

SULTANBEYLI, ISTANBUL, TURKEY

A Case Study of Refugees in Towns

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About the RIT Project

This report is a case study of Refugees in Towns (RIT), a research project that aims to promote understanding of migrant and refugee experiences with integration—both formal and informal—in urban settings in the U.S. and around the world. Our case studies are ground in local knowledge. They are designed, conducted, and written by refugees and locals, capturing their voices and the perspectives of the communities in which they live. The project was conceived and is led by Karen Jacobsen, and is based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University. It is funded by the Henry J. Leir Foundation.

Our goals are twofold

1. First, by gathering a range of case studies we are amassing a global data base that will help us analyze and understand the process of immigrant and refugee integration. These cases reveal global differences and similarities in the factors that enable and obstruct integration, and the different ways in which migrants and hosts perceive, co-exist, adapt, and struggle with integration. We draw our case studies from towns in resettlement countries (e.g. the United States); transit countries (e.g. Greece), and countries of first asylum (e.g. Lebanon). Our long-term goal is to build a global, grounded theory of integration.
2. Second, the RIT project seeks to support community leaders, aid organizations, and local governments in shaping policy and practice. We engage policymakers and community leaders through town visits, workshops, conferences, and participatory research that identifies needs in their communities, encourages dialogue on integration, and shares good practices and lessons learned.

Why now?

The United States—among many other refugee-hosting countries—is undergoing a shift in its refugee policies through travel bans and the suspension of parts of its refugee program. Towns across the U.S. and globally are responding in a range of different ways: some are resisting national policy changes by declaring themselves to be “sanctuary cities,” while others are supporting travel bans and exclusionary policies. In this period of social and political change, we need deeper understanding of integration and the ways in which refugees, other migrants, and their hosts interact. Local perspectives on these processes are not well represented in the scholarship on integration: our RIT project seeks to draw on—and give voice to—both refugee and host communities in their experiences with integration around the world.

For more on RIT

On our website, there are many more case study reports from other towns and urban neighborhoods around the world. Keep in touch: we regularly release more reports as our case study projects develop. There is also more information available about RIT’s researchers, goals, practical local outcomes, and theoretical analyses.

www.refugeesintowns.org

Location



Introduction

This case study is focused on Sultanbeyli, a district located at the outskirts of Istanbul, Turkey. It explores the Syrian refugee experience and the role of social networks in the everyday lives of refugees and host communities in Sultanbeyli, which has served as a hub for migrants for several decades. As both a key transit and host country, Turkey's cities provide critical insights to the experience of refugee urban integration. Since 2011, Turkey has experienced the largest wave of Syrian forced immigration in its history (DGMM), and where many countries of first asylum place refugees in camps on arrival, in Turkey more than 90% of all refugees live in cities. According to the latest official numbers from the Turkish government, since 2011 around 500,000 Syrians have migrated to Istanbul, the largest metropolis in Turkey with a total population of 15 million. Here, Syrian refugees struggle with exclusion and poverty among other groups of urban poor, and are integrating with the urban fabric.

All previous research on migration in Sultanbeyli has highlighted the vitality of social networks for the lives of the migrants living there because informal networking relations based on trust have been the main source of upward mobility for decades (Pinarcioglu & Isik 2008, Tugal 2006). However, unlike previous studies, this case study looks at migrants' opportunities by depicting refugees as active agents who have the capability to shape their own futures.

This case study report begins by describing the methods behind our findings. It then provides contextualization of Syrian forced migration in Turkey; maps the Syrian refugee population in Sultanbeyli and Istanbul; examines the urban impact of integrating Syrian refugee and host communities; and describes refugees' experiences in the town of Sultanbeyli including livelihoods, levels of integration, social networks, political orientations, and future plans.

Methodology

Between May and August 2016 in Sultanbeyli, I conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with 22 Syrian refugees, and a focus group with the participation of 11. All of the interviewees had been residents of Sultanbeyli for a minimum of four months, up to a maximum of three years. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the representatives from Sultanbeyli Municipality, the Turkish Red Cross, and the Blue Cross Association, which were the main three organizations active in Sultanbeyli and working on refugee integration.

Refugee groups in Turkey are generally inaccessible for outside researchers, since they are often reluctant to speak with people they do not know due to security concerns. While I

spent much of my adult life in Istanbul, I had few connections in Sultanbeyli and had spent little time there. Therefore, once I returned to Istanbul from study in Boston, in order to build trusting relationships with the refugee population, I signed up as an intern at the Refugee Coordination Center of the Sultanbeyli municipality, the main local governance unit assisting refugee integration there.

This internship was a hands-on experience, yet it also provided me the chance to collect data as a participant observant. For two weeks, I met refugee families in person, registered them into the Center's system, and assisted their medical appointments at nearby hospitals. After two weeks, I began to ask refugees if they would like

Interview Sampling Chart

	Men	Women
Number of individuals	9 (ages 16-42)	22 (ages 16-42)
Focus group	0	11 (ages 25-55)
Number of key informants	8	6
Main organizations of key informants	Sultanbeyli Municipality	
	Sultanbeyli Refugees Association	
	Red Crescent Sultanbeyli	
	Blue Crescent Sultanbeyli	
	Migration Research Center at Koç University (MiReKoç)	

me to interview them. Two native Arabic speaking friends I had made in Istanbul through previous research on Syrian migration helped me with translations during the interviews. Most of the refugees seemed more comfortable talking to me once they learned my name is Zeynep. “Zeyneb” is a traditional Arabic woman’s name, and also is very commonly used by Turks. After a couple of weeks, most members of the community stopped calling me *ecnebi*, the Arabic word for foreigner, and to them I became “Zeynep,” or to some, “sister Zeynep.”

The hardest part about interviewing people in the field, on the street, and in public areas was not having a space that I could be alone with interviewees. Despite my best attempts at finding secluded spaces, on many occasions, people around interrupted the interviews; we had to start again, or sometimes cut it off early. As a qualitative researcher, I found the field experience required patience and strength because it is both a physically and psychologically challenging undertaking.

My qualitative data is supplemented by a desk review of data from the Sultanbeyli Municipality, who collected data separately from the UNHCR and the Turkish national government because of

a need for more localized and granular data to meet the Municipality’s service needs. A research company based in Istanbul conducted the survey for Sultanbeyli Municipality, with enumeration taking place between June and November 2015. The survey included more than 2,000 households and 10,281 individual Syrian refugees from June to November 2015. Surveys were conducted face to face in three languages (Arabic, Kurdish, and Turkish) depending on the respondent’s needs. Two-stage cluster sampling was used when selecting interviewees. In the first stage, the population was divided into clusters using ordinary cluster sampling methods. In a second stage, simple random sampling was used for selecting individual interviewees. A 99% statistical confidence level was achieved.

Overview of Syrian Refugees in Turkey

In the early stages of the Syrian conflict, Syrian refugees mostly clustered in southern Turkey close to the Syrian border, but as the protracted nature of the crisis became apparent, they began to move to big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. The most recent Syrian refugee wave to Turkey started when 252 Syrians arrived at the Turkish border on 29 April 2011 after the Syrian government cracked down on anti-government protests. In the following three months, there were some 15,000 border crossings. As a preliminary measure, refugees were taken to a shelter city built in Hatay province on the Syrian border. The first group of arrivals mostly consisted of young activists, oppositionists, and protesters, and almost half of them went back to Syria by the end of 2011 (Icduygu, 2015).

Forced immigration regained momentum in 2012 as ceasefire talks between the Syrian government and the opposition failed. Turkish authorities responded to these increasing numbers of refugees with unofficial measures: additional tent cities were built in provinces such as Sanliurfa, Kilis, Osmaniye, and Gaziantep on the Syrian border (Icduygu, 2015).

While Turkey is a signatory to the 1951 Convention, it maintains a geographical limitation in that it only grants refugee status to asylum seekers who are displaced “due to events unfolding in Europe.” Therefore, Syrians who were welcomed by the Turkish government as “guests” did not initially have any legal protection status (Koru and Kadkoy, 2017).

It took two years from the initial arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011 for Turkey to make legal adjustments. In April 2014 two major developments were enacted. First, the Department General for Migration Management (DGMM) was established to fix the lack of coordination among the institutions working on migration and asylum. Next, the Parliament passed the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) which granted temporary protection to Syrians and provided access to basic public services such as health, education, and to a limited extent, the labor market (Koru and Kadkoy, 2017).

By 2017 there were 3,523,981 Syrian refugees in Turkey, 92% of whom live outside of camps (DGMM). In the early stages of the conflict, Syrians were mostly clustered in southern Turkey close to the Syrian border, but as the crisis became protracted, they began to move to the big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Refugees

have at least three reasons to prefer life in non-camp urban settings. First, almost all the 23 refugee camps in Turkey are operating at maximum capacity. Second, refugees can find

better shelter in the cities through family ties or by using personal financial resources. Finally, cities provide opportunities for higher mobility with less surveillance by the Turkish security apparatus.

Overview of Refugees in Istanbul

Of all of Turkey's cities, Istanbul is the largest host of Syrian refugees: 15.7% of Turkey's Syrian refugees are registered there (approximately 485,227). Generally, refugees settle in areas of Istanbul where the urban poor are clustered (Erdogan, 2017). Although each district in Istanbul hosts sizeable numbers, Syrian refugees are mostly clustered in the poorer and more religiously conservative districts of Kucukcekmece, Sultangazi, Bagcilar, and Sultanbeyli. As of March 2016, there were 485,227 Syrian refugees in Istanbul, of whom 20,192 resided in Sultanbeyli, constituting about six percent of the district's total population.

Located on the outskirts of Istanbul, Sultanbeyli is a low-income neighborhood with low levels of educational attainment and female employment, and high levels of fertility (Pinarcioglu & Isik, 2008). Like all of Istanbul, Sultanbeyli has had a constant inflow of immigrants since the 1950s and grew from a village in the 1980s to a district municipality by the 1990s. Its population increased from 3,600 in 1980, to 175,000 in 2000, to 309,000 in 2013 (Sultanbeyli Municipality), with immigration playing a significant role in this growth. In the 1950s, Sultanbeyli was the destination for Bulgarian Turks, and urbanizing Turkish rural migrants who arrived during the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, migrants and refugees from different ethnic and national backgrounds have made Sultanbeyli their home.

According to a 2015 Sultanbeyli Municipal survey (see methodology reviewed below), women comprise 47% of Syrian refugees living there. Also,

according to the survey, 20% of Syrian refugees living in Sultanbeyli were illiterate, 50% graduated from primary school, 16% from middle school, 4% from high school, and 3% had a university degree or higher qualification. Over 95% spoke Arabic as their native language, and almost 90% are from Aleppo. The majority of refugee families lived in two or three bedroom apartments with an average of 6.5 people per apartment.

The survey of Syrian refugee households in Sultanbeyli (N=2,032) suggested that for a refugee family, the household income on average was 1,207 Turkish liras (USD 340). When asked why they chose Sultanbeyli as their final destination, 73.7% said it was because they had family in Sultanbeyli, 13.7% said a friend recommended it to them, and around 10% said it was primarily selected for affordable accommodation and job opportunities. As can be interpreted from these figures, social capital plays the most important role in migration decisions.

When asked, 97.6% of the families declared that they had no plans to move anywhere else than Sultanbeyli within a year. Among these, 13.7% mentioned the positive attitude from neighbors, and 7.2% said the proximity to their family was their primary reasons for staying in Sultanbeyli. In addition, 57% of all families surveyed expressed that they were either "very content" or "content" with their neighbors, compared to 5% who were discontent. The primary reason for contentment was that they felt welcomed, while getting help from neighbors also played a role. Despite the

high levels of satisfaction, most of the families expressed their willingness to go back to Syria when the war ends: 81% of all families and 75.5%

of those who claimed high levels of contentment had plans to return.

The Urban Impact & Refugee Experience

Mapping the Refugee Population

Generally, in Istanbul refugees chose to settle in areas where urban poor are clustered. According to descriptive statistics, there is a negative correlation between refugees' top choices of residence and the quality of life provided in those towns (Erdogan, 2017). Although each district in Istanbul hosts sizeable numbers, Syrian refugees are mostly clustered around certain areas such as Kucukcekmece, Sultangazi, Bagcilar, and Sultanbeyli, where poverty is prevalent, conservatism and religiousness is part of everyday life, informal social networks are active among urban poor, and life is considerably cheaper compared to the other parts of Istanbul (Erdogan, 2017).

Livelihoods

According to the Sultanbeyli household survey, 96% of Syrian refugees indicated employment as their main source of income. However, only 38% of refugees of working age Syrian refugees were employed, reflecting the shared Syrian and Turkish cultural practice in which men are seen as responsible for making a living for the family,

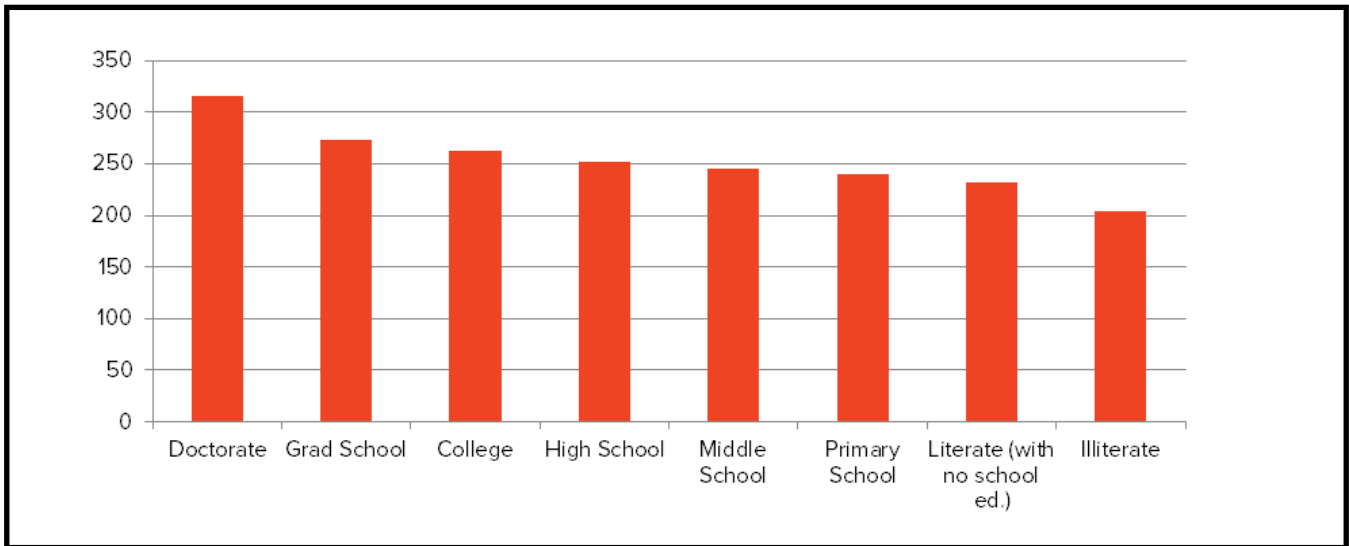
while women stay at home and take care of the household.

Low income was cited as the main problem of all refugees regardless of their educational background. The survey indicated that respondents earned an average of 858 Turkish Liras (approximately USD 230) per capita, with an average household income of 1,207 Turkish lira (USD 300).

Sheyma is a 27-year-old Syrian refugee who came to Sultanbeyli several years ago. She holds a university degree in English Literature, and is fluent in Arabic, Turkish, and English. After teaching English at Turkish and Syrian private schools, Sheyma took a job at the Sultanbeyli Municipality as a humanitarian worker. She said she is happy with the work, but knows she is qualified to do more. "The only problem is the pay," says Sheyma. "I am a college graduate, and I am qualified to take a managerial position, but my degree from a Syrian university does not mean anything in the Turkish job market. After working for almost two years here in Sultanbeyli, I am still a basic worker with no chances of promotion or raise."

Many refugees experience downward occupational mobility in Sultanbeyli. Another Syrian refugee, Amira, who visits the center regularly to check out the job postings said: "I used to have a high-ranking position at a bank in Syria. All they

Average Income (in USD)



(Sultanbeyli Municipality household survey, 2015).

offer for Syrian women here are housekeeping and cleaner jobs.”

Except for a few refugees working in the public sector, almost all refugees in Sultanbeyli are informally employed, with long working hours, no social security, and exposure to other forms of exploitation. Kemal, the head of the refugee coordination center, said, “Many refugees come here to complain about their employers. There are several cases of fraud, when employers refuse to pay at the end of the month. But we cannot do anything about it, since the work is informal. Syrians can’t file a complaint, or take their complaints to the court if they do not have documents.”

Employers, on the other hand, think there are both pros and cons to hiring Syrians. A textile factory owner who visited the coordination center to recruit Syrians for his production line, said it is a win-win situation for both employers and Syrians: “we pay them less, but they need jobs, and it is our duty to help them.” However, Turkish employers also express discontent about Syrian employees. Many think Syrians cannot keep up with the responsibilities of the modern work environment. One employer said, “One never knows if they will show up the next morning, or after how many days, sometimes hours, they will give up and quit. I can’t rely on them.”

Social Integration

In general, refugees travel to Sultanbeyli through chain migration. Typically, a family sends a young male member to the district, and he rents an apartment and finds a job. After he has established a relatively secure anchor, he is then followed by his family. In some cases, the entire extended family eventually moves into Sultanbeyli. According to the survey, when asked why they chose Sultanbeyli as their final destination, 74% of refugee respondents said it was because they had family in Sultanbeyli, while 14% said a friend recommended it to them, and 10% said it was primarily selected for affordable accommodation and job opportunities. These reasons suggest social capital plays an important role in migration decisions.

Many refugee families stay in their close circles and do not develop new social connections. Most interviewees named a close family member as their best friend. For example, Habir, who is a 27-year-old single woman, said her family members are her best friends; she has no other friends in Turkey. In terms of social activities, she has been to the park next to their apartment only once. Similarly, Leyla who is 20 years old and married, said her in-laws are very conservative and

do not let her socialize with people they do not know, so she can only socialize within her family.

However, the household survey reflected that 57% of all refugee families expressed that they were either “very content” or “content” with their neighbors because they feel welcomed. Rima, a former dentist and now a housewife, said her Turkish neighbors are the most sincere and helpful people she has ever met: “they have been incredibly helpful to us in every manner. One of them helped me to register my children to the school. She even went to their parents’ meeting to cover for me,” she said.



(Simpson, 2017).

For refugees, language is the primary barrier to integration. Learning Turkish is significant for many reasons: besides increasing refugees’ access to information, to public services, and to work opportunities, learning the local language is a door to the social life of the host population in Sultanbeyli. Three separate community centers in Sultanbeyli (the Refugee Coordination Center, the Red Crescent, and the Blue Crescent) have free Turkish language classes for men and women. Refugees attending the Turkish class for women at the Red Crescent described the community center as a place where they make friends, forget about everyday problems, and laugh together. One said:

“we did not know each other before coming here, but now we are like a second family.”

Women in particular benefit from Sultanbeyli’s community centers. Seyma, a psychologist providing psychosocial support at the Red Crescent, said almost all of her counselees are women. “We are talking about the poorest of the poor here,” she added. Most men work during the day, so they cannot benefit from the center which is only open during business hours. However, this is not the only reason, said Seyma: “compared to women, men are more reserved when it comes to opening up to strangers about their personal lives. They do not want to talk to us. We are worried, because there is a large male population out there who we cannot help at all.” The unequal access to services between women and men is likely to create problems in long term integration.

Social Integration and Information

In addition to being substitutes for local friends, refugees view their families as the most reliable source of information about daily life in Sultanbeyli. Information flows from the first family member to arrive in Sultanbeyli to the last member who arrived. When asked how they found an apartment for example, most refugees said a friend or extended family member who arrived earlier helped them find it.

Despite their economic hardships, most refugees in Sultanbeyli had smartphones and access to the Internet. These smartphones were hardly an extravagance, but rather important both to keep in touch with family members still in Syria, and as a source of information about daily needs—usually through social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Line. Instead of browsing the open Internet for answers to questions about life in Turkey, Sultanbeyli’s refugees usually ask for information through social media from people they personally know.

Finding a job also depends on how well a refugee is socially connected. Many refugees find jobs through Halil Bey, the head of the Department

of Strategy Development and the municipal government official responsible for refugee integration. Some refugees complained about favoritism in the job market, for example Nour, who had a senior position at a company in Raqqa, and said, “If you are not from Aleppo, you can only suffer in Sultanbeyli...In practice, all decent jobs in Sultanbeyli are exclusively for people from Aleppo.”

Housing and Public Services

When it comes to housing, informal ties among Turkish migrants have traditionally replaced formal state bureaucracy in Sultanbeyli. Pinarciklioglu and Isik (2006) describe Sultanbeyli as a town “almost entirely composed of unauthorized housing.” The urban poor do not rely on formal housing assistance. However, this practice is changing with the continuing migration of Syrians into Sultanbeyli. The presence of state and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is increasing, with new organizations arriving every month. Through international support and resources, the municipal government is also increasingly involved in refugees’ lives.



(Simpson, 2017).

While state and international organizations improve the quality of services and care for refugees, this may have eroded solidarity networks among Syrians in Sultanbeyli. Ola, a 27-year-old woman with three children, said, “there is competition for aid among Syrians.” Similarly, Ragat said of her Syrian neighbors: “anytime they hear about distribution of free food or clothes, they keep it to themselves. I do not know how many times I saw free supplies delivered to their apartment, but they have no intention to share.”

Organization and Governance

Religion plays an active role in Sultanbeyli’s civil society. Since the mid-1980s, Sultanbeyli has been known as the heart of Islamist political activism in Istanbul, with migrant networks serving as an important driver of Islamization in the 1990s when pious rural migrants were attracted to the town (Tugal, 2009). All but a few Syrian refugees in Sultanbeyli today are Sunni Muslims, and most are comfortable with their Turkish neighbors because they have similar cultural and religious backgrounds. For example, during the holy month of Ramadan, two communities meet for *iftars* (fast-breaking dinner) organized by pro-Islamist civil society organizations.

Syrian refugees in Turkey do not have the right to vote since they are registered under temporary protection status. However, that does not mean that they are politically inactive. Syrians in Sutanbeyli do not hold back from expressing their gratitude to AKP, the current ruling party of President Erdogan. On 15 July 2016 when the military rolled in to Istanbul in an attempted coup, many Syrians took to the streets demonstrating against the coup in support of Erdogan. In the aftermath of the coup attempt, Syrians were among the most fervent to join the pro-Erdogan democracy protests, coming out to the streets nightly for a month.

Conclusion

Sultanbeyli, one of the districts with the lowest life quality in Istanbul, has always been a migrant hub, and will continue to play this role into the future. The size and intensity of the most recent Syrian migration to the district has raised concerns about already limited resources there. Despite the Turkish government's overall focus on centralized solutions, Sultanbeyli Municipality has found effective ways to identify refugees' needs and match them to service delivery organizations at the local level. Their research-based approach, use of innovative data-gathering and analysis tool, and hands on coordination between stakeholders are all good practice to be emulated elsewhere.

Syrian refugees chose to live in Sultanbeyli for different reasons: some wanted to be closer to their families, some thought the district has the most affordable accommodation in Istanbul, and some said Sultanbeyli is where they feel culturally integrated. Unlike refugees living in many other districts in Istanbul, the majority of Syrian refugees in Sultanbeyli feel welcomed in their new home. Despite the poverty and longing for their life back in Syria, they express belief that they can build a new life and future for their children in Sultanbeyli. They express their appreciation about the municipality's outstanding efforts for service provision, and their Turkish neighbors' hospitality towards them.

However, Sultanbeyli is not all roses for refugees. Many Syrians are unemployed, and those with jobs are working informally, often in adverse conditions without employment protection. It is still too early to say what the future holds for these new residents of Sultanbeyli, but they will likely continue settling in for the foreseeable future. In so doing they are changing the town, and contributing new tiles to the town's mosaic.

The Future of Integration in Sultanbeyli

Syrian refugees in Sultanbeyli do not plan to leave Turkey in the short term, but they also wish to go back to Syria when the war is over. According to the Municipality's survey, when asked about future movement within a year, almost all (98%) of respondents said they had no plans to move anywhere else. The main reasons for not wanting to move were because they were not able to (23%); they are sick of moving (23%); Sultanbeyli offers the most affordable housing (20%); and they liked the neighborhood and their neighbors (14%). However, during in-depth interviews, almost all refugees said they hoped to go back to Syria when the war is over.

For men, finding a steady job with decent pay is a long-term priority. Many want to start their own businesses and report self-employment as the only way out of unemployment. By contrast, many women said they did not have any future plans for themselves, and tended to talk instead about plans for their children or their husband's future. For example, Ola said she does not have any plans for herself, but her husband wants to open a business in Turkey. Many women focus on getting by day by day, instead of planning their future in Sultanbeyli. Mulfide, for example, said that she has no other plans than keeping "her children's stomachs full."

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Refugees in Towns is a project of the Feinstein International Center. More information on the project, including more case study reports, is available at <https://www.refugeesintowns.org/>

The Feinstein International Center is a research and teaching center based at the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University. Our mission is to promote the use of evidence and learning in operational and policy responses to protect and strengthen the lives, livelihoods, and dignity of people affected by or at risk of humanitarian crises.

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