

UPINION

Social tensions in Türkiye: Syrian refugees' perspective

November 2024

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Introduction

This brief presents key findings from a conversation held from October 22nd to December 5th, 2024, with Upinion's online community of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. The conversation aimed to continue monitoring social tensions in light of the evolving refugee situation in the country. It specifically captures individuals' feelings of safety, understanding of social tensions, factors influencing their sense of security, and future plans.

Methodology

The study's methodology consisted of a conversation held through Upinion's Digital Engagement Platform (DEP), as part of a broader series of monitoring conversations conducted with Syrian individuals in Türkiye over the past four years. Upinion has developed this online platform that allows it to securely connect and stay in touch with marginalised or hard-to-reach communities, including 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, which are also widely used by Syrian refugees in Türkiye.

Important to mention is that the DEP enables Upinion to send tailored, neutral information to respondents about relevant services or initiatives in their area, thereby turning the conversation into an information exchange. This sets the study's methodology apart from traditional surveys, as participants become active agents engaged in and influenced by knowledge exchange, rather than being simply providers of data.

Demographic information

It is essential to interpret the results while considering the sample characteristics unique to this conversation.

The sample consists of **367** Syrian nationals who started the conversation, and **333** respondents who completed it. The data collection took place from October 22nd till December 5th, 2024.

Of those who provided their demographic information, **70%** (n=361) identified as male and **30%** identified as female, resulting in a male-to-female ratio of 1 : 0.42.

The majority of the respondents (**36%**, n=367) were aged between 36 and 45, with smaller groups in the 26-35 (**26%**) and 56-65 (**11%**) age ranges. Only **14** respondents were between 18 and 25, and **13** older than 65 years old.

Regarding respondents' areas of residency, individuals in this sample were living in the Southeastern Anatolia Region (**33%**, n=367), the Mediterranean Region (**29%**), the Marmara Region (**26%**), and the Central Anatolia Region (**7%**). Only **13** respondents lived in the Aegean Region and **3** in the Black Sea Region.

Representativeness

Upinion does not aim to establish statistical representativeness through its findings, as the conversations conducted for research purposes constitute qualitative or quantitative inquiries that do not simulate a reflection of the actual population. When comparing our distribution to actual country distributions, readers are invited to see for themselves how our samples can be reflective of a larger tendency.

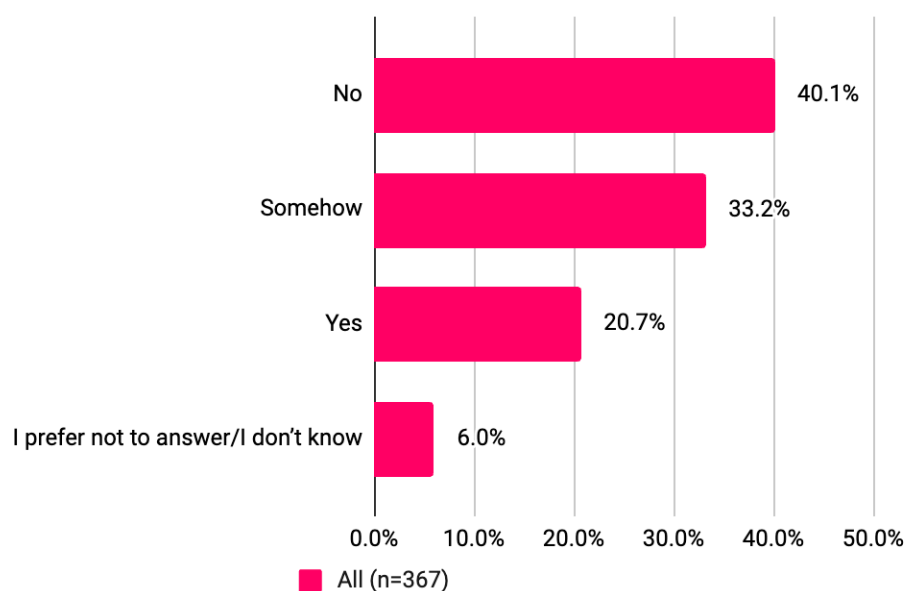
Data findings

Feelings of safety

Whilst **40%** (n=367) of Syrian respondents indicated not feeling safe in Türkiye, **33%** indicated feeling somehow safe, and **21%** safe.

This is consistent with the previous responses given to this question in August 2024, where **55%** (n=395) of respondents indicated feeling safe or somehow safe. Feelings of complete safety across Syrian respondents over time have been gradually declining, as **37%** (n=421) of respondents indicated feeling safe in April 2023, with a continuing drop from June (**26%**, n=667) or August 2024 (**28%**, n=395) until now (**21%**).

Figure 1. "Do you feel safe in Türkiye right now?" - all respondents (n=367)



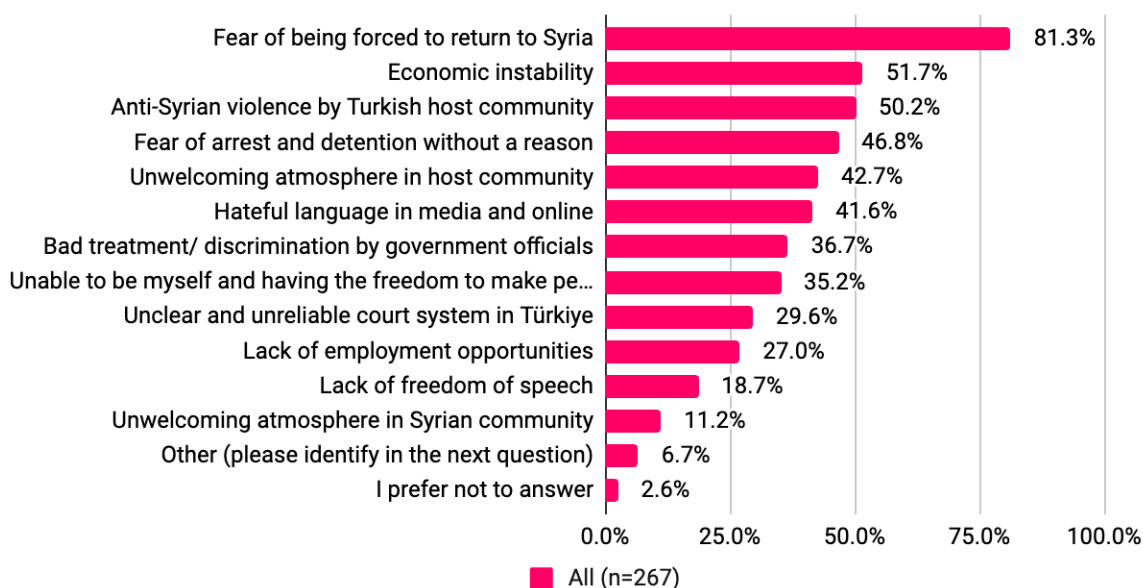
When looking at the results per region, respondents expressed lower feelings of safety in the Marmara region (**49%** did not feel safe, n=96) than for example, in the Mediterranean (**35%**, n=106) or Southeastern Anatolia (**38%**, n=122) regions.

Factors to feeling unsafe

The large majority of Syrian respondents indicated that they feared being forced to return to Syria as one of the leading reasons making them feel unsafe in Syria (**81%**, n=267). Close to half of the respondents also described economic instability (**52%**), anti-Syrian violence by the Turkish host

community (**50%**), and fear of arrest and detention without a reason (**47%**) as factors behind this feeling.

Figure 2. "Could you elaborate on the factors that make you feel unsafe in Türkiye?" - all respondents feeling unsafe (n=267)



When asked to describe which factors were participating to their feelings of insecurity in Türkiye, respondents from the Marmara region indicated the fear of arrest and detention without a reason (**62%**, n=79) considerably more than people from the Mediterranean (**44%**, n=70) or Southeastern Anatolia (**37%**, n=89) regions.

Secondly, hateful language in media and online is a significant concern, particularly in the Marmara region, where **58%** of respondents cite it as a major factor. This is considerably higher than in the Mediterranean (**31%**) and Southeastern Anatolia (**36%**), where the concern is still relevant, but less pronounced.

The perception of an unclear and unreliable court system also contributes to feelings of unsafety, with **43%** of respondents in the Marmara region highlighting it as a factor. In comparison, fewer respondents in the Mediterranean (**26%**) and Southeastern Anatolia (**23%**) see the court system as a key issue. These findings suggest that both media rhetoric and the legal system are perceived as greater sources of insecurity in Marmara than in other regions.

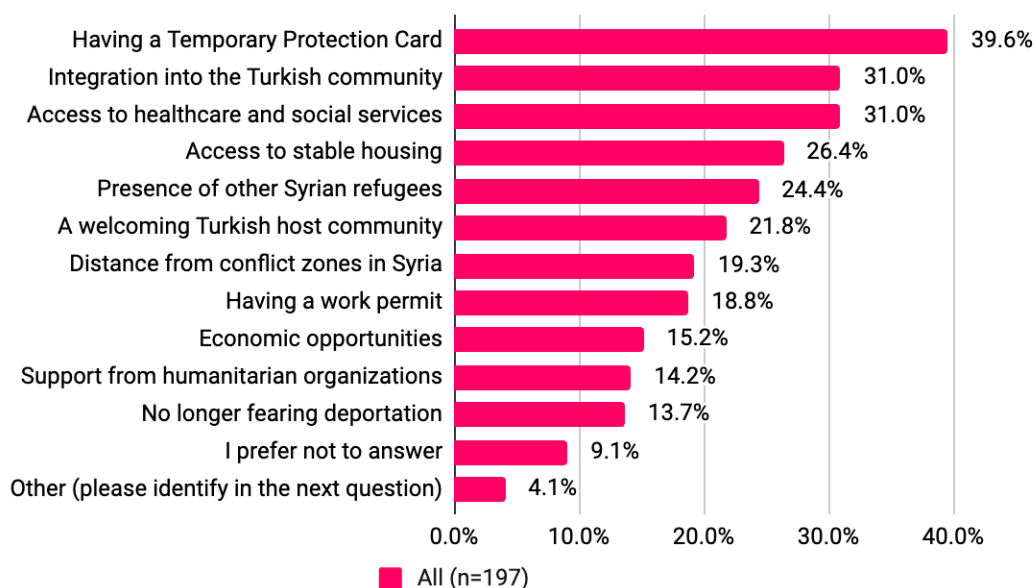
Factors to feeling safe

When asked about the factors that made respondents feel safe in Türkiye, their responses were quite fragmented. **40%** (n=197) however expressed that the obtention of a temporary protection card was a key reason behind them feeling safe in Türkiye. The following two most chosen

responses were the integration into the Turkish community and the access to healthcare and social services (**31%** for both).

It can also be noted that support from humanitarian organisations (**14%**) or other economic opportunities (**15%**) do not seem to be contributing to Syrians' feelings of safety currently. This would seem to indicate that comprehensive social integration greatly contributes to Syrians' feelings of safety living in Türkiye.

Figure 3. "Could you elaborate on the reasons or factors that make you feel safe in Türkiye?" - all respondents feeling safe (n=197)



The possession of a work permit as a factor to Syrians' perception of safety in Türkiye notably differs per region. In the Marmara region, **30%** (n=43) of respondents feel safer due to having a work permit. In contrast, only **14%** (n=59) of respondents in the Mediterranean region and **14%** (n=71) in Southeastern Anatolia share this sentiment. These figures suggest that while a work permit is not seen as one of the top factors contributing to safety, it is more significantly so in Marmara compared to the other regions. This could be explained by the likelihood that relatively more participating Syrians in the Marmara Region possess a work permit compared to the other two regions.

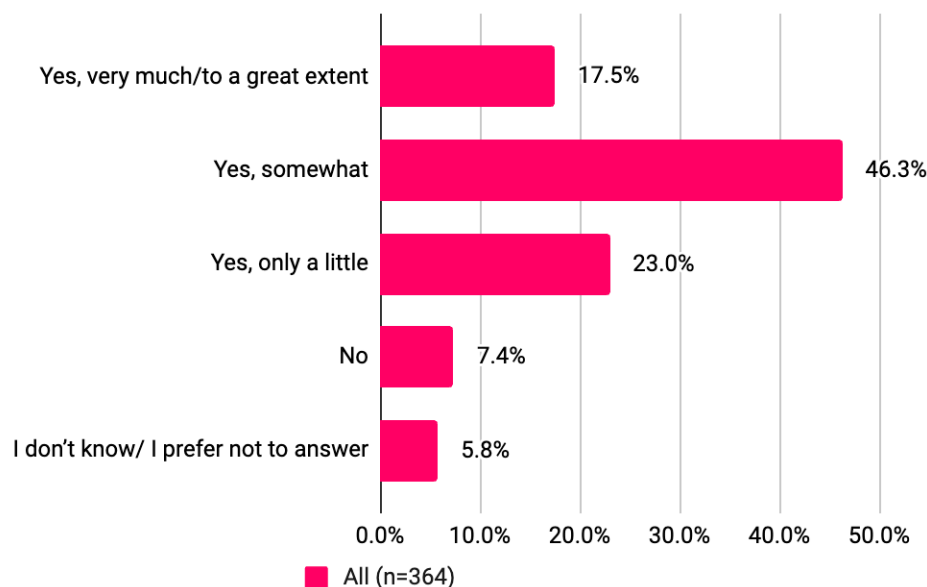
Social tensions

Perception of existing tensions

When asked about their perception of social tensions between Syrian refugees and host communities in Türkiye, **46%** (n=364) of respondents claimed there were some tensions and **18%** great tensions, which would add up to **64%** of respondents considering tensions between refugee and host communities notable.

In parallel, **23%** found there were only a little tensions, for **7%** who expressed they experienced no tensions.

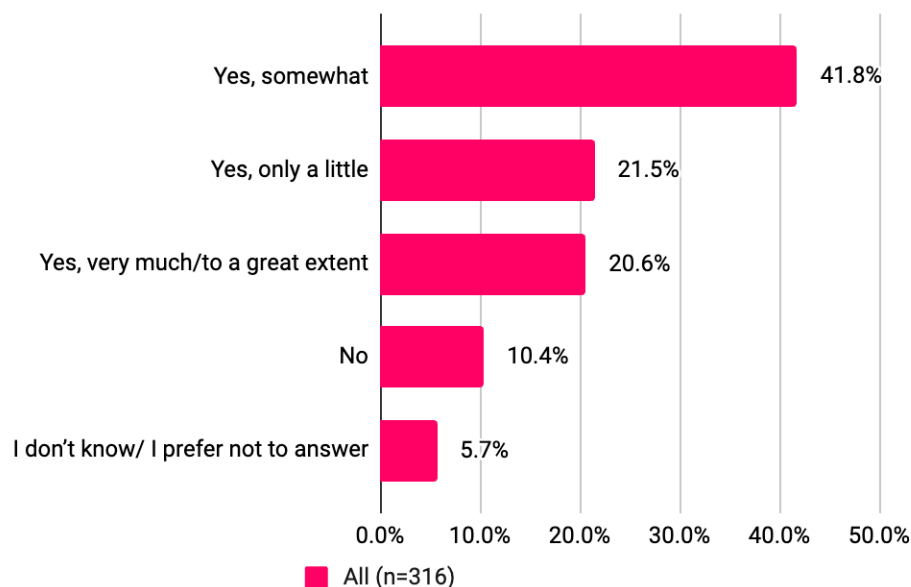
Figure 4. "Do you think there are tensions between Syrian refugees / migrant communities and host communities in Türkiye?" - all respondents (n=364)



Evolution of social tensions

Amongst those perceiving social tensions, **63%** (n=316) reported that the social tensions in Türkiye had notably increased since June 2024, for **32%** only a little or not at all.

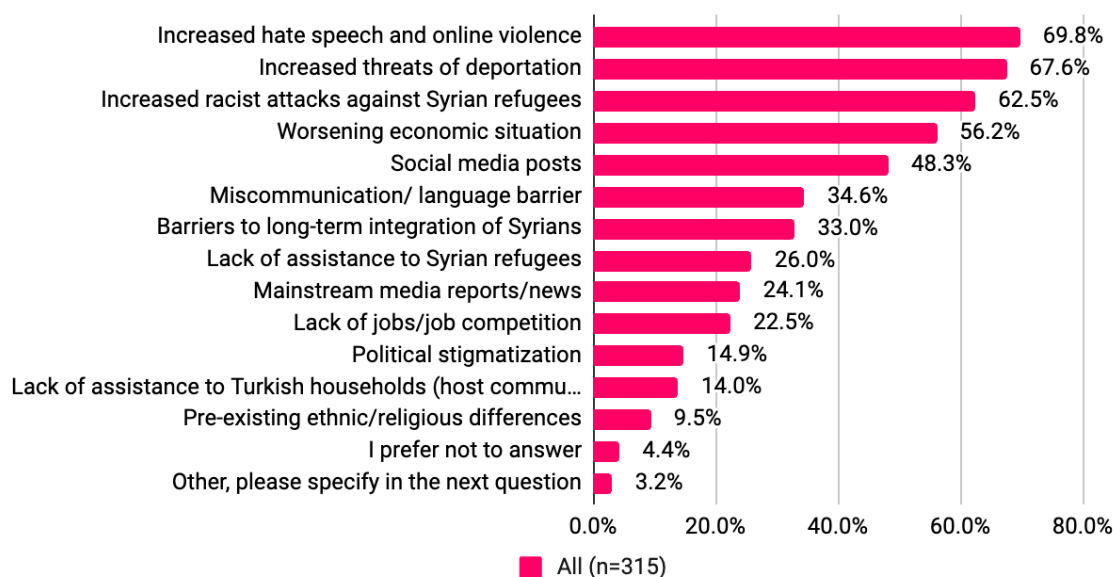
Figure 5. "Have these social tensions (between Syrian refugees / migrant communities and host communities) in Türkiye increased since June 2024?" - to respondents expressing there were social tensions (n=316)



Reasons behind social tensions

When questioned about what they believed were the reasons behind these social tensions, Syrian respondents identified three dominant factors: (1) the increase of hate speech and online violence (**70%**, n=315), (2) the increase of threats of deportation (**68%**), and (3) the increase of racist attacks against Syrian refugees (**63%**).

Figure 6. "What do you think are the main reasons for these tensions?" - all respondents expressing there were social tensions (n=315)



Female respondents identified the language barrier between host and refugee communities leading to miscommunication as one of the main reasons behind these social tensions, slightly more (**43%**, n=95) than male respondents (**31%**, n=216).

Male respondents more frequently indicated that increased hate speech and online violence was behind those tensions (**73%**) than females (**62%**).

The reasons for existing social tensions between locals and Syrian refugees also vary across regions. In the Marmara region, a notable **73%** (n=86) of respondents attribute the tension to increased racist attacks against Syrian refugees, the highest percentage among regions. This is followed by the Mediterranean region, where **61%** (n=90) share this concern, and Southeastern Anatolia, where **50%** (n=102) identify racist attacks as a key factor.

Lastly, social media posts contribute to the tensions particularly in the Marmara region, where **63%** (n=86) cite them as a major factor. In the Mediterranean, **46%** (n=90) and in Southeastern Anatolia, **40%** (n=102) of respondents agree that social media plays a role in escalating tensions.

Example of how these tensions manifest themselves

Respondents who felt comfortable doing so were asked to elaborate on how the tensions they mentioned affected their daily lives. Their answers varied and included experiences such as hate speech and street violence, threats of deportation, lingering fear after the incidents in Kayseri, imposed restrictions, and mistreatment in public spaces and services such as hospitals. A few examples are shared below:

"When I leave the house to do something, I hear people on the street speaking about me—or the Syrian community in general—in insulting terms, saying things like, *'When will you leave us alone? Go back to your country. We will deport you.'* There are some words I can't even write because they are too offensive." - Syrian respondent

"For example, when anything happens to a Turkish citizen because of a Syrian person, intentionally or unintentionally, the Turkish community and authorities turn against all Syrians and restrictions begin to be imposed on them." - Syrian respondent

"Since the events in Kayseri Province, my family and I have not gone out for a walk." - Syrian respondent

"When we go to the hospital, we feel people looking at us with hostility. Our children are attacked in the streets and even threatened with knives by young Turkish men. The daily toxic rhetoric in Türkiye against Syrians alone makes us constantly worry about our safety and well-being. Returning to Syria is not an option at all—there is poverty, violence, crime, and ongoing bombings." - Syrian respondent

Reasons for no perceived social tensions between Syrian and host communities

Those who reported not perceiving any social tensions between Syrian and Turkish host communities were asked to explain their reasons in an open-ended format.

Most of the 22 respondents cited good relations and a sense of integration with the host community as the main reasons for the absence of social tensions. Responses emphasized the perceived morality and respectfulness of Turkish people, their willingness to support those in need, and examples of mutual respect and peaceful coexistence.

"In any area, you must respect the place. Then, no one bothers you. Respect, be respected." - Syrian respondent

"The Turkish people are moral and respectful and do not interfere in what does not concern them, and for thirteen years I have not been exposed to any problem. Turkish security is excellent and is always present and spread in all inhabited places to protect all citizens. They deserve all thanks and respect, and this is what I found to be honest." - Syrian respondent

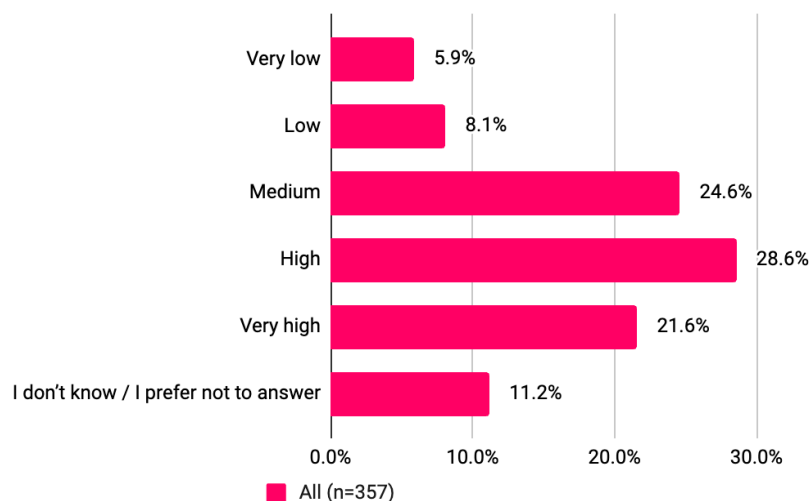
"The Turks in our region love the Syrians and sympathize with them" - Syrian respondent

"Because the Turkish people, in general, are good people and support the oppressed, regardless of some individual cases that create racism between the host people and the refugees." - Syrian respondent

Pressure on Syrians to leave Türkiye

In light of the aforementioned tensions, Syrian respondents were asked to rate the pressure they felt to leave Türkiye. **51%** (n=357) believed the pressure is high or very high, for **14%** who rated low or very low. **25%** thought the pressure was moderate.

Figure 7. "In light of the current social tensions and events since June, how would you rate the pressure on Syrians to leave Türkiye?" - all respondents (n=357)

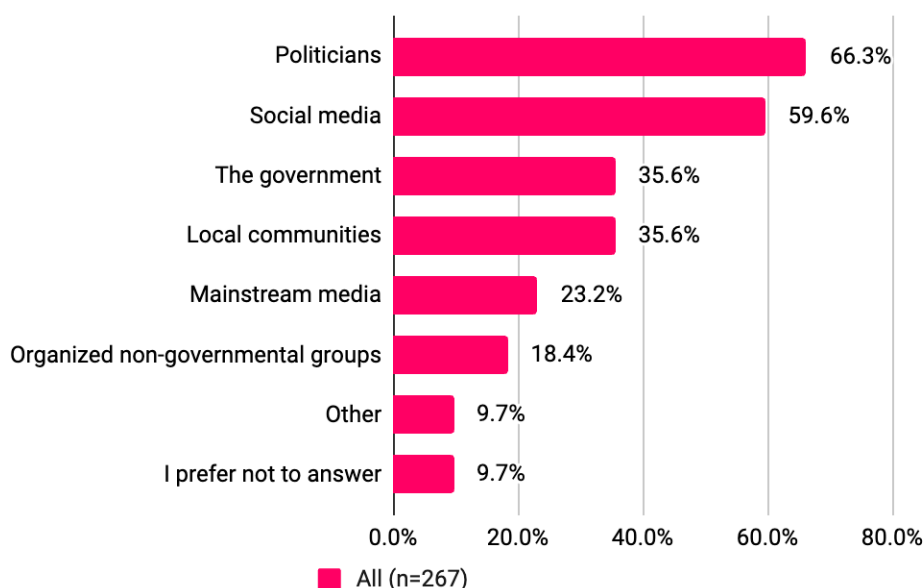


When combining the "high" and "very high" responses, the portion of respondents perceiving strong pressure for Syrians to leave Türkiye in the Marmara region (**63%**, n=94) is notably higher than in the Mediterranean region, where **41%** (n=105) feel similarly, and Southeastern Anatolia, where **46%** (n=117) share the sentiment. These figures suggest that the pressure to leave is most strongly felt in the Marmara region compared to the other regions.

Actors putting the most pressure

Respondents who mentioned that there was pressure put on Syrians to leave Türkiye were asked a follow-up question about the actors behind that feeling. For **66%** (n=267) of respondents, it was predominantly politicians, followed by social media (**60%**), and a little further behind the government and local communities (**36%** both). See the bar chart below.

Figure 8. "Which actor(s) would you say are currently putting the most pressure onto Syrians to leave Türkiye?" - all respondents expressing a high pressure to leave Türkiye (n=267)



While the government is not seen as the primary actor putting pressure on Syrians to leave Türkiye, there are notable regional differences. In the Marmara region, nearly half of respondents (**46%**, n=77) point to the government as one of the main sources of pressure. In the Mediterranean region, **30%** (n=69) share this view, and **33%** (n=89) of respondents in Southeastern Anatolia. These figures highlight a perception of government-driven pressure especially in the Marmara region.

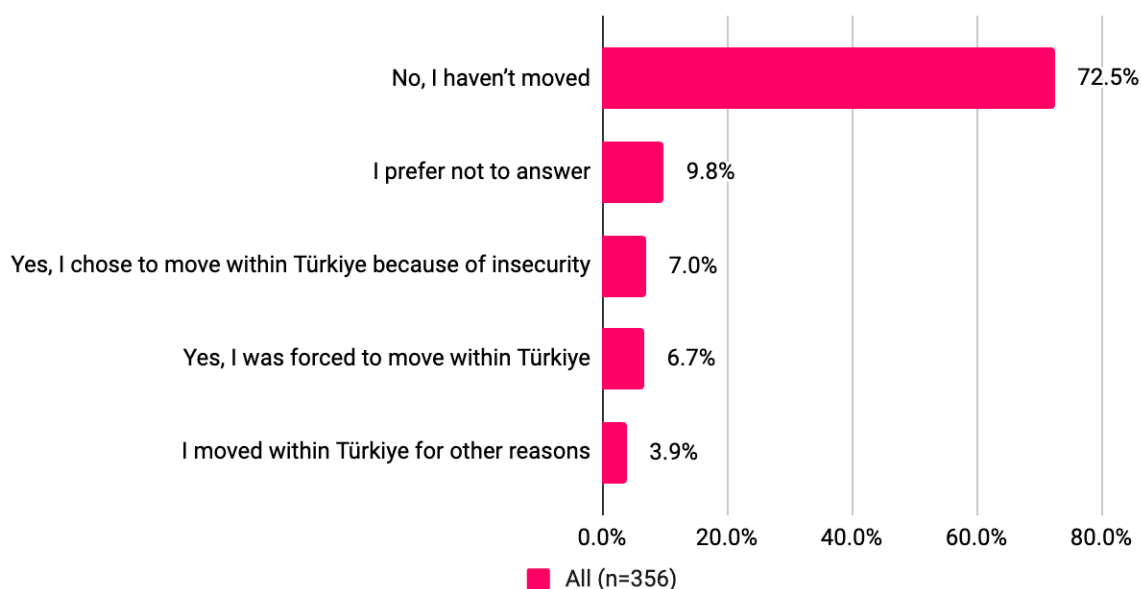
Male respondents affirmed that politicians were some of the main actors behind the pressure for Syrians to leave Türkiye a lot more (**74%**, n=186) than female respondents (**49%**, n=76).

Increase of anti-Syrian violence or pressure

Displacement and other movements

In light of the rise of anti-Syrian violence, Syrian respondents were asked about their recent movement patterns. Whilst **73%** (n=356) have not moved due to increasing anti-Syrian violence, a small percentage chose to move within Türkiye because of insecurity (**7%**), and a similar percentage was forced to move within Türkiye (**7%**).

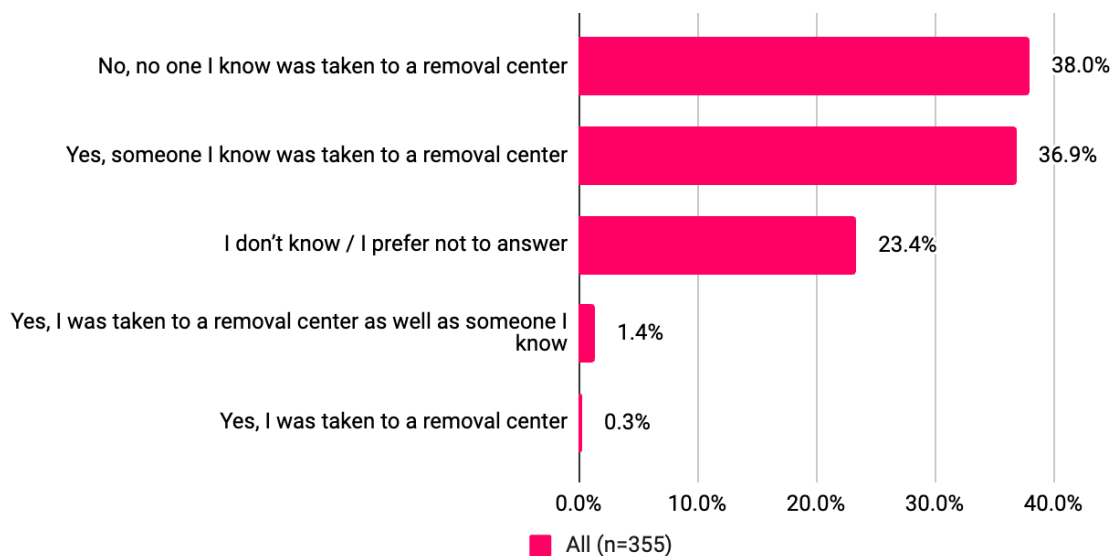
Figure 9. "Have you been displaced or forced to move within Türkiye due this increasing anti-Syrian violence?" - all respondents (n=356)



Removal centre

When asked about whether they or anyone they know has been taken to a removal centre, similar numbers of respondents answered no (**38%**, n=355) or said that someone they knew was taken (**37%**). Not negligably, **23%** said they did not know or preferred not to answer.

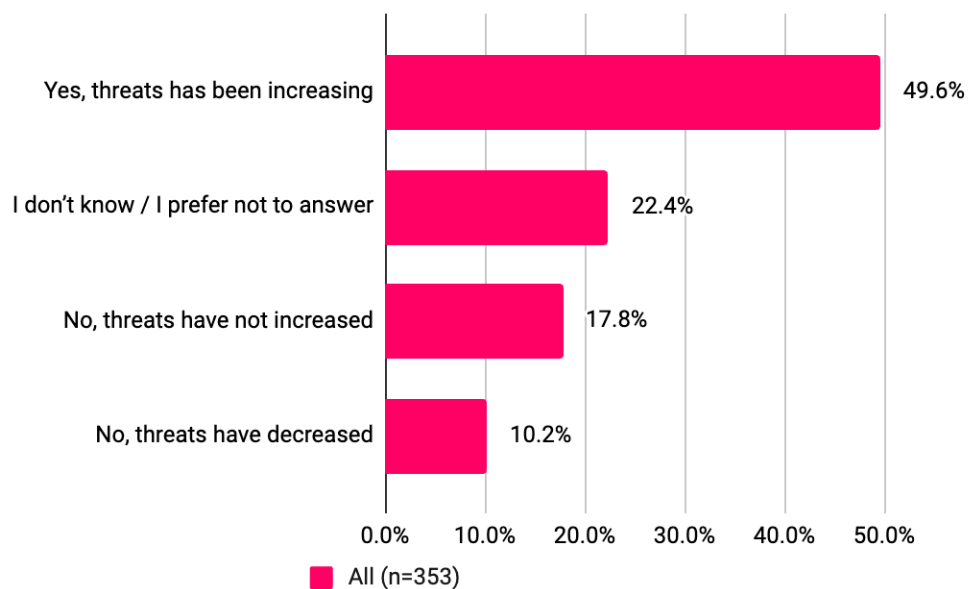
Figure 10. "Since the renewed eruption of violence in June 2024, have you or has anyone you know been taken to a removal centre?"- all respondents (n=355)



Threats of deportation

Half of the respondents (n=353) claimed that they have witnessed threats of deportation increasing since June 2024 as an intimidation factor. See the bar chart below.

Figure 11. "Since the escalation of tensions in June 2024, have you noticed an increase in threats of deportation as an intimidation strategy?"- all respondents (n=353)

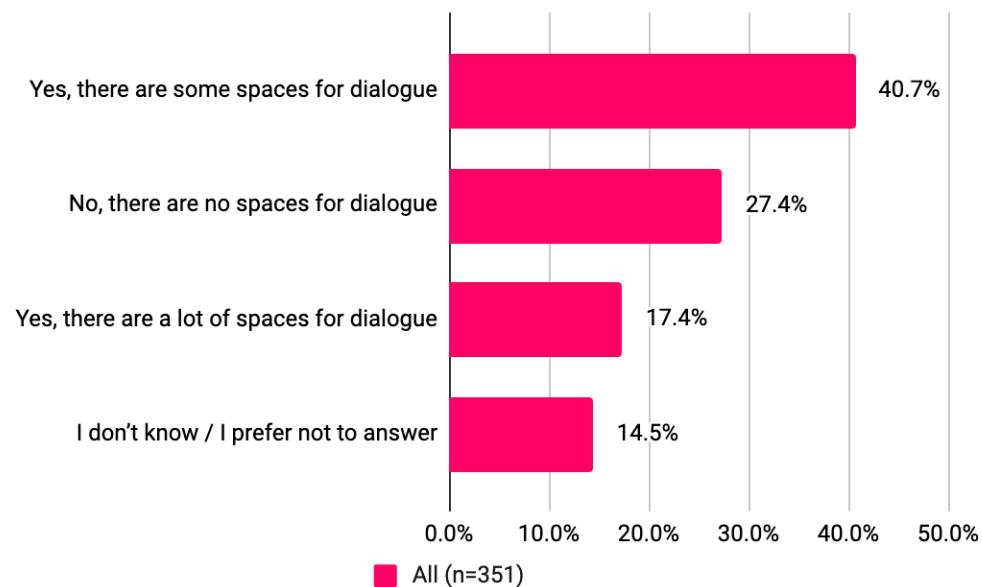


Spaces for dialogue

Existing space for dialogue

When asked about whether respondents believed there were enough spaces for dialogue between host and refugee communities, **41%** (n=351) found there were some, for **17%** a lot and **27%** no spaces at all.

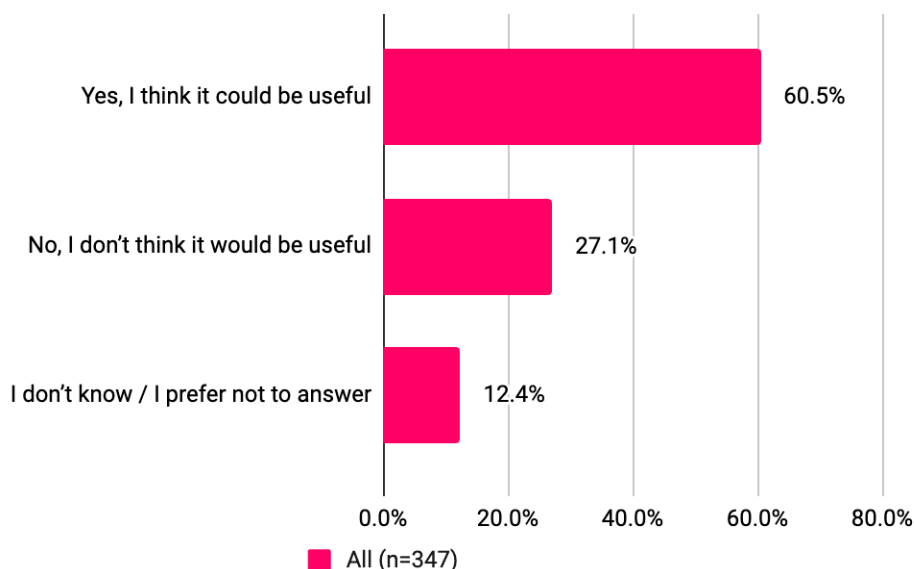
Figure 12. "Do you think there are spaces for dialogue between the two?" - all respondents (n=351)



Spaces for dialogue and social tensions

61% (n=347) of respondents found that having more spaces of dialogue could help appease social tensions, for **27%** who disagreed. This shows that a majority of respondents believe that communication and social cohesion are defining factors in the existing social tensions between Syrian and host communities.

Figure 13. "Could having more spaces for dialogue help appease the social tensions between local and migrant populations?" - all respondents (n=347)



Over half of the respondents from the Marmara region (**51%**, n=91) believe that creating more spaces for dialogue could help ease social tensions between local and migrant populations. This view is even more pronounced in the Mediterranean region, where **71%** (n=103) of respondents think such spaces would be beneficial. In Southeastern Anatolia, **58%** (n=113) of participants also support the idea, indicating a broad consensus across these regions that fostering communication could improve social cohesion between local and migrant / refugee populations.

Type of spaces of dialogue useful to help mitigate social tensions

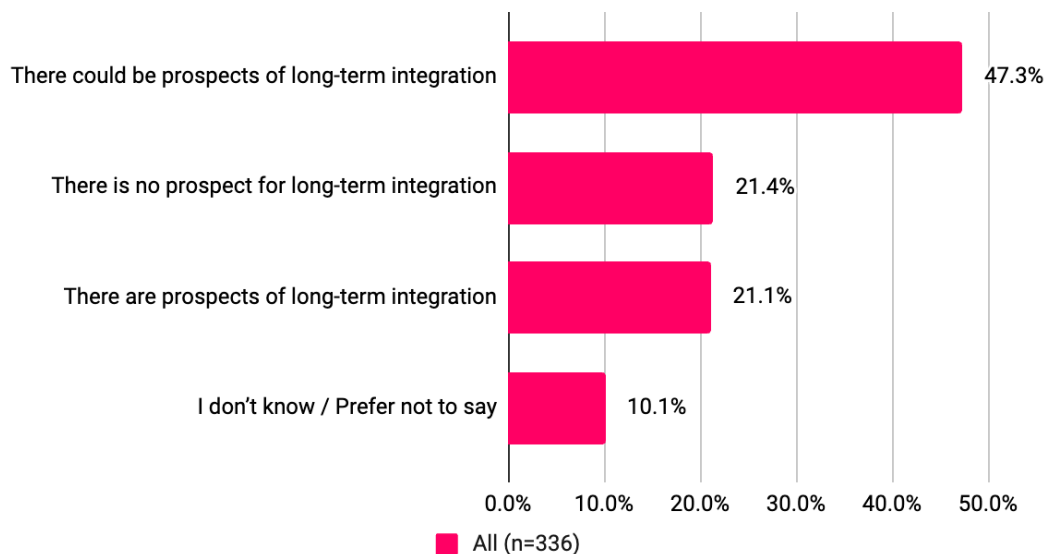
When asked what types of spaces could help foster dialogue between communities, respondents mentioned social events, the creation of clubs that include members of both communities, and initiatives that introduce people to one another through theater, awareness programs, seminars, or dedicated discussion spaces (e.g., meetings to better understand each other's situations). Support centers for the integration of Syrian refugees were also suggested, focusing on promoting Turkish language learning, encouraging respect for Turkish culture, and getting a better idea of how to be of support to the Turkish community.

Additionally, respondents emphasized the important role of media in sharing accurate information and addressing misinformation, for example, by "hosting representatives of the Syrian community in official Turkish media programs."

Long-term integration prospects

To the question of whether there were prospects of long-term integration, respondents' answers are not definite. The largest percentage found that there could be prospects (**47%**, n=336), while the same proportion of respondents found that there were already prospects (**21%**) or that there were no prospects at all (**21%**).

Figure 14. "Do you think there are prospects for long-term integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye?" - all respondents (n=336)

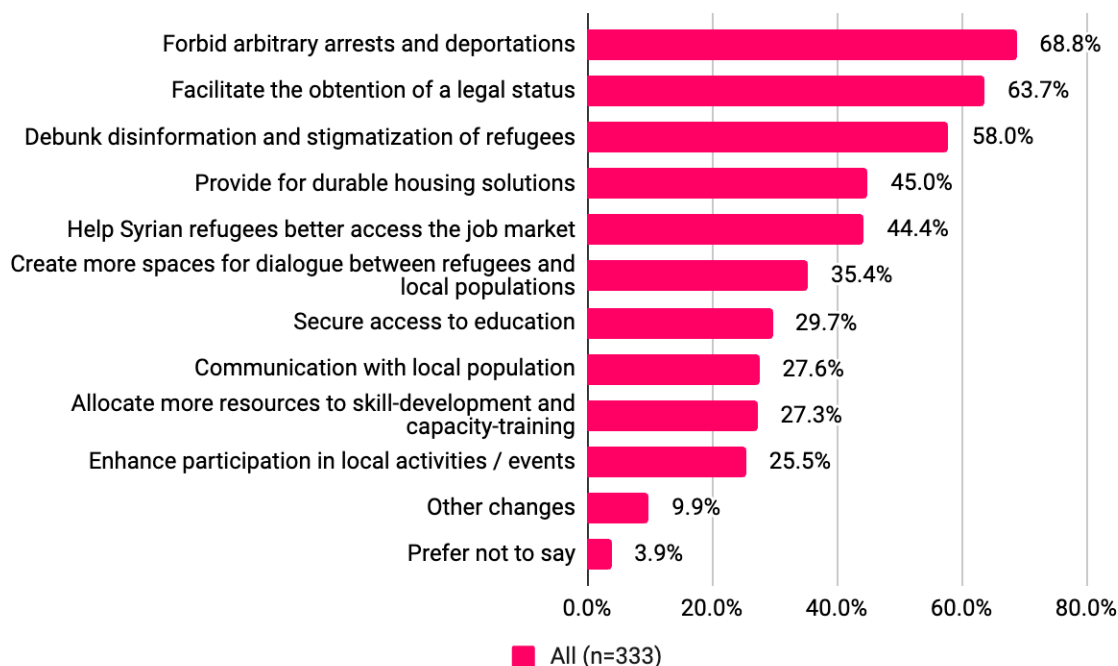


Priority changes for long-term integration

The prevalent priority changes for Syrian respondents in order to allow for long-term integration concerned the forbidding of arbitrary arrests and deportation (**69%**, n=333) as well as the facilitation of the obtention of a legal status (**64%**).

Although mentioned somewhat less frequently, enhancing participation in local events (**26%**), investing in skill development and capacity-building (**27%**), and improving communication with the local population (**30%**) were still highlighted by a considerable number of respondents, also emphasizing their continued importance in long-term integration of Syrian refugees.

Figure 15. "What priority changes are needed in order to allow for the long-term integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye?" - all respondents (n=333)



When asked about the priority changes which would be needed in order to allow for the long-term integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, male respondents prioritized debunking disinformation and the stigmatization of refugees more (**65%**, n=231) than female respondents (**41%**, n=96). As for female respondents, they favored providing for durable housing solutions more (**54%**) than male respondents (**41%**). Additionally, people between the ages of 36 and 45 (n=124) also chose durable housing solutions more frequently (**54%**) than other age groups.

The data also reveals regional variations in the priorities needed for the long-term integration of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Across all regions, addressing disinformation and stigmatization of refugees is a significant concern, with the Marmara region showing the highest percentage of support (**73%**, n=88), followed by the Mediterranean (**59%**, n=97) and Southeastern Anatolia (**49%**, n=109). Similarly, facilitating refugees' access to legal status is seen as a key issue, with strong support across regions: **74%** in Marmara, **61%** in Southeastern Anatolia, and **59%** in the Mediterranean. These findings suggest that while the need for legal status and combating stigma are broadly recognized, the degree of urgency varies, particularly between Marmara and the other regions.

Conclusion

Feelings of safety among Syrian respondents are declining, with a significant portion reporting feeling unsafe due to fear of deportation, economic instability, anti-Syrian violence, and fear of arrest. Social tensions between Syrian refugees and host communities are perceived as notable and increasing by many, driven by hate speech, threats of deportation, and racist attacks.

There's a high level of pressure felt by Syrians to leave Türkiye, with politicians and social media identified as key actors contributing to this pressure. While some Syrian respondents report positive interactions and a sense of integration with Turkish communities, a substantial number experience daily challenges, including discrimination, mistreatment, and fears for their safety.

Many believe that increased spaces for dialogue could help mitigate these tensions and that priority changes, such as preventing arbitrary arrests, facilitating legal status, and addressing disinformation, are crucial for long-term integration. However, the overall outlook on long-term integration remains uncertain, with varying regional experiences and priorities.