

# THE RETURN OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY: OUTLOOK AND CONCERNS

CMEPS-J Report No. 42 (Updated on August 27, 2018)

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More than three million Syrian refugees reside in Turkey, and addressing their residency will soon become a major issue. What do Syrian refugees themselves think about their prospects of returning to their home country?

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It has been hard to displace the superiority of those siding with the government in the Syrian conflict, and the conflict's focus is moving toward redevelopment and the rebuilding of political and social structures. Amidst these issues, the treatment of refugees and those displaced due to the conflict both within and outside Syria will be an important issue not only for Syria, but for the countries that have hosted refugees. It must be noted that, though simply branded as refugees and displaced people, their circumstances such as the amount of the resources that can be spent on transboundary movements differ considerably. Educational levels, capacity, and existence of relatives are included in such a resource. Furthermore, standpoint of each refugee toward the conflict may differ vastly in accordance to their current residing place.

For example, even among those contemplating taking refuge in one of the countries bordering Syria such as Lebanon, where many Syrians have relatives and can be counted as an ideal place to take refuge, but many Syrians avoid it because it is ruled by the [Hezbollah](#) and other such groups that provide assistance to the Syrian government. Syrians who moved to Turkey because of the country's aggressive support for groups opposing the Syrian government, and Syrians who stayed in Syria also have different views about the countries involved in the dispute.

We conducted opinion-based surveys and interviews in Jordan (2014), Sweden (2015, 2016), and Syria (2016, 2017), in order to shed light on the feelings of a certain segment of the Syrian population. This paper analyzes some of the results of an opinion poll with Syrians living in Turkey, which was conducted with the cooperation of an Istanbul-based investigative organization in October and November 2017. More than three million Syrians currently live in Turkey, with seventy percent living in seven provinces, including Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Hatay. In addition, ninety percent of these individuals live outside of refugee camps. This survey was conducted with 812 Syrian refugees who were living outside but who were within the seven provinces where many Syrians have taken temporary refuge.

## I. Satisfaction with Current Lifestyle

Among those surveyed in this poll, there is a high level of general satisfaction with life in Turkey, though there is a high level of dissatisfaction with household finances. Only a little over ten percent of respondents answered that their monthly wages compared to Turkey's average monthly wage (around 350 dollars) were "much higher" or "a bit higher." This suggests that the economic circumstances of Syrians living in Turkey are not very good. However, it should also be noted that a survey team conducting a preliminary survey in September 2017 pointed out that survey respondents thought their answers could influence the future provision of aid. Respondents thus tended to understate their income and economic circumstances.

Moreover, [the survey carried out in Sweden](#) showed a tendency toward disparities in satisfaction with general life and satisfaction with economic circumstances. While these disparities may be a reflection of a sense of security due to the absence of concern about threats of war and oppression despite people's economic instability, some refugees are still in the process of receiving residency or refugee status, or are just beginning the process of unifying their families in Sweden. It should be taken

into consideration that displaced Syrians are in difficult positions when it comes to expressing dissatisfaction with life in the countries that have accepted them.

Figure 1 Satisfaction with Life in Turkey (%)

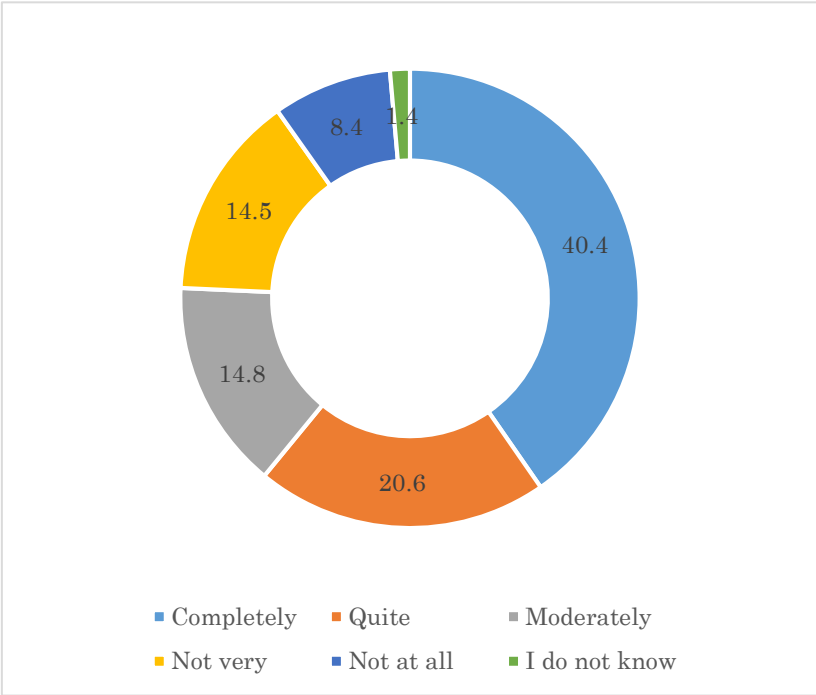
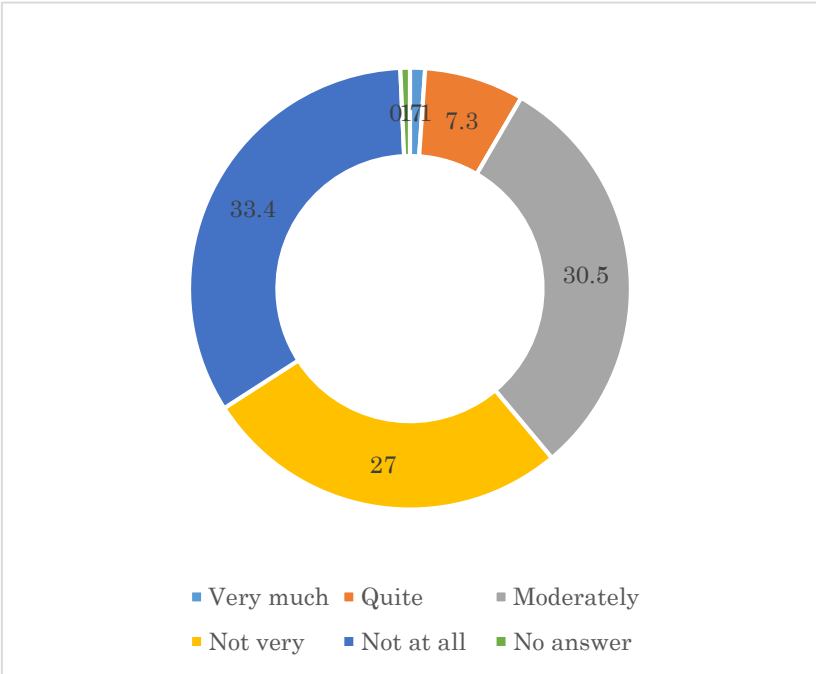


Figure 2 Satisfaction with Household Finances (%)

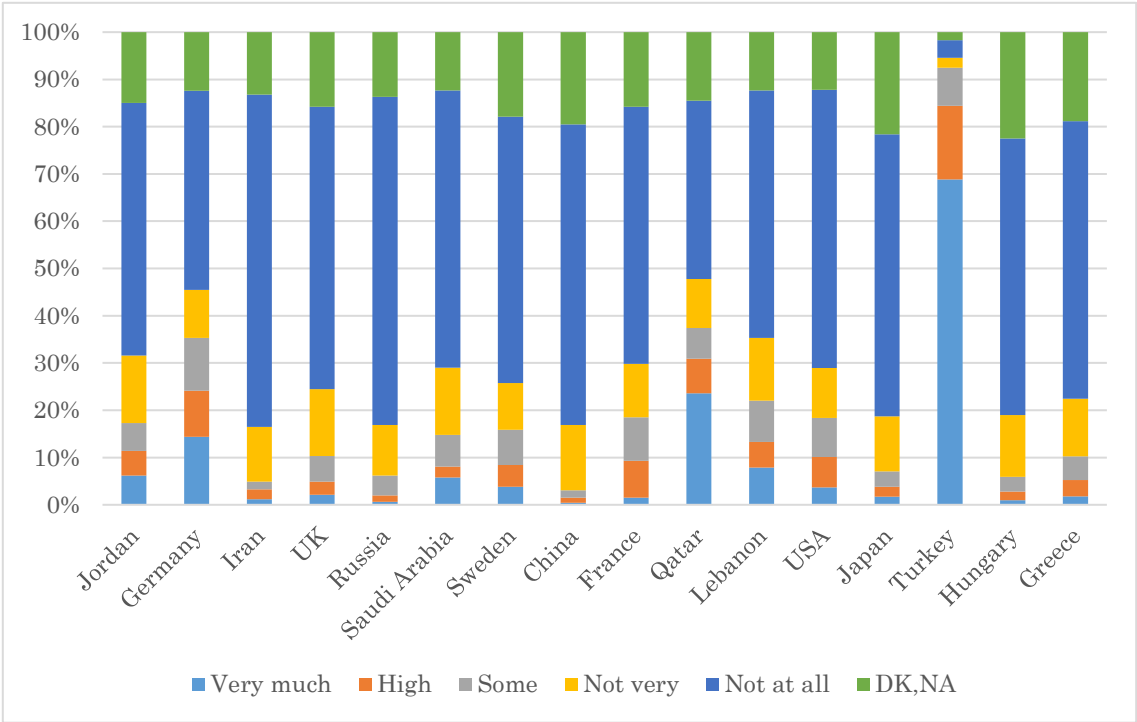


## II. Awareness of Foreign Countries

Syrians’ responses to the question of how they feel about “aid” from other countries are thought to be a stark reflection of their political viewpoints and stances with regard to the Syrian conflict. While the interpretation of the word “aid” was left to the

respondents, Syrians living in Turkey held Turkey in high regard, a regard they also extended to Qatar. In contrast, the same responders gave low marks to Russia, Iran, and China, who have provided aid to the Syrian government. Likewise, the US, the UK, and France also scored poorly, though they have aided the opposition forces. In the surveys conducted in Syria (2016, 2017), countries like Russia, Iran, and the China were highly evaluated, whereas, the countries which supported the opposition, including Turkey and Qatar, had poor evaluations. In the current survey, the extremely low assessment of Japanese aid was also characteristic.

Figure 3 Evaluation to Aid From Other Countries



### III. Outlook for Returning to Syria

Those who responded “I strongly wish to return” and “I want to return” make up about sixty percent of total respondents. These individuals tend to prioritize not only “peaceful circumstances” and “better income,” but also “family, relatives, and neighbors” and “living with family”. In addition, a minority of respondents responded that they place the utmost importance on “a political transfer in Syria,” which would mean the expulsion of the Assad government. In the event of repatriation to Syria, respondents seemed to desire repatriation with a certain level of support for a mixture of blood or territorial kinships, or of religions and sects.

At the same time, it does not appear that there is a very clear correlation between satisfaction with life in Turkey and a desire to repatriate to Syria, with not many individuals who are “very satisfied” with their life in Turkey responding that they “strongly wish to return” to Syria..

### IV. Conclusion

Syrians who support the opposition to Assad government are among those who have escaped from Syria due to the conflict. Many of these individuals may no longer be able to live in Syria as a result of their direct involvement with the opposition groups. Such people probably do not actively desire to return as long as the government is in a superior position in the conflict. Those who have already built a stable life in their new locations have no strong desire to return to a Syria that is lacking in social

Figure 4 Desire for Returning to Syria (%)

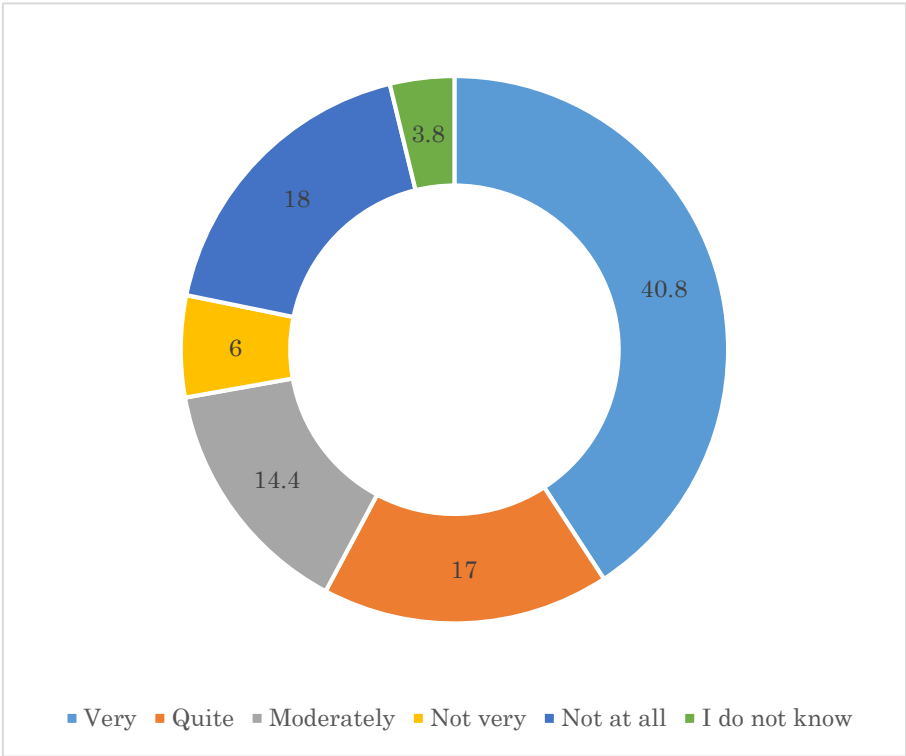


Table: Crosstab (Number of People) of “Satisfaction with Life in Turkey” and “Desire to Repatriate to Syria”

		How do you feel about returning to Syria?					
		I strongly wish to return	I want to return	Neutral	I somewhat don't want to return	I don't want to return	Unsure
Satisfaction with life	Very satisfied	184	23	42	15	59	5
	Satisfied	42	35	42	9	35	4
	Somewhat satisfied	37	25	18	5	23	12
	Dissatisfied	38	42	9	15	13	1
	Very dissatisfied	23	12	6	3	15	9
	Unsure	7	1	0	2	1	0

infrastructures or an economic base. Answers must be found as to why those that responded “I somewhat don't want to return” or “I don't want to return” in this survey answered in that manner.

In addition, Turkey, which has accepted many Syrians, and other countries that support the reconstruction of Syria, are at a point where they must choose to either quickly repatriate the Syrians living within their borders or absorb many Syrians into Turkey. The policies taken, and amount and quality of aid rendered, will differ depending on the option Turkey and other countries take. When considering how to deal with refugees and displaced peoples within and outside Syria, it is important to carefully investigate the social and economic circumstances of their current locations, and respond accordingly.

Note: This paper was written based on local surveys and opinion surveys conducted as part of a scientific research grant project entitled “A Comprehensive Study of Transborder Movement in Conflict Areas in the Middle East: A Focus on Movement of Immigrants, Refugees, and Infiltrators” (2016-2018, Yutaka Takaoka, representative).