

# OPPORTUNITIES FOR SYRIAN YOUTH IN ISTANBUL

## A Labor Market Assessment

*Executive Summary*  
*July, 2018*

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## INTRODUCTION

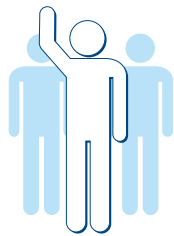
Syria's ongoing civil war has upended the lives of millions of people. Young Syrians torn from family members, schooling, and the futures they expected have been navigating uncertainty in new towns and neighboring countries. Today, approximately 140,000 young Syrians ages 18 to 29 live in Istanbul, alongside 3 million Turkish citizens.

The Syrian Refugee Employability Program (SREP), an initiative of the International Youth Foundation, aims to enhance the knowledge and capacity of civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) working in Turkey to implement best practices in employment programs targeting Syrian refugee youth. Specifically, this labor market assessment aims to provide a new awareness of the employment needs, challenges, and opportunities of young Syrian refugees in Istanbul.

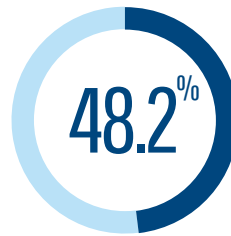
This assessment is informed by desk research using data from state institutions—the Turkish Statistical Institute, the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, and the Turkish Labor Agency, İŞKUR—and from extensive field research. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected among subject groups that include young Syrians, businesses (including companies with Syrian ownership), employment agencies, municipalities, and institutions that provide training to young Syrians. In the absence of data on labor force participation rates, this assessment saw the completion of a face-to-face survey of 1,003 Syrian youth. It provides substantial data on the labor market outcomes of Syrian refugee youth, such as working conditions, unemployment, discrimination, and plans.

## EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING LANDSCAPE

This survey data revealed that nearly half of the Syrian youth population in Istanbul (48.2 percent) is unemployed. This figure is even higher among young Syrian women. One-third of youth say they do not have access to formal employment opportunities. One in five unemployed youth surveyed say they would take a job even if it paid less than 1,000 TL (approximately US\$ 214) per month.



One in three youth say they do not have  
access to formal employment opportunities.



of Syrian youth population in Istanbul  
is unemployed.

Among employed young Syrians in Istanbul, the working conditions are disheartening. While 88.5 percent of them work full-time, only 2.2 percent have obtained a work permit. Young Syrians work for lower wages and longer hours: 87.7 percent work more than 48 hours per week and average 10- to 12-hour workdays. Almost three-quarters of them have a tenure of one year or less. On average, young Syrians in Istanbul earn just over minimum wage (1,492 TL/US\$ 319.60 per month, compared to 1,400 TL) and roughly 20 percent less than what a young Turkish citizen makes in the same period (1,883 TL/US\$ 403.29). Young Syrian women make an additional 20 percent less than young Syrian men, and three-quarters earn less than the minimum wage.

The top three sectors of employment for young Syrian men are wholesale and retail trade (22.4 percent), textiles and apparel (17.7 percent), and accommodations and food services (17.1 percent). In the first sector, more than 25 percent have a university degree. In the last two, more than half have at most a junior high school degree. Young Syrian women are mostly employed in education (40.6 percent). Of this group, more than 70 percent have at least a university degree.

There is a network effect in employment for Syrian youth, whereby almost half of young Syrians work at companies where there are two to five Syrian workers, including themselves. Most of the employed Syrians search for a job by asking relatives, Syrian friends, or a combination. Combined with the fact that 20.6 percent of employed young Syrians found work by visiting employers directly, these figures indicate that İŞKUR is not playing an effective role as an employment agency.

Today, civil society organizations and municipalities have developed and administered various educational opportunities for Syrians. Language courses constitute the bulk, although, as the next section describes, most young participants say that the training is not effective. İŞKUR, metropolitan and district municipalities, and NGOs provide most of the vocational training programs.

İŞKUR provides multiple training programs for Syrians and Turks, and three are relevant for youth:



\*in 2017

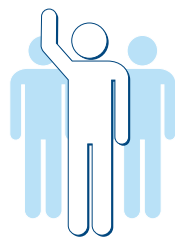
As the numbers indicate, the on-the-job training is by far the most common type of program. Firms can organize such a training by choosing participants on their own, or İŞKUR can select candidates according to the company's requirements. İŞKUR pays for the daily expenses as well as some of the taxes of the workers who are participating. Furthermore, the company can benefit from tax subsidies if it employs workers through these programs.

## BARRIERS & CHALLENGES

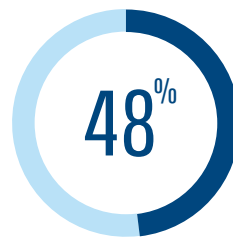
### Language

Language is cited as the main barrier to employment overall, because the vast majority of Syrians arrive in Istanbul as Arabic, not Turkish, speakers. One-third of all survey participants say their Turkish skills are insufficient when searching for a job. Of the courses young Syrians participated in, 48.1 percent taught Turkish language skills. However, existing language training does not appear to be meeting current need. Only 39.2 percent of youth who participated think it proved useful in finding a job. Common complaints are about the content, structure, and delivery of these courses, including insufficient opportunities to practice their speaking skills and poor teaching quality.

The main grievance pertains to scheduling. Young Syrians who responded to the survey prioritize having a job and say that attending courses is difficult during work hours or on weekdays. Given they work long hours, evenings present challenges too. It is even harder for women to participate, because traditional gender roles dictate that they are responsible for housework and childcare. Women also might need their husbands' approval to attend such training courses.



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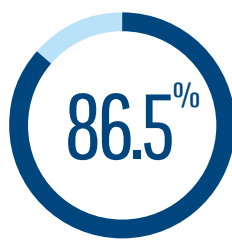


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taught **Turkish language skills**.

## Credentials & vocational training

Although having a degree usually implies higher wages, whether it is a junior high school or university degree, for Syrians it does not affect wages significantly. This finding is exacerbated by the fact that Syrians are finding it difficult to obtain degree equivalencies and therefore prove their education credentials. One in five unemployed Syrians says he or she cannot provide the necessary documents, such as diplomas. The same percentage says their relevant skills are not recognized.

Only 13.5 percent of survey respondents say they have participated in a training program in Turkey. Among the 86.5 percent of young Syrians who did not participate in any, most cited scheduling conflicts. In addition, the lack of a reliable database negatively affects the management and effectiveness of these programs. In terms of İŞKUR specifically, they do not have sufficient numbers of Arabic-speaking staff, and their website, where they publicize upcoming training programs, is available only in Turkish and English.



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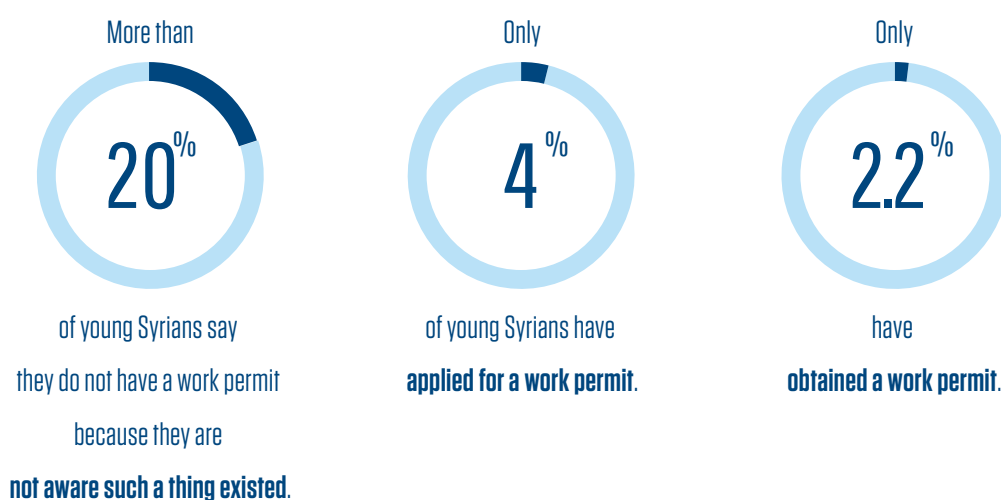
## Regulations & awareness

The regulatory environment hinders formal job creation for Syrians. A company must sponsor each work permit and is subject to a 10 percent cap on the number of Syrians it can employ. Additionally, the Syrian for whom the company applies needs to hold a foreigner ID card and have lived in that province for the past six months. As of January 2018, each work permit costs 300.90 TL (about \$US 64.20) and must be renewed annually.

From a company perspective, these regulations particularly hinder formally hiring Syrian youth. While the current cost of the work permit is less than it was in 2017, employers still do not want to pay this fee, and they often take it out of young Syrian's wages. Smaller companies and firms say they find it burdensome to handle the paperwork. They report sometimes using intermediaries to speed up the application process. Citing high turnover rates, the firms are reluctant to cover annual fees. The 10 percent quota also is unreasonable for firms with Syrian ownership.



Many young Syrians are not aware of these processes and requirements. More than 20 percent say they do not have a work permit because they are not aware such a thing existed. Another 15.8 percent state they do not know how to apply for it. Only 4 percent have applied for a work permit, and only 2.2 percent have obtained one. Another 13.8 percent of young Syrians say they do not understand the process to apply for temporary protection status, which entitles them to basic services such as free health care. Finally, almost all Syrian youth surveyed (98 percent) are unfamiliar with the Turkuaz Kart, a combined residency and work permit that does not require a company's sponsorship. Any foreigner who can prove that they have high levels of skills or that they are "high-grade investors" can apply directly.



### Discrimination & maltreatment

More than three-quarters of Syrian youth in Istanbul (80.3 percent) state they have faced labor market discrimination. They say they are less likely to receive job offers, work for lower wages and longer hours, have no overtime pay, and even have shorter break periods. Interviews with business owners confirm that, on average, Syrian workers are paid lower wages.

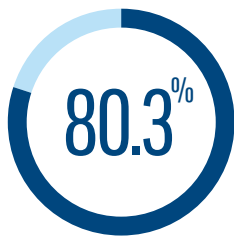
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***"There were 3-4 Syrians working at that factory. They were giving us much more work and forcing us to work much harder in comparison to the Turkish workers."***

*— unemployed 22-year-old man*

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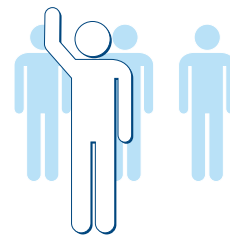
Young Syrians also frequently mention maltreatment. One in four young Syrians in the labor market state that their bosses or managers have mistreated them because they are Syrian. In the in-depth interviews, most young people say they are not paid on time, and others report not being paid in full or at all. Almost one in five young Syrians reports mistreatment by coworkers. In the in-depth interviews, some say that informal hierarchies in the workplace involved making Syrians do the “dirty work.” Facing such conflicts in the workplace, young Syrians lack mechanisms of protection. While some leave their jobs, many decide they cannot afford to quit.



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## OPPORTUNITIES

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The textile sector has the highest number of new vacancies, and salespeople are urgently needed in various sectors. İŞKUR data shows that machine operators, seamstresses and tailors, sales representatives, and text handlers are among the top occupations with the greatest number of vacancies. Employers also struggle to fill these openings. For these occupations, firms most commonly request sufficient knowledge or vocational and/or technical skills and experience.

United Work, a small employment agency that aims to find formal employment opportunities for Syrians, reports that opportunities exist where speaking Arabic is an asset. These openings are predominantly in the service sector, for example translators in hospitals and call centers serving the Middle East. It bears noting that this agency also offers a program that includes training youth on labor laws and discrimination.

Additionally, employers can benefit by recruiting Syrians through agencies such as İŞKUR. İŞKUR pays for the trainers and provides a daily allowance to trainees, also enabling employers to be eligible for tax subsidies.

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***“Where I lived in Syria, women did not work,  
but they must work here. We have to pay the rent,  
bills for electricity and water.”***

*— 22-year-old woman who was looking for a job*

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## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

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The future is uncertain for young Syrians working to rebuild their lives in Istanbul. However, specific changes in training, policy, and programming can help prepare more young Syrian men and women in the country's economic center with critical skills and knowledge. These changes also can make it easier for employers to formally hire Syrian youth seeking stability.

1. **Language learning:** The top priority for labor market integration should be facilitating easier and more widespread access to and awareness of Turkish language courses. This includes offering basic and advanced Turkish language class options. Even companies that primarily serve Arabic-speaking customers prefer that their employees have some Turkish language skills. Vocational training programs will not be efficiently implemented until Syrian youth have the necessary basic Turkish language skills to navigate daily life.
2. **Training accessibility:** To reduce scheduling conflicts, courses and programs aimed at expanding the technical, entrepreneurship, and language skills of young Syrians should be offered outside typical work hours and in easy-to-access, convenient locations. Many Syrian youth request flexible training options due to their own sporadic work schedules and long workdays that include nights and weekends.
3. **Life skills:** Existing training should be rounded out with lessons in developing critical skills such as personal agency, stress management, and respecting others. IYF has seen that strengthening these skills carries benefits for youth in terms of work, particularly in the service sector, and life generally.
4. **Market-driven training:** Providing training on how to use textile and apparel machinery will help young Syrians find employment. The vocational requirements for these sectors are well defined. Additionally, vacancies are abundant, because workers with relevant skills are in short supply.
5. **Policy changes:** A multidimensional policy design would fight labor informality:
  - Shorten the waiting period to obtain a work permit. The current process takes too long, particularly given short production horizons in the apparel and textile sector.
  - Reconsider the quota, which has adverse effects because it contradicts market realities.
  - Review the six-month residency condition, which also has negative effects.
  - Reduce the annual fee for a work permit. Although it already has been reduced, the cost still presents another barrier to employment.

6. **Employment agency changes:** İŞKUR should tailor its programs and web presence to include and improve accessibility for more Syrians.
  - Hire Arabic-speaking staff.
  - Offer Arabic as a language option on its website, which is the primary source for information on upcoming training programs.
7. **Social inclusion and support activities:** To reduce incidents of discrimination and mistreatment and allow young Syrians to more easily enter and succeed in the labor market, underlying social and cultural tensions need to be addressed. While this type of intervention was not the focus of this assessment, the broader work of the SREP initiative points to its necessity.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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**Bahçeşehir University Center for Economic and Social Research (BETAM)** served as a valuable partner to IYF in conducting and completing this study. BETAM, a research center headquartered within Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, Turkey, was founded in 2008. BETAM conducts applied research on economic and social issues by evaluating the efficiency and success of current policies and producing policy recommendations, aiming to increase social and economic welfare. To learn more about BETAM's research, visit: <http://betam.bahcesehir.edu.tr/en/>

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For more than 25 years and in over 100 countries, the International Youth Foundation (IYF®) has focused exclusively on helping young people succeed. A global nonprofit organization, IYF believes that there are three keys to achieving this success: learning skills that will endure, earning a livelihood, and growing as an engaged citizen. IYF supports youth in developing work readiness skills, choosing a career path, and securing employment or deciding to start or grow their own small business or social venture. The resilient spirit of these young women and men inspires us and gives us purpose. IYF initiatives have benefitted more than 7.4 million young people directly, and over 12 million additional people have benefitted indirectly. We forge partnerships to deepen investment and impact in youth employment and engagement. In cities and towns across the United States and around the world, IYF empowers young people to lead productive, fulfilling lives.

To learn more, go to [www.iyfnetwork.org](http://www.iyfnetwork.org).