



Szent István University

Doctoral School of Management and Business Administration

**Refugee students in the Turkish higher education in the light  
of the Syrian conflict**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

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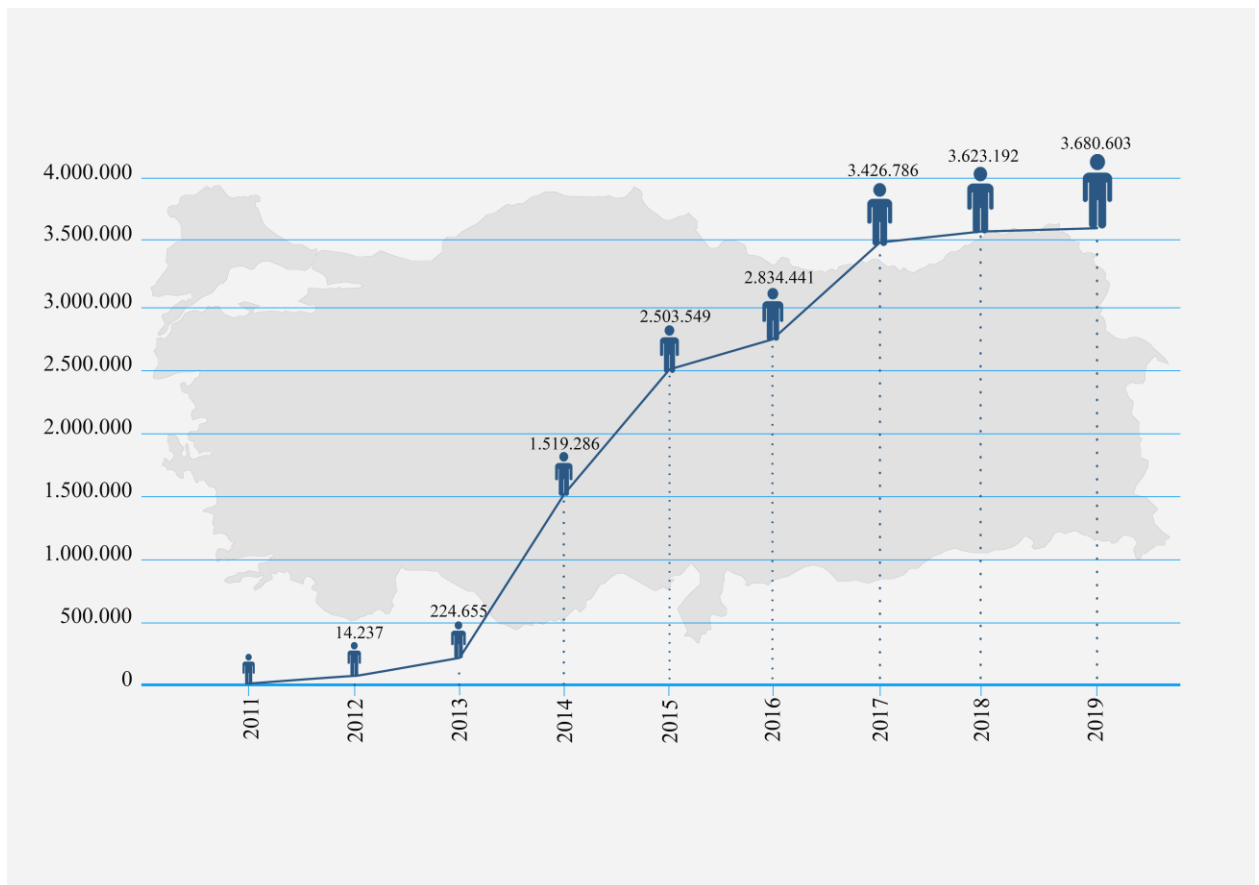
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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The number of refugees residing in Turkey after the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011 is getting higher and higher and the ongoing fierce battles are still preventing them of returning home. As more and more Syrians realize that they are forced to settle down in a foreign country, they also acknowledge that for their future life and career in Turkey, they need a proper higher education. At the same time, the Turkish government is facing a great challenge while trying to teach Turkish language to non-Turkic refugees and integrating them into a changing national higher education system. The improvement of educational institutions to accommodate the input of students with refugee background based on advancement in securing quality in higher education in Turkey results in the formation of a more educated Syrian population in Turkey willing to work for their new home. The development of science and technology in Turkey, as well as that of the management of individual and institutional career options are to be considered decisive while the topic of Syrian refugee students in Turkey.

### **1. 1. Study Background**

After the civil war broke out in Syria in March 2011, an ever-growing number of refugees fled the Middle Eastern nation. The first asylum-seekers appeared at the Syrian-Turkish border on the 29th April 2011 and the first temporary refugee camp has been established in the southern Turkish province of Hatay (Kap, 2014). Their number remained relatively low until the attack by the forces loyal to the regime in Damascus on the northern Syrian city of Jisr al-Soughour in August of that year. The number of Syrian refugees attained the number of 19.000 by the end of 2011 and kept growing by 3.000 to 6.000 persons ever since every day. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees registered up to 2.910.281 displaced in March 2017 (Syrian Regional Refugee Response, 2017), there might be even more according to certain estimates as the European Commission speaks of 3.2 million refugees (European Commission, 2017).



**Graph 1. Number of Syrian nationals residing in Turkey**

(Source: Göç İdaresi Genel Müdürlüğü, GIGM, 2019)

The vast majority of the above refugees live outside the refugee camps, while around 10% of them are still located in one of those reception centers installed in the Southeastern regions of Turkey. Soon after the arrival of the first refugees, Turkish policymakers decided to give them quality education in Arabic as at that time everybody hoped that the crisis would end soon and the displaced would return home. In 2013, with the increase of the number of refugees and the intensity of the hostilities, Turkey changed its viewpoint and commenced to teach Turkish to newcomers (Emin, 2016). Syrians with a refugee status have free access to the Turkish national education system granted by a statute on the education services designed for foreigners issued in September 2014 by the Ministry of National Education (Emin, 2016). Though the right to education is given the actual access to those services is distributed in an unequal manner. As far as primary and secondary school aged young people are concerned, 90% of the ones living in the sheltering centers go to school, whereas –according to estimations- a quarter of their counterparts residing outside do so (Emin, 2016).

If basic educational needs are hardly met, it is not a surprise that on the level of higher education, the situation of the Syrian refugee students is not easy. Already a surprising 27.5% of the Turks

think that Syrian refugees must be banned from Turkish universities (Erdogan, 2014.a), admitting them to the Turkish higher education system has much less of a popular support. Having said so, there are also positive examples by local authorities and civil society organization helping Syrian refugees to finish their studies in Turkey. For example, to empower the young female students, the local government of Istanbul's Fatih district located in the historical center of the city provides various services including bus rides to the campuses in order to contribute to the success of the Syrian refugee students living on the territory administrated by them (Macreath and Sagnic, 2017).

## **1.2. Research Aims**

My work has three main aims. The first purpose of this research is to describe the situation, the second is to identify the main problems and the third is to propose eventual solutions to the problems evoked. A list of practical resolution proposals would be fruitful both for the students and the Turkish government.

## **1.3. Research Questions**

With the increase in the number of Syrian refugee students in Turkey over the years, there are different questions about how they perceive their studies and future career and how they are received by the government and the overall population. The following questions might be addressed.

1. How the Turkish authorities and civil society organization are dealing with the issue of Syrian refugees?
2. What do the Turkish authorities and the civil society organizations do for the education of the Syrian refugee students?
3. Will Syrian refugee students studying in Turkey continue their careers in Turkey after graduation?
4. Is the economic and social development in Turkey an influence in determining career orientations of these students?
5. After graduation, would they want to work in the public or the private sector?

## **1.4. Hypotheses**

The main hypotheses of the present thesis are as follows:

H1: It is to be supposed that the Syrian refugee students are happy to live a peaceful life and to be able to study but are not fully satisfied with their living conditions. In this regard, they profoundly differ from those ordinary students opting to study abroad from peaceful country. They do not seek diversion or adventure.

H2: As the Syrian refugee students are satisfied in general, they are also content with the study environment offered to them by the Turkish authorities and NGOs.

H3: Syrian refugee students –especially with the flow of time- would not return home even though in many parts of Syria the fire is ceased. They increasingly choose to have a career in Turkey or in the West.

H4: Indeed, the ever-changing economic situation, especially the recent hardships due to the increase of the prices and the impairment of the Turkish currency, has a deep impact on the choices of the Syrian refugee students.

H5: Syrian refugee students are willing to work in the private instead of the public sector.

## **2. MATERIAL AND METHOD**

### **2.1. Sample**

This work includes a detailed description of the civil war in Syria, the escalation of the refugee crisis in Turkey related to it and a presentation of the education systems of both in Syria and Turkey with a consideration of the integration of the Syrian refugee students into the overall Turkish higher education system. In addition to these issues, an analysis based on a sampling will be done in order to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions above.

The sampling was conducted in Turkey in the second half of 2018 with the collaboration of the Council of Higher Education (Yükseköğretim Kurulu Başkanlığı in Turkish, YÖK). The YÖK supported the sampling by providing ten contact details of two dozen of Syrian refugee students based on a special set of criteria to include both sexes and individuals of all possible ethnic and religious background relevant in the context of the Syrian civil war and the refugee crisis. Ten students have been selected, the basic information about them is summarized in the table below:

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Home city	Age	Turkish university	Subject
Mohammed A.	Male	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Latakia	25	Gaziantep	Law
Ali M.	Male	Arab	Shia Muslim	Homs	22	Sanliurfa	Agriculture
Houmam E.	Male	Turkmen	Sunni Muslim	Bayirbucak	24	Adiyaman	Dentistry
Fathi L.	Male	Kurdish	Sunni Muslim	Qamishli	27	Istanbul	Engineering
Loutfi M.	Male	Arab	Christian	Safita	23	Ankara	Fine Arts
Amena L. D.	Female	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Aleppo	25	Bursa	Medicine
Qamar V.	Female	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Jisr	28	Izmir	Tourism
Nouda U.	Female	Arab	Sunni Muslim	Aleppo	25	Istanbul	Computer sciences
Raghida R.	Female	Arab	Druze	As-Suwayda	28	Istanbul	Sociology
Aya T.	Female	Kurdish	Sunni Muslim	Hassake	22	Gaziantep	Religion

**Table 1. Personal details of the respondents of the survey done for the present thesis (Source: own work)**

## 2.2. Instrument and Analysis

The selected students and their respective families if available were contacted at the very beginning of the academic year 2018/2019, and after obtaining permission from all of them interviews were arranged with them in October and November 2018. In fact, these interviews necessitated three study trips. The first in the South East of the country (Gaziantep, Sanliurfa and Adiyaman) near the border with Syria, the second in Western big cities (Istanbul, Bursa and Izmir), and a third to nations capital, Ankara. Not only a personal relationship has been established with the students but also their actual living and study conditions have been observed.

The respective interviews lasted, in general, two hours but were preceded by a brief meeting to overview the aim of the research with the student and to learn the most possible thing about their personality. The interviews evolved around five prepared questions and according to the needs further questions have been asked. The five main questions were the following ones:



1. What are your experiences with the civil war in Syria? How did you cross the border? How did Turkish authorities help you with your personal needs and to obtain the refugee status?
2. How could you start your studies in Turkey? Did the Turkish authorities and civil society organizations help you in this procedure?
3. What are your plans after graduation?
4. Does the economic and social development in Turkey influence your career orientation?
5. After graduation, would you prefer to work in the public or the private sector?

After the interviews took place, respondents were asked to contribute by giving their general opinion on the topics included in the present thesis. All their precious answers were considered.

For analyzing the data received from our respondents, five distinct points are used in the chapter detailing their answers. The first point is longer than the following four following ones as it gives a summary of their personal story with the war and the situation as a refugee in Turkey. If it was possible, if there were some similarities, in the examination of the last four questions ideas given

### **3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1 Methodology of the analysis**

To test the hypotheses presented at the beginning of the thesis and to survey the actual opinion of the persons concerned a complex method has been used to come to the proper results. The complexity with regards to the discussion means that the present chapter contains both qualitative and quantitative elements. Though the qualitative and the quantitative approach required different steps to be taken, the preparation for the scientific work included the same actions.

#### **3.2 General level of satisfaction with the assistance of the Turkish authorities and civil society**

The first question to the ten individuals representing almost all segments of the Syrian refugees residing in Turkey was the following one:

How the Turkish authorities and civil society organization are dealing with the issue of Syrian refugees?

The related hypothesis proposed was as follows:

Ali M. started an undergraduate program in agriculture at a university of another Southern city, Sanliurfa where an important Arabic-speaking ethnic minority already lived before 2011. This was his main focus after he left his home city of Homs very soon after the start of the armed conflict as his place was under attack from a very early stage of the war. The building where they lived was bombed, he and his Shia Muslim Arab family was first internally displaced and tried find a place with their large family in the capital. Some family disputes forced them out with no place where to go. The entire family came to the conclusion that leaving the country is the only solution. They first tried to cross into Lebanon with the help of a Shia network. Their money was taken away, Ali has lost a younger sister due to the eruption of a small ambush in the mountains at an army check point. Finally, they all went to the North and presented themselves at a Turkish border crossing. They had to wait a few days. After getting in, they were transferred to a refugee camp for families in Oncupinar in the Province of Kilis. This is one of the largest facilities of its kind and consists of a high number of containers. They have got their own container where they stayed several years. They opted for moving out of the camp following a conflict with another group of refugees, also from Syria, but from the Sunni denomination. In this conflict, they were assisted by an NGO that found an empty house on the outskirts of Sanliurfa where they stay. The family, after renting out the house with the adjacent land decided to send their oldest son, Ali to a local vocational school where he first learned Turkish and agriculture. As he was a good student, again the same NGO helped them to finance his undergraduate studies.

The fourth person to answer the questions of the interview was Fathi L., this 27 years old Kurdish gentleman left his home city of Qamishli in April 2016 during the most violent part of a battle that opposed the local tribal police force, the Asayish and Assad loyalist paramilitary units. His life was in danger as he is the only son of a local tribal leader, a Kurdish a sub-ethnic group that has very wide connections to Kurds living just across the border in Turkey. A secret forum of Kurdish tribal leaders in Turkey that operates totally independently of the notorious terror cell of the PKK decided to forward him to Istanbul to keep him far from the frontier region. Though the situation in Qamishli proper is safe and its region is becoming increasing suitable for human life, Fathi think that it is still wiser to stay in Istanbul. As he was bored and got enough money from his tribesmen in Turkey, he decided to restart his studies. Before the war, he has just started his engineering course with the university in Deir-ez-Zor. After the war broke out, he left the school and lived on smuggling goods between Turkey and Syria, an activity that is quite widespread in this

Kurdish populated area. In some sense, it also used to be before the armed conflict. This period of four years let him earn some money and learn some Turkish that helped him integrate into the Turkish education system.

Fathi is not very much in touch with the Turkish reality and society. Basically, he seeks assistance from Kurdish people living in Istanbul. His stay has been legalized after his arrival, he had only a limited contact with the Turkish authorities whom he judges to be nice and fair. He was also surprised to realize how much of them are also of Kurdish origin even in the Western cities of Turkey. Though he is surrounded by ethnic Kurds, he enjoys the multicultural nature of the big cities very much. He is amazed how organized and clean Istanbul is compared to his home city or Deir-ez-Zor. Therefore he has much respect for the ordinary Turks.

Loutfi M., this 23 years old Christian Arab from the Lebanon Mountain town of Safita left his place with his entire family after the intensification of the pressure on his fellow community members in September 2013. At that time the Syrian branch of the Al Qaeda terror network, the Al Nusra Front besieged the famous Christian town of Maaloula further in the South. Most Christians from that area left for Lebanon that was closer, Loutfi's family has decided to take another route to the North. For a couple of months, they lived in the town of Kasab, a Christian majority locality near the Turkish border. As Muslim extremists were pushing them out of the region, they did not have any other option than going to Turkey. They were lucky as they only had to march a few km and were sent to a nearby container camp in Yayladagi. Loutfi started to learn Turkish and attended a special psychological training to process his bitter war memories. This course included some drawing and painting sessions where his extraordinary skills has been discovered, and he was soon offered a scholarship in Fine Arts by a university in Ankara.

Loutfi is amazed by both the Turkish people and the Turkish authorities and by the academic life in Ankara. He admits that he had many bad stereotypes about the Turks before he came to the country, but after his establishment in Ankara, all of a sudden, this feeling changed. He had some ambivalent feelings when they arrived to Yayladagi because he would prefer to go to Lebanon or Europe where Christians number more. He finds Turkish Muslims far more tolerant of Christians than their Syrian fellows. He also admits that this issue is also present in the Yayladagi refugee camp where some of his family members still stay. His deepest wish would be therefore a family re-unification in Ankara as now it seems impossible to be with them as his scholarship is only sufficient for one person. Some of his other family members have recently returned to Safita under the control of the central government. That makes his wish even less

feasible. Due to his scholarship and the possibilities it can offer him, Loutfi is not considering a return to the Lebanon mountains.

Amena is now 25 years old and is in her second year at a faculty of medicine. She likes Turkey, the Turks and the easy-going ambiance of the big cities. Though they live in the vicinity of Bursa, she goes frequently to Istanbul to meet the members of the local elite. She enjoys very much that there is a buzzing night scene there and morals are far more liberal than back home. Her family is “cool” as she says and permits her to follow a very Westernized lifestyle though they started to limit her expenditures as she went into some extremes in spending the money of her family. Her family helps her in many ways, they arranged all necessary paper works for staying and studying in Turkey. She is very happy with that. This also means that she has only a very limited knowledge of the Turkish beurocracy. The only disturbing thing is that she regularly hears some racist comments. Some Turkish students think that Syrians are not real refugees and that they should go home and fight for their freedom. This type of speech suddens her a lot.

The best word to describe Qamar’s attitude is gratefulness. After she lost her father and one of her brothers to a governmental mortar shelling, she could hardly imagine that she would be able to restart her life. She says that this only thanks to God, to her mother and the Turkish nation that she got there. Even after thinking a while, she could not say a single bad word about the way they were received by the Turks.

One can deduce from the above testimonies, Syrian refugee students harbor very diverse views and feelings regarding the humanitarian work of the Turkish authorities and the NGOs. Generally speaking, they tend to be more critical with the civil servants. There a number of complaints as far as the border guards are concerned, and several incidents of violence have been also reported by the interviewees. It seems that they are much more satisfied with the assistance of the Turkish and international civil society organizations. Frequently, they are the ones who push the Syrian refugees to study.

### **3.3 Satisfaction with the assistance of the Turkish authorities and civil society on the level of higher education**

The main question concerning this topic is as follows:

What do the Turkish authorities and the civil society organizations do for the education of the Syrian refugee students?

The corresponding presupposition is:

As the Syrian refugee students are satisfied in general, they are also content with the study environment offered to them by the Turkish authorities and NGOs.

Mohammed is still uncertain about his future, possibly he stays in Turkey, but is sure that he wants to do some research on international humanitarian law. The main intention of his is to combine his law studies with his own situation of being a refugee who was brutalized while crossing the border and who had to spend a certain amount of time in a refugee camp. Either he becomes a lawyer or a researcher, he needs more guidance from the university or NGOs on how to conduct a proper research on this topic. Basically he is happy with his university in Gaziantep, but he notices that the main focus there is engineering. He understands that this is due to the history of the school that goes back to the 1970s when it was a place exclusively dedicated for those sciences. He notices that this might also concern native Turkish students, too.

Leading a student life in Gaziantep is not that difficult, the city is medium-sized, not too complicated to cope with and in a good deal of sense similar to his native Latakia. If he needs help with practical issues, he can easily get it. The only thing he misses is the sea that always had reconforted him even during the hardest moments of life.

Fathi L. and Aya T. share a certain number of things in common. Though Fathi is male and Aya is female, they come from the same ethnic background, and they got almost the same way to Turkey thanks to a Kurdish tribal networks that operate in secret and well over the borders. Their immediate environment remain this tribal structure even during their studies, they do not mix too much with local people, even though an important proportion of them is ethnic Kurd from Turkey. If they need help, they rely on the „network” rather than on unknown people. The greatest disadvantage of this situation according to them is that they frequently feel uncomfortable and fearing their environment without having a valid reason for it. This situation also prevents them of having local friends. Aya is a very reserved young lady and prefers to stay at home, Fathi would sometimes go out, but does not wish to go alone. Aya almost always lived with her family and can accept this, Fathi started to develop an interest in get out of this circle, but, at the same time, he respects his tribal elders and prefers not to break some tribal taboos. As they have only a limited contact with the Turkish authorities and the NGOs, they do not have a very deep impression on them. In general, they are very appreciative and thankful because they realize that they have chance that most Syrian youth do not.

Amena L.D., the daughter of a rich merchant family of Aleppo lives a life that resembles a little the one of the two ethnic Kurdish youth. The reason is different. Almost everything is arranged for Amena by her parents. She feels uneasy with this situation, and expresses the wish to be more autonomous but it would necessitate a bitter separation from the family. For sure, she does not want to move to a student hostel or take extra classes to better speak Turkish as many other Syrian refugee students do. Basically, she does not want to give the luxury in which she exists. In general, she is happy with the situation at her university. She thinks that it is well housed and well equipped, the level of education is very high. She believes that the knowledge and practice she gets there is sufficient both for a practice in Turkey or to work in Syria if she returns. She finds it important to note that the university permits the Syrian students to spend some extra time in the laboratories, she uses these opportunities quite frequently. For this, she is very grateful to the administration of the faculty.

Though the facilities at her university in Izmir are a bit run down and rudimentary, Qamar finds the approach to the Syrian students by the school administration excellent. She sees a big difference between the management of the university and the local authorities in the city of Izmir. These latter ones on several occasions objected projects that included Syrian refugee students and made them undergo more than one unnecessary controls at the student hostel where she stays. Her impression is that the university and the local civil society is very receptive, they also offer diverse practice possibilities on the Mediterranean shore or at the antique ruins in the region of Selcuk (the site of Ephesos). She explains this difference between the school and the municipality with a raising nationalistic sentiment. As Amena did earlier, Qamar also reports some anti-Arab comments being heard around the city center in Izmir. She even recalls that a few months ago a small ambulant vendor boy had been harassed by local residents. This is why she like the tourism practices in Selcuk that harbors a multi-ethnic population as some of its inhabitants can trace their origin to Africa. People in Selcuk are also more helpful and cheat less on foreigners – according to Qamar.

Nouda U. from Aleppo is now studying computer sciences in Istanbul. The love for informatics comes from her father who were among the first people to establish internet connection in Syria. Nouda besides the computer is interested in the social media and journalism. Her greatest joy while doing her studies in the largest Turkish city is a project for young female Syrian refugees to collect and process war testimonies by fellow Syrian women. This opportunity was offered to her by her school administration. She dedicates all her free time to this work. She is always very tired, but this way she tries to return all the help she has got in Turkey after her arrival.

The interviewees of the current survey on the level of satisfaction of the Syrian refugee students prove that they all have their own stories that explain their impressions vis-à-vis their university. Though the overall picture is rather positive, there were some negative comments, too. For example, Qamar reported some opposition to the correct reception of the Syrian refugees by the local authorities, the municipality. The majority of these testimonies show that these are isolated occurrences often motivated by the racist attitude of some individuals while the overall system has a rather positive approach to the refugees and their problems.

### **3.4 Career in Turkey or abroad?**

The question arises as follows:

Will Syrian refugee students studying in Turkey continue their careers in Turkey after graduation?

The related hypothesis is:

Syrian refugee students –especially with the flow of time- would not return home even though in many parts of Syria the fire is ceased. They increasingly choose to have a career in Turkey or in the West.

When asked about his plans concerning his future career, Mohammed excludes with great sadness his home country, Syria. Very simply he cannot return to the city where he was born as it was already an Alawite majority place before, and now, during the civil war a “religious cleansing” took place and there is no more room for Sunnis there. To other parts of Syria where the majority remains Sunni, he does not want to move. He has no family there, no friends or less than in Turkey. Mohammed thinks that his studies also predestine him for a career in Turkey as he studies law, basically Turkish law or the Turkish understanding of law. Though he admits that there a certain similarity between the Turkish and the Syrian legal systems, especially when it comes to the civil law. The reason for this is the common past. The Ottoman rulers followed the Hanafite school of jurisprudence of the Sunni Muslim creed. Sunni Arabs in Syria rather belong to the Shafiite school, but the legal tradition in both countries can be traced back to the Ottoman past when all subjects were judged according to the same legal principles. Today, both Syria and Turkey are secular nation states and their legal systems are not based on religion, but certain ways and approaches are inherited from the time of the emperors. In fact, Mohammed underlines, despite these common values, there are more

differences than similarities and this also makes a return to Syria rather difficult. The same rule applies to start a career in a third country. As Mohammed is fluent in English and likes the British culture very much, he also considered a career in the United Kingdom. With the complexity and the uncertainty that surrounds the Brexit, the islands leaving the European Union and its impact on immigration, he gave up this idea. As of now, Mohammed envisages his near future in Gaziantep. The city is close to the Syrian border and is home to an important Syrian Arab and ethnic Arab population. A perfect place for doing a thorough research on international humanitarian law and its impact on the refugees. Why to go elsewhere – he raises his voice.

Amena –who is studying medicine in Istanbul- shares some of Houmam’s views. She is also concerned by the run down situation of the Syrian health care system and is conscious of the problem of the brain drain in their profession. She would readily go home after graduation and work in a hospital, she is not very much worried about her safety, rather she is interested in learning more about the current working conditions at a Syrian hospital whether they access to all materials including medical instruments and drugs absolutely necessary for medication. As her family is rich, the possibly low salary would not discourage her. The only thing that would keep her in Turkey is her family. Since they have a very successful construction stone business there, her parents and brothers obviously opt for staying in Bursa. They have also purchased a new home in a nearby village. So, if she returns, she returns alone and that would sadden her.

Fathi, this 27 years of ethnic Kurdish young man from Qamishli says that he would prefer to the West after graduating from his school of engineering. With such a degree – he believes- he would be welcomed by the major manufacturers. His main target country is Germany, and he can imagine himself working at an important car producer. He opts for Germany also because it already has a large Kurdish and Turkish population where he could feel at home and at the same time he can follow the western trends. If this does not come true, he has nothing against staying in Turkey. Returning to Syria would be problematic as the status of his city is uncertain. It is still held by rebels. Whenever it is taken back by the regime, scenes of vengeance could occur. According to Fathi it is wiser to wait the clarification of the situation and observe. Anyhow, he would consult with his tribal elders about an eventual return.

Loutfi is categorical about the place where he wants to live. It is Italy. Loutfi as a Christian imagines Italy as a land of Christianity. Though he is not Roman Catholic, the fact that the prorefugee pope resides there makes Italy attractive in his eyes. Otherwise, Italy for him is also a land of art and artists, the symphony of colors – as he calls it after seeing a number of pictures and films about the country of his dream. Right now, he prefers to evolve both at school and in



art, he only considers moving to Italy after graduation. From the practical point of view he does not know how to do and finance it and how to bring with him his family might also prove to be a great problem.

Nouda misses Syria and Aleppo very much, but she is already busy with constructing a career in Istanbul. The social media project of collecting female war memories sticks her to the city of Istanbul where she imagines her future. She thinks Istanbul is a vibrant city, both Eastern and Western, it is the confluences of multiple influences where she feels at home already. She says that she would only go back to Syria if it is fully pacified and civilized again under the rule of a democratically elected government. It might be true that the everyday life in most of Syria came back to its normal form, after such an uprising not to gain anything and having the same dictatorship according to her, is far from being too attractive.

It is not surprising that Raghida is categorical. She cannot imagine a better option than moving to the West and having an academic career at a university or research institute in any European Union member state. She confesses that her favorite European country is The Netherlands. If she had a choice, she would live in Amsterdam or Utrecht.

Aya is still undecided about her future and would not determine her future without consulting her father and her tribal elders. She learns religion because she wants to teach the moderate version of Islam. There is an urgent need for it back in Syria, but in a way there is also a need for it in Turkey or in any other country of the world. If it was only up to her, after graduation, she would return to Hassake as the city is quite peaceful, but the overall situation in Syria is still very volatile, so this is far from being a final commitment.

From the above testimonies, one can see that most Syrian refugee students are tantalized by homesickness, and at least half of them would readily go home if the situation in the Arab country is fully normalized. Despite they think that to return and serve the Syrian nation is their patriotic duty, they also realize that it is in many cases almost impossible, especially in cases of minority origin being a disadvantage. Most of them can easily imagine their future in Turkey, some of them even in the West. It is to be noted that many non-rational factors intervene during their decision making including their care for their people and family. One thing is sure, they are aware of their multiple level responsibilities and would decide accordingly.

### **3.5 The influence of the Turkish economic and social reality on the career plans of the Syrian refugee students**

The related question is:

Is the economic and social development in Turkey an influence in determining career orientations of these students?

The related hypothesis is:

Indeed, the ever-changing economic situation, especially the recent hardships due to the increase of the prices and the impairment of the Turkish currency, has a deep impact on the choices of the Syrian refugee students.

Mohammed –who studies law in Gaziantep- says that the most possible scenario is that he stays in Gaziantep. He could not travel too much around Turkey, and he is aware that in many other Turkish cities life is better and easier. He says that being close to the border and being surrounded by people with whom you share something in common is more valuable than a more modern way of life. He agrees that in recent months Turkey became more and more expensive, but still it is cheaper compared to the Western nation. This is another argument to remain there.

For Fathi, having a good salary as an engineer is very important. One of the reasons why he could imagine himself working at car manufacturer in Germany is that they are well-paid. Salary in itself is not enough, he says, you should be able to spend your money on quality products and services. If you have money in Syria or Turkey, you have to limit your spending on what is available locally. Istanbul is an exception. In Istanbul, you find everything you need, but as soon as you leave the big city, the countryside is considerably poorer. Fathi underlines that money is not everything though. In Germany, engineers are also recognized for their work not only in the material sense of the term.

Loutfi considers himself more spiritual than materialistic. So, he does not really care about the economic situation in Turkey or elsewhere. His reason for willing to go to Italy lays in his religious enthusiasm and artistic projects. He is aware that if you are an immigrant in the West, you start very low and your living conditions can even be worse than in Ankara. Aya can be compared to Loutfi. She is also spiritual in her approach to the outside world and tries to detach herself from the outer influences. She concentrates on her theological studies instead of worrying of worldly things.

Amena has a solid financial background as her family is wealthy enough to support her during her studies and possibly even after that. Her family is not concerned by the economic crisis in Turkey as they sell construction materials and despite the crisis, the prestigious infrastructural development projects go on, the Turkish government carries on this type of investments. Amena underlines that these developments also include the sector of health care. The opening of large new hospitals and similar facilities might be an argument for staying in Turkey.

Qamar –as she is studying tourism- has a different view on the Turkish economy. She does not feel any anxiety regarding the weakening of the Turkish currency. On the contrary, it can be a trump in the hand of the Turks if they utilize the situation the good way. As the Turkish lira is cheap, the country and its seaside resorts become increasingly appealing and more and more Western tourists return after their number was widely shrinking following the failed coup attempt in 2016. At the same time, of course, she recognizes that the situation is not good for the everyday Turks. She thinks that the government has to change its economic policy and shift from the support of infrastructural development to the production centered industries.

Nouda and Raghida in some sense share the same views. They both assume that the living standard in Istanbul is very good, the impacts of the ongoing crisis is much less visible there than in the more rural areas. Nonetheless, Raghida is sure that even this is far from the level of the Western nations like The Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries. This is why she prefers to go to Europe.

Syrian refugee students are, indeed, influenced by the economic conditions and their change in Turkey, but they seem to be less worried about the situation than the native Turks of the country. It is also visible that they approach the issue from the various points of view of their field from agriculture to tourism. Maybe their inherent optimism can help Turkey to tackle the question of economic and social hardships.

### **3.6 Private or public?**

The research question is:

After graduation, would they want to work in the public or the private sector? The related hypothesis is:

Syrian refugee students are willing to work in the private instead of the public sector.

Mohammed says that according to his double career plan, he would like to work both for the public and the private sector, but not at the same time. First, he is planning a career as a researcher in the field of the international law related to the issue of the asylum seekers. To do a proper investigation on this topic, he would need the help of a research institute, and as most of them are linked to a national academy of sciences or a government run university, he will need to cooperate with them. Second, he projects a later career as a lawyer. As a lawyer, he would prefer to have his own office or assist a transnational company first and then to establish his own business. From among the ladies, Raghida's vision can be compared to Mohamed's answer. Raghida as a sociologist first finds logical to deal with a research institute and establish a proper business after getting a certain fame. If at the end she manages to have her own company, she would specialize in the domain of the opinion polls both in politics and economy.

Ali as a biological farmer admits that he has a limited option only. Most probably because of the civil war and some family issues, he will remain in Turkey, in a country where there is no tradition of state own large agricultural companies and cooperatives restrict themselves only to certain activities, he can continue his experiment only as a private individual.

Fathi opts for a career in the private sectors. As he explained it earlier, he imagines a career as an engineer at large German car manufacturer.

For Loutfi, the most important thing in life is artistic freedom. If a government can assure him his freedom, he is ready to take a job, but for sure he would not help the propaganda of any agency or political faction. Therefore, he prefers to remain independent and live on the income he can get from the auctions of his paintings.

Amena is aware that the health care system in many countries are mostly controlled by the national government. Having chosen the profession of a doctor, she also accepted that her work force would be needed by the country. She would be easy with a post a public hospital in Turkey or Syria but might also welcome the help of her rich family to establish her own cabinet in an upmarket neighborhood of Istanbul.

Qamar who is studying tourism give an obvious answer, she would like to work with a private tour operator in Antalya or Istanbul. In her sector, it has sense of talking of a government agency or civil service.

Nouda imagines her future both as a computer expert and a journalist. She is interested in investigative journalism and prefers to remain independent. This only possible in the private sector as governments put more and more pressure on media outlets the finance and influence the in-field work of the professionals.

The above confessions show that the Syrian refugee students tend to choose the private sector, but it is also obvious that their selection is influenced by two important factors: the nature of their future profession and the socio-cultural reality of the country where they imagine their career.

### **3.7 General evaluation of the interviews**

The survey the present thesis was based on the present thesis proves that the actual social environments around the Syrian refugee students are not limited to the already mentioned four circles, namely the family, the friends, the neighbors and the university, but is completed by the tribal structures. Tribal affiliation and loyalty are still crucial while examining the Syrian social reality, whereas in Turkey with the modernization during the first part of the republican era and internal mobility of the Turkish population, it has a much smaller, but still perceivable impact on the Turkish society. In the examples, this attachment to the tribal structures characterized the students of Kurdish descent, but it is also typical among ethnic Arabs and Turkmens of Syria. This tribal structure has an advantage over the other forms of social environment, as family members and friends might pass away during a civil war, the tribe survives and remains most of the time and provides the members with stability that is very important for a refugee as these structures cross the border since they were established during the Ottoman era, well before the formation of the current frontier. For the students involved in the survey the family is a much vulnerable structure, several family members were massacred or killed, on many occasions they found themselves in a miserable situation in Turkey compared to their existence back in Syria before the armed conflict. The refugee students can count on their parents much less than the ordinary students studying at home or abroad. Having said so, not all the refugee students are deprived of their families and family wealth. Those who lived in a fortunate situation in Syria, mostly continue to live well. One can see that the situation of asylum in many cases reproduces the former social hierarchies. Most refugee students speak less about friends than their classmates. It is visible that they mostly lost their friends or have hard time to contact them and communicate with them if they are back in Syria. In fact, in the question of choosing the right career path, they are much less useful than other social environments. It is also evident that the Syrian refugee students do not really possess local friends, they do not befriend their fellow students, rather Turkish adults, their helpers at the university or the civil society organization assisting in their integration process. As they befriend less the local students and interact less with those Turks that have the same age, it is evident that there are considerable obstacles in the way of the intercultural learning process. For a Syrian national, Turkey in much sense is somewhat like a Western country, they discover

there more the Western lifestyle and values than the actual Turkish culture. Some of them get attracted by this, but the majority remain neutral vis-à-vis the Occidental cultural influence. As they are separated from the majority of the social environments a student usually has and find many barriers during their intercultural learning process, most Syrian refugee students often feel alone and desperate. This is the main reason besides the uncertainties caused by the civil war in Syria why the students in the survey cannot have a clear-cut vision of their future career. The lack of a solid system supervised by the Turkish government that could assist them makes the planning process even more difficult. Therefore, an urgent community response is needed, otherwise only the strongest and the most confident students can really have fair career. After years of peaceful cohabitation, in recent months a campaign has been launched against Syrian refugees residing in Turkey in general, and refugee students in particular that is often compared to verbal lynching. The targeted Syrian refugee students perceive this argumentation as unjust as they were forced to leave their home country and come to Turkey because their cities were bombed. The refugee students from the Gaziantep University – according to the news report of the website called Evrensel- say: “we try to live together with these people, and we understand that their living conditions are poor, but they have to imagine that ours is even worse.” One of the unidentified female students added: “during the night we were staying outside under the olive trees when planes were overflying us and hitting the home of our neighbor, they all died, it was impossible for us to stay”. Muhammed –who also participated in the above survey- states: “we do not want people to think bad things about us. Certain people believe that it is bad that we walk around Turkey freely whereas the Turkish army is about to fight in Syria. Many of us had been killed or displaced.

Very simply we try to survive” (Ipek-Arar, 2019).

Because of the changing attitudes and the continuing pacification of Syria that is basically due to the final victory over ISIS in that country by the Syrian Democratic Forces in March 2019, more and more Syrian refugee students change their mind and prefer to return if they are not that much welcome as they were a few years ago. For example, Sinan Beymuru who is studying international relation at the prestigious Marmara University in Istanbul, underlines that even if the war is not over, he would return to Syria after graduation as –after all- it is his home country. Though he admits that Turkey is his second home, for him the top priority is Syria. Some other students want to play a much active role with their return as their target is to educate the Syrian people recently blindfolded by hatred. Abaraf Khoja – who came to Turkey as a refugee and now is pursuing their studies in Islamic theology- says that Muslims are now described as being ignorant. This what Abaraf wishes to change after getting back to Syria (Alioglu, 2019).

Despite the heavy criticism of the chance to get educated given to the Syrian refugee students, a certain number of exemplary pilot projects are being realized by different actors such as the universities themselves, civil society organizations, the Turkish and foreign governments. One of them is also linked to the above-mentioned Gaziantep University that is currently cooperating with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs that finances a special course entitled Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematic designed for the Syrian refugee students. The rector of the university situated very close to the Syrian border underlines that this course is not only important for the academia, but it also contributes to the development of the city and its immediate surrounding region, too. The rector finds it crucial that these training programs focused on new technologies and the use of robots in industry are being proposed to the Syrian refugee students in close cooperation with the local industries and the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey (known in Turkey as TUBITAK) as there is ongoing industrial revolution taking place in that particular area of Turkey. The program has to be noticed also from the point of view of higher education in general as it features a new interdisciplinary approach as engineering, technology and mathematics are being taught together to get brand-new vision of the scientific discoveries and their practical application (IHA, 2019).

One has to note that education does not only depend on how the government deals with the issue and solves the emerging problems, it is an activity between the humans, the educator and the pupil, it is based on a mutual understanding, on mutual goals and common aims. If the education system has duties, the students have also duties besides their obvious rights and freedom. In one sense, education is communication and is fruitful only if both parties communicate well.

The second point quoted above puts an emphasis on the issue of the language skills that is primordial for an efficient communication. On one hand, the system has to empower the Syrian refugee students by teaching them the necessary capabilities, but on the other, the Syrians themselves have to do all what they can in order to better learn the Turkish language. According to a study 51.5% of the Syrian refugee student state that they are fluent in the idiom of the Turks, whereas 41.2% constate that they know some Turkish. Having said so, most Syrian refugee students are convinced that their knowledge –both in oral and written Turkish- is largely enough to be successful in their studies and daily life. Despite their self assessment, most Syrian students accept that in certain situations –including taking notes, answering classical questions or understanding the questions of a written examination- they fail to use the

Turkish language properly. Their percentage vary from 28 to 40%. An interesting finding of this very survey is that the Turkish proficiency depends on the age of the students, the ones aging 24 or more have more difficulties to learn Turkish (Paksoy et al., 2016).

Language and communication in a way is a barrier, in the other a bridge. Good language and communication skills are a must in order to get integrated into the Turkish education system or into the overall Turkish society. Though it is far from being enough, Syrian refugees have to be motivated to get them interested in pursuing their studies at a Turkish higher education institution and to plan a career after graduation that might also include an option of overstaying in Turkey. The best method to galvanize the massive participation of Syrian refugees in higher education, good examples are to be showed to the coming generations. A study group formed at the prestigious Marmara University in Istanbul has researched the issue and came up with some interesting personal stories, careers or possible future careers. One of the exemplary young Syrians on Turkish soil is 17 years old Zekeriya who totalized 99.3% of the points during his secondary education and in 2016 was preparing for the YOS, an important entrance exam to Turkish higher education. According to him the key issue for a successful career is integration through the similarity of the two cultures. Zekeriya thinks that the Islamic heritage of both Syria and Turkey is similar and the Turkish language contains a high amount of words having Arabic roots. He also underlines that Syrians in Turkey have to become Turks through education as it is easy for them and facilitates their future integration and career. His views are echoed by Salih Ismail a mechanical engineer who after graduation became a teacher of this field in Turkey (Yurtsever, 2017).

Not all Syrian refugees think the same way as Zekeriya or Salih Ismail. Imad Tahlil who studied Islamic theology and now works for a Turkish NGO called Union of Islamic Knowledge says that they were forced to leave their homes, they never had the intention to travel or to study abroad and with the normalization of the situation would return to Syria and hope to find a similar job there (Yurtsever, 2017).

The question of assimilation, integration or complete refusal of the varieties of identities offered by the situation of being a refugee in Turkey is still open and asylum seekers respond in very diverse ways. Uncertainty reigns and prevails over the general condition of the refugees, their education and their career planning.

Why is it so? There is an objective and a subjective answer to this question. The objective one is that the armed conflict is still not over. At the time of writing, dozens of civilians were taken to hospital in the city of Homs because an opposition group was shelling the settlement in the hands of the Assad regime with poisonous gas. In such a case, it is impossible and unjust to require a Syrian refugee student to tell exactly what they would do in 5 or 10 years. The



subjective one is linked to harmful events these refugees underwent during the civil war in Syria. Studies show that the lack of language skill is not the only obstacle, the Syrian refugees also need to process their experiences and raise a certain psychological capital to have a higher chance to be able to take a good job as demonstrated by a research conducted among Syrian refugees residing in the Netherlands and Greece (Zacher, 2018).

The proper psychological background can be ensured by the family background of the refugee students. Several examples show that if the refugee parents work, and especially if they work in their original profession, it has a positive impact on the studies and future career of their children. The contrary, so, if the parents are well-trained professionals like teachers and medical doctors, and they do not find a job in Turkey that is related to their degree, furthermore if they were forced to leave behind all their wealth and belongings, it has a very negative influence on the studies and career of their children (Sezgin and Yolcu, 2016). Family is not the only human environment around a student and family members are not the only source of psychological support in case of need. The second such circle around a young individual is constituted by their friends, and, in the Syrian culture, the people who live in the same city, with whom the refugee student had interacted prior to the civil war. In fact, one of the main reasons for the Syrian refugee students to be homesick is that they miss their friends and neighbors, and find extremely difficult to keep in touch who survived the horror of the armed conflict and who still reside in the country. For this reason, Syrian refugee students have very hard time to befriend fellow students, they rather search for the company of the teachers and the personnel of the faculties (Sezgin and Yolcu, 2016).

#### 4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following table summarizes whether the hypotheses proposed in the introductory chapter are confirmed or rejected.

	Interview & Qualitative	Questionnaire & Quantitative
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Hypothesis H1	Partially confirmed	Confirmed
Hypothesis H2	Confirmed	Confirmed
Hypothesis H3	Partially rejected	Confirmed
Hypothesis H4	Confirmed	Confirmed
Hypothesis H5	Confirmed	Confirmed

**Table 2. Confirmation or rejection of the hypotheses**

(Source: own work)

It is important to note that the students included in the survey were selected according to a certain set of criteria and cannot be considered fully representative as it presents the view of ten individuals out of nearly 25.000 Syrian students studying at Turkish universities. **Hypothesis H1 is partially confirmed** as some of the Syrian refugee students express solid criticism vis-à-vis the Turkish authorities, the growing phobia against the Syrian refugee population in Turkey, especially in certain cities like Izmir and incapability of acting against these phenomena. Having said so, they are much more grateful regarding the Turkish and international civil society organizations who help them more with their life as a student than the Turkish authorities themselves.

**Hypothesis H2 is confirmed** as the Syrian refugee students are more satisfied with their study environment than their overall situation of being a refugee in Turkey. They admit that the universities and NGOs help them in their student life and sometimes in their career planning, too.

**Hypothesis H3 is partially rejected** as it seems that the main motive in choosing the place where to live and work is determined by their love of the homeland and the feeling that they have duties regarding their country and community of origin. Having said so, one should not forget that there are considerable obstacles. Even though most parts of Syria have been pacified by the central government, important regions, especially in the multi-ethnic and multiconfessional North are still under the control of the rebels. This volatile situation makes impossible the return of some of the respondents.

**Hypothesis H4 is confirmed** as the Syrian refugee students are indeed interested in and influenced by the socioeconomic context in which they live. They see the ongoing economic hardships as a chance and are a bit less critical with them than the Turkish public.

**Hypothesis H5 is confirmed** as the Syrian refugee students tend to opt for the private sector, but in certain cases they would not turn down an offer of the government either.

The **first aim** of the questions to the respondents of the survey included in the present thesis is to examine the level satisfaction with their situation as a refugee in general and as a student in particular. Though the **first two research questions** seem to be highly inter-connected, the respondents indeed differentiate between the two confirming that the general situation of the refugees in Turkey is far from being a satisfying one, whereas those who make to the universities are rather appeased by what surround them.

The **second aim** of questions to the respondents of the survey included in the present thesis is to analyze the career planning of the Syrian refugee students. The **other three research questions** measure the impacts that determine the future choices of the students. It is clear that there are material and spiritual needs that these students try to fulfill at the same time. This means that these young Syrian individuals are driven by both the necessity of feeding themselves and their future families and acting according to some more abstract principles like the love of the homeland, the religious values or the success in art.

Based on the survey and the literature, three main recommendations have to be taken into account by the Turkish authorities and society.

To provide access to the higher education system for Syrian refugees is one of the duties of the Republic of Turkey as it prescribed various international agreements such as the Circular on Educational Activities Targeting Foreigners and many others. Turkish authorities and assisting civil society organization have to take three major steps to achieve this goal.

**First**, they have to provide support in order to facilitate the transition of the Syrian refugee youth from the system of their country of origin to the Turkish system and later from the Turkish secondary education system to the Turkish higher education system. The most important obstacle to overcome is the question of equivalency as these Syrian young people cannot easily prove their academic history, or they never attended formal education (public or private) in Turkey. Second to the problematic of equivalency, it has to be mentioned that a number still high of Syrian youth is following the Syrian curriculum in Arabic language in the refugee camps. It is a must to transfer those of them to the Turkish free of charge secondary education system who would like to continue in Turkey at the level of the universities (Komsuoglu-Yurur, 2017, 3).

**Second**, to speed up this transition process for the Syrian refugee students, the Turkish Higher Education Council had and still has to adopt a certain number of policies. The major issues to be dealt with are as follows: missing documents proving the academic background of the refugees, the lack of Turkish language skills, lack of information and guidance throughout the entire transition period. The Council facing the problem of the deficiency in Turkish and other languages now proposes a preparatory course for Syrian refugee students at eight selected higher education centers throughout the country. The Turkish authorities must also tackle the question of financial support of the students as most of them come from vulnerable families and cannot finance themselves. Therefore a scholarship scheme is being worked out and constantly reviewed (Komsuoglu-Yurur, 2017, 3).

**Third**, because of the growing criticism coming from the side of the Turkish families, the Turkish officialdom has to develop a special communication strategy to make them understand the particularities of the issue of the higher education of the Syrian refugee students in Turkey. This can be done from the angle of the basic human rights and how respecting these human rights can upgrade the external image of the whole country (Komsuoglu-Yurur, 2017, 3).

## **5. NEW SCIENTIFIC FINDINGS**

New scientific findings have been deduced from the testimonies of the ten respondents but with limitations can be applied to the total Syrian refugee population in Turkey.

**The general situation of a Syrian refugee student in Turkey depends on their family background and other larger social structures.**

It is visible from the survey that those who already had higher social status in Syria and were surrounded by a firmer social (in many cases tribal) structures, find themselves in a better situation in Turkey, whereas those who lost their loved ones and went through the horror of the civil war are more vulnerable.

**The majority of the Syrian refugees studying at Turkish universities are rather satisfied with their studies and study conditions. They consider universities more protective of their rights and freedom than the Turkish government.**

Turkish universities created a more inclusive environment than the Turkish Republic in general. Turkish universities can be considered to be safe places for the refugees in the more and more hostile social surroundings.

**The choice of the future country of career is largely influenced by the love for the homeland and the desire to serve it.**

Contrarily to the general belief that the refugees as the time passes prefer to stay in their country of residency or move to the West, the majority of the young Syrians indeed would prefer to return home if it was possible for them.

**Syrian refugee students are less critical of the social and political difficulties than their Turkish counterparts.**

Though there are imminent economic hardships in Turkey in recent years, the situation is much better compared to Syria, even if one considers the situation before the civil war. Syrian refugees enjoy the relative freedom and economic wealth that Turkey can offer and rarely criticize the Turkish government for that matter.

**Syrian refugee students are divided on the issue of working in the public or private sector. They would make their choice depending on their personal story and situation.** As other students, the Syrian refugees, too, want to earn money in order to have a peaceful life with a certain level of dignity and wealth. Being safe at the workplace and earning money seems to be a priority whether it can be secured by a government or an entrepreneur or company.

## 6. SUMMARY

In the present PhD thesis, first a historical description and analysis of the civil war in Syria is given that is later followed by the story of the refugee crisis that the armed conflict in the Arab country provoked. The table is completed by the presentation of the respective higher education systems of Turkey and Syria. In the latter case, both the situation before and after the civil war is taken into consideration. In the case of the Turkish higher education, a detailed depiction of its history and the evolution of the reception of foreign nationals to the Turkish universities is proposed.

Reviewing the literature, the context of the Syrian refugee students of Turkey is described, the features of the Turkish higher education system, its advantages and disadvantages are identified. This part of the thesis proves that there is constant growth in the number of the

Syrian refugees going to Turkish universities that makes it a must to understand this social phenomenon.

In order to do so, with the help of the Turkish Council of Higher Education (YÖK) ten future respondents for a survey have been selected and contacted to conduct with them personal interviews at the locations where they live and study. After obtaining the necessary permissions from these individuals and their families, on average two hours long interviews were realized with them. The interviews were made up of two major parts. First, ready-made questions in relation with the research questions and hypotheses detailed in the introduction were put. Second, a freer conversation took place on the issues of being a refugee and a student in Turkey. The answers of the respondents were later analyzed, a search for was conducted in order to identify the similarities in the stories and the opinions. This work was later on completed with a more general overview of the results in the light of the literature.

Using the majority of the answers given by the ten Syrian refugee students included in the survey three out of the five main hypotheses were confirmed, one of them partially confirmed and another one partially rejected. The results of the survey showed that though the background and the current situation of the respondents is highly diverse, some tendencies, indeed, can be observed.

The survey proved that even though the Turkish authorities failed to get all the refugees in a hassle-free way, civil society organizations and universities were able to create an inclusive environment for the Syrian refugee students. It also demonstrated that career planning of these young individuals is influenced by a high number of factors including material, emotional and spiritual needs.

As Turkish authorities in some sense failed and still fail to provide all the available young Syrians with a reliable training for their professional life, three important recommendations were made for the Turkish government.