress (service sector)	540

Source: Turkish Labour Agency, 2016

### Preparing qualification competence sets

Concerning each profession, the competence sets for the required qualifications should be prepared and integrated into vocational training. This training should not only target Syrians but also include Turkish unemployed workers to maintain the host society's tolerance and peaceful co-existence with the newcomers. Otherwise the concerns and misperceptions among the locals increase as Syrians are being perceived as a threat who take the already few jobs available in the market.

### Removing conditionality in emergency social

### and financial aid programmes

The emergency social and financial aid programmes that have been used with Syrians in Turkey over the last eight years should be transformed more into integration targeted programmes. Because these programmes make aid conditional on lacking any income, many Syrians do not declare that they work but prefer to remain in the informal market. In order to benefit from the aid, they do not apply for work permits although many family members work.

In addition, these aid programmes are designed for emergency and survival, so eventually they are not based on conditionality such as to get vocational training. However, after eight years after they arrived, it is obvious that many Syrians are not temporary visitors, so they need to be properly integrated into the labour market to become self-supporting. Thus, as in Germany, livelihood programmes should introduce vocational training and labour market integration factors as conditional to the sustainability of the assistance programmes.

### Engaging the private sector

Although the private sector has labour shortages and has reasonable resources for training, in Izmir, it lacks coordination and information about the potential economic contribution of Syrians. This also stems from the lack of complementary cooperation between public and non-public institutions such as municipality, chambers and NGOs at local level.

**Table 6. Labour demand by sector in Izmir**

Food Sectors	Labor demand	Automotive	Labor demand
1- Cook/Chef assistant	200	CNC operator	570
2- Cook/Chef	100	Lathe operator	250
3- Pide Chef	55	Montage technician	55
Service Sectors	Labor demand	Textile	Labor demand
Waiter	540	Machine Operator	1,765
Call center operator	300	Shoe maker	220
Nurse/attendant	200	Presser	130

Source: Turkish Labour Agency, 2016

### **Facilitating equivalency and degree recognitions**

Turkey's Higher Education Authority has issued facilitating mechanisms to support the access and integration of Syrians students into Turkey's higher education system. However, the procedures for equivalency and diploma recognition take time and effort to complete, which forces Syrians with skills, professions or qualifications to work beneath their capacity to survive. Instead, they could be more productive and beneficial for the Turkish economy if they were also employed specifically for the integration strategies developed for Syrian society.

### **Encouraging joint ventures and eliminating quota restriction**

It is observed that particularly in food, service and wedding dress sectors, Syrians are highly demanded not only as employees but also as joint ventures. In food sector, some employers underlined that they decided to have joint venture with Syrian employers in order to serve for the demands of Syrian customers. They were satisfied to have increased their sales and income with the help of their Syrian business partners. As the data shows, Syrian entrepreneurs in Izmir have the potential to initiate their own business if they are provided capital and technical assistance. This would certainly increase the number of registered business or scale-up the existing ones. The employers also mentioned that the 1/10 quota system is a barrier for them since small business have few employees and they can only hire 1-2 Syrians whereas they need more Syrian workers. If the quota system becomes flexible, more Syrians are to be recruited and effectively integrated into the labour market.

### **End Notes**

#### **1. List of Interviews with Institutions**

1. Aegean Region Chamber of Industry
2. İzmir Chamber of Merchants and Craftsman
3. Ministry of Labour and Social Security (Ankara)
4. İzmir Directorate General of Migration Management
5. Ministry of Provincial Food Agriculture and Livestock (Ankara)
6. Aegean Exporters' Association
7. World Food Programme (Ankara)
8. International Labour Organization (ILO-Ankara)
9. UNHCR (Ankara)
10. UNDP (Ankara)
11. International Organization for Migration (IOM-İzmir Office and Ankara)
12. Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (İzmir Office)
13. Governorship of İzmir
14. İzmir Development Agency
15. İzmir Chamber of Clothing
16. Aegean Young Businessmen Association (EGIAD)
17. Aegean Industrialists and Businessmen Association (ESIAD)
18. İzmir Chamber of Fashion, Textiles and Garments

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This research will be published as an academic paper in a peer-reviewed journal where the findings will be fully reflected and analytically evaluated more in detail.

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