

BETWEEN CHALLENGE AND CHANCE:
EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON
ATTITUDES TOWARD REFUGEES IN TURKEY
AND GERMANY

Arzu Karakulak



Introduction

With the COVID-19 pandemic causing more than 6 million deaths and 500 million infections worldwide,¹ the world has been facing an immense crisis over the last two years that has not only affected the public's physical health but also placed serious psychological strain on individuals and societies. From a social psychological perspective, the exposure to a global threat such as COVID-19 is likely to have implications on social identity, perception, and behavior: in other words, how people view themselves, how they perceive others, and how they interact with them.² The perception and behavior directed at social out-groups is particularly likely to shift when responding to strong perceptions of threat. The nature and direction of such shifts, however, cannot be clearly foreseen and can have either positive or negative impacts. On the positive side, common threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic may blur preexisting group boundaries and promote social cohesion, unity, and prosocial behavior by triggering an overarching and inclusive group identity.³ On the negative side, however, exposure to the COVID-19 threat may promote ethnocentrism and nurture violence, extremism,⁴ and prejudice against minority group members.⁵

This policy brief will examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attitudes toward refugees in both Germany and Turkey and present, compare, and discuss the data obtained from university-educated young adults between 18 and 30 years old. These two countries were selected as they host millions of refugees, with Syrian nationals being the largest group of refugees in both countries.⁶ Young adults were selected as the focus group in this study as they themselves are in a phase of transition characterized by increasing instability. Together with the uncertainties and existential threats in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, young adults may become more susceptible to adopt extremist attitudes. More acutely, university-educated young adults were selected to examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected a population that is usually known for holding more favorable attitudes toward immigration and refugees.⁷ However, evidence suggests that the protective effect of education

against prejudice may not apply in Turkey.⁸ It is therefore important to investigate and compare how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected prejudice against refugees among university-educated individuals in two qualitatively different migration contexts.

This policy brief consists of three parts. First, a brief review on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected attitudes toward out-groups in different contexts will be provided. Second, the results from a survey conducted with Turkish and German university-educated young adults between 18 and 30 years old on their perceptions of COVID-19-related threats and feelings toward refugees will be reported and compared against the insights gained from the focus group interviews that were conducted with university-educated young adult Syrians living in Turkey and Germany. Third, the policy-relevant recommendations that emerged from our data will be outlined. These recommendations present avenues for undermining the pandemic's detrimental effects on increasing prejudice to ensure the sustainability of peaceful, multicultural, and cohesive societies.

COVID-19 and Attitudes toward Out-groups: Challenge or Chance?

What started with COVID-19-driven prejudice and discrimination against people of Chinese or Asian descent⁹ soon spilled over to targeting other vulnerable and stigmatized groups. In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2020, not only Asian Americans but also Black Americans reported that they had been facing increased racism toward their groups since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ In India, the COVID-19 outbreak was found to be associated with higher levels of Islamophobia,¹¹ and in Belgium the COVID-19 pandemic was found to enhance discrimination in the housing market distinctively against immigrants of Maghrebian origin.¹² A survey conducted in Germany found that COVID-19-related discrimination was not only reported by immigrants of Asian origin but also by respondents originating from Turkey, Africa, and the Middle East.¹³ More racist and nationalist sentiments were also voiced against the Roma population: the COVID-19 outbreak strengthened hate

speech against the Roma minority, and their culture was accused of spreading the virus across several regions in Romania.¹⁴ Likewise, the 2021 report of the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) indicates that in Libya, xenophobic statements blaming the spread of COVID-19 on illegal immigrants have increased both on social media and among government officials.¹⁵ Marginalized groups such as (forced) migrants also disproportionately suffered from the pandemic's financial and health impacts, for instance, the Syrians in Turkey,¹⁶ the Venezuelans in Brazil,¹⁷ and lower-income individuals and Arabs in Canada.¹⁸ Hence, the pandemic has put traditionally marginalized groups under disproportionate strain and brought about the risk of further fueling hostility between groups.

Large-scale threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic, however, do not inevitably sharpen inter-group competition and conflict. On the contrary, large-scale threats such as natural disasters can also mobilize cross-national prosocial behavior and more favorable views between different groups.¹⁹ In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is likely that its character—i.e., as a long-term threat to all humanity that requires coordinated global efforts to be overcome—may dilute the boundaries of in- and out-groups and represent a chance to unite societies via the implementation of a common and inclusive group identity.²⁰ Accordingly, a recent investigation from Turkey found that the perception of COVID-19 as a threat promoted more favorable attitudes toward refugees when individuals endorsed a common in-group identity.²¹ Likewise, data from the Social Cohesion Monitoring Survey conducted in Turkey found that the pandemic increased tolerance toward immigrants and reduced the perceived tensions between Syrians and Turkish citizens.²² For Germany, the longitudinal research by Schiller et al. found that the level of prejudice against asylum-seekers was lower among Germans in spring 2020 during the nationwide lockdown compared to before the lockdown.²³ Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic may also be considered as a unique opportunity for positive societal change, especially for the inclusion of stigmatized minority groups. It is thus important to comprehensively understand how the pandemic has affected these minorities and to identify effective tools for turning these challenges into opportunities.

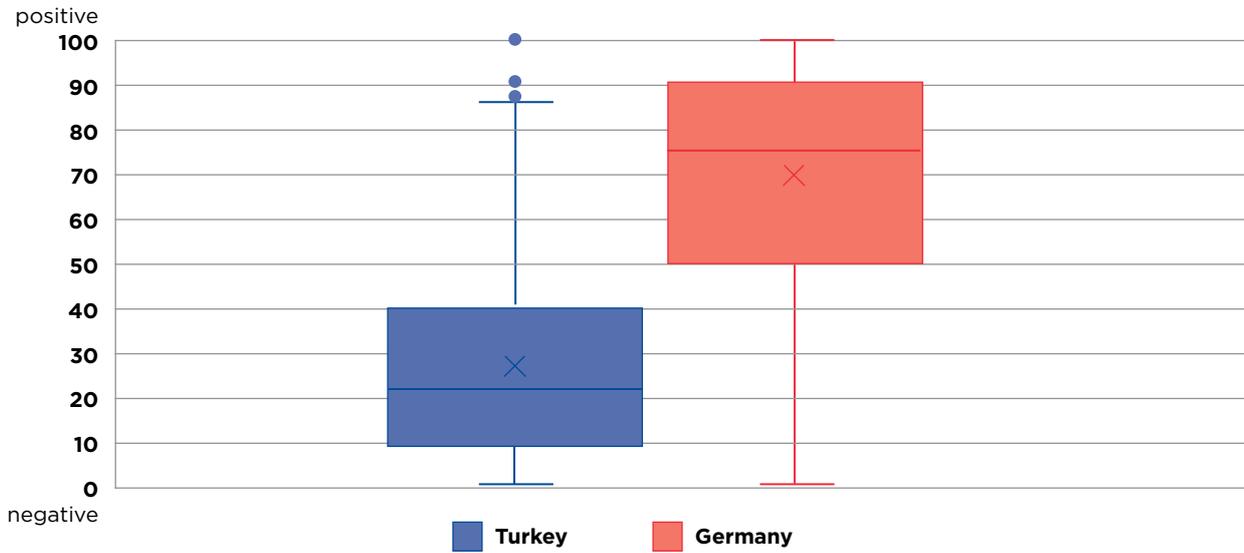
The Pandemic and Prejudice: What Host Population Members Report and What Syrians Perceive

To investigate how the threats arising from the COVID-19 pandemic have affected prejudice and discrimination toward refugees, we conducted surveys and focus groups with university-educated young adults in Turkey and Germany. We surveyed members of the host populations and asked them to report on their perceptions of COVID-19-related threats and their feelings toward refugees. The results of this survey have been extensively discussed in two previously published IPC Analyses.²⁴ We also conducted focus groups with university-educated young adult Syrians in Turkey and Germany who were interviewed about the prejudice and discrimination they have faced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

What Host Population Members Report

A survey was conducted with 355 respondents from Turkey with an average age of 21 years old and 274 respondents from Germany with an average age of 24 years old. The results of this survey indicate that young adults' feelings toward refugees substantially differ between respondents from Turkey and respondents from Germany. Respondents were asked to report how they feel about refugees in their country on a feelings thermometer, ranging from "0 = negative" to "100 = positive." While the average score of Turkish respondents, 26.6, was indicative of predominantly negative feelings about refugees, the average score of German respondents, 69.5, was indicative of rather positive feelings about refugees.

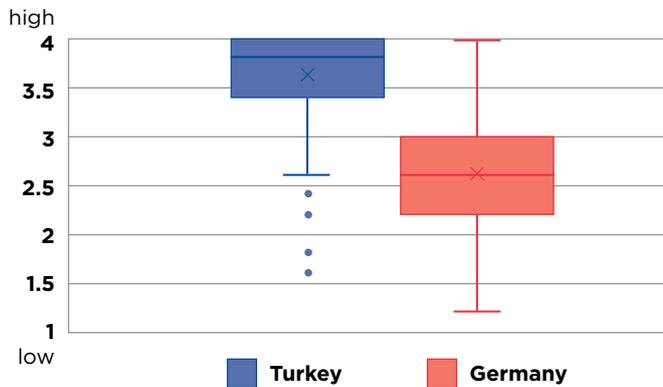
Feelings about refugees



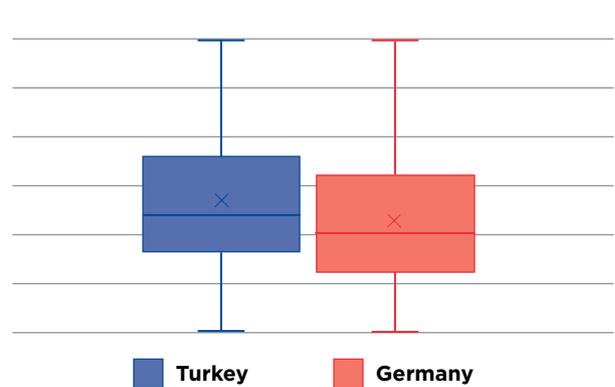
When examining the extent to which respondents perceived the COVID-19 pandemic as a realistic threat (i.e., threat to personal and public health and the economy) and a symbolic threat (i.e., threat to values, traditions, democracy, rights, and free-

doms) with answer options ranging from “1 = not a threat at all” to “4 = major threat,” Turkish respondents reported higher threat perceptions than German respondents, especially in regard to COVID-19 as a realistic threat.

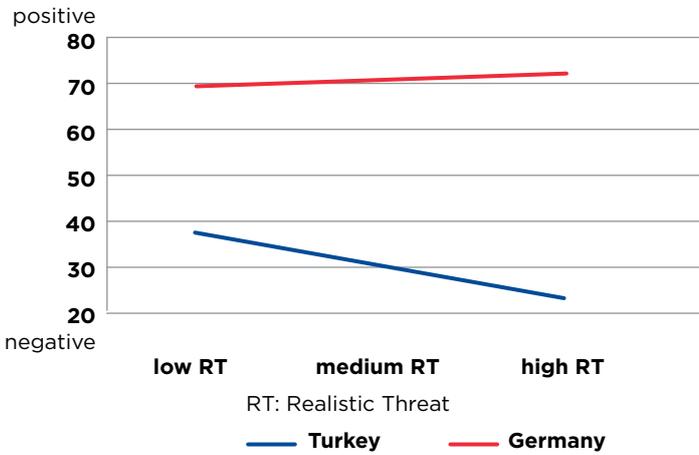
COVID-19 as a Realistic Threat



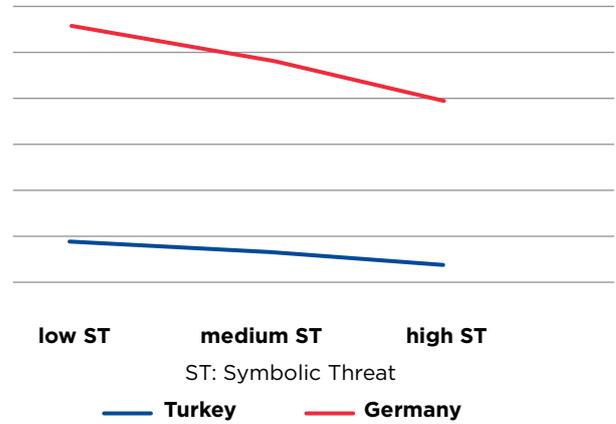
COVID-19 as a Symbolic Threat



Feelings about Refugees by Realistic COVID-19 Threat Perceptions



Feelings about Refugees by Symbolic COVID-19 Threat Perceptions



Finally, when examining the association between realistic and symbolic COVID-19 threat perceptions and feelings toward refugees in Germany and Turkey, we found that a higher perception of COVID-19 as a realistic threat was associated with more negative feelings toward refugees in Turkey, while there was no similar association in Germany. Rather, the perception of COVID-19 as a symbolic threat was associated with more negative feelings about refugees in both Turkey and Germany; however, this association was stronger for Germans than for Turks.

Overall, the results show that university-educated young adults in Turkey feel extremely negative about refugees and perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as highly threatening both realistically and symbolically. Additionally, stronger perceptions of COVID-19 as a realistic threat are associated with more negative feelings about refugees. For university-educated young adults in Germany, the survey results portray rather positive feelings toward refugees and moderate levels of perceived realistic and symbolic COVID-19-related threats. Moreover, the perception of COVID-19 as a symbolic but not a realistic threat was associated with more negative feelings toward refugees.

What Syrians Perceive

We conducted a focus group with 11 Syrian university students living in Turkey and 10 Syrians living in Germany. Of the ten interviewees from Germany, seven were active students, one was a university graduate, and two others had a high school degree. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23 years old in the sample from Turkey and 21 to 28 years old in the sample from Germany. The focus group in Turkey was conducted as a face-to-face interview. All participants were studying at the same private university and living in Istanbul. The focus group interview in Germany was realized online, and participants were residing in different areas within Germany. Notably, both the survey data and the focus group data from Turkey were obtained from students that study at the same university in Istanbul. Hence, the socio-economic status of both the survey respondents and the Syrian focus group respondents from Turkey can be considered as medium to high. In the focus group sample from Turkey, the majority hold a student residence permit, while in the sample from Germany, the majority had gained asylum status. The table below illustrates the demographic background of the focus group interviewees.

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Turkey (n = 11)	Age	Gender	Year of entering Turkey	City of Current Residence	Residence Status
Participant 1	23	Male	2013	Istanbul	Under temporary protection
Participant 2	23	Male	2015	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 3	23	Female	2017	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 4	21	Male	2018	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 5	21	Female	2017	Istanbul	Turkish citizen
Participant 6	21	Male	2018	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 7	19	Male	2018	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 8	22	Female	2018	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 9	21	Female	2018	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 10	21	Male	2013	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Participant 11	21	Male	2017	Istanbul	Student residence permit
Germany (n = 10)	Age	Gender	Year of entering Germany	Federal State of Current Residence	Residence Status
Participant 1	24	Female	2015	Baden-Württemberg	Short-term residence permit
Participant 2	23	Female	2019	Berlin	Subsidiary protection
Participant 3	21	Female	2016	Lower Saxony	Asylum status
Participant 4	26	Female	2019	Lower Saxony	Student residence permit
Participant 5	28	Male	2019	Berlin	Ongoing asylum process
Participant 6	23	Male	2015	Berlin	Asylum status
Participant 7	23	Male	2018	Saxony	Subsidiary protection
Participant 8	27	Male	2014	Lower Saxony	No information
Participant 9	22	Female	2015	Berlin	Asylum status
Participant 10	24	Male	2015	Saxony	Asylum status

Impact of COVID-19. We asked the focus group respondents to report how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their lives. Both respondents from Turkey and Germany reported most changes in the social domain, stating that the pandemic and the restrictions resulted in social isolation and aggravated social interaction, particularly with members of the host society. Other domains that were affected by the pandemic were the students' university and work lives. The fact that lectures and courses were taking place online instead of face to face were reported as one of the most challenging changes, with

perceived negative effects not only on their learning process but also on their social lives, as social interactions both at the university and at work were at a minimum. Respondents also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic affected them personally, both in positive and negative ways. On the positive side the pandemic has made some respondents grow personally; some reported to have started their own online business or having discovered new interests and hobbies. On the negative side, respondents reported mental health issues due to COVID-19; they indicated that they became more fearful and anx-

ious when interacting with each other.

Finally, respondents also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has increased fear, anger, and intolerance among people in general, which has resulted in increased discrimination and racism. For instance, participant 6 from Turkey explained that “...when COVID hit, Turkey wasn’t good economically and I feel like everything exploded. So everyone just hated themselves and hated everyone; even Turkish people hated each other not only the Syrians. I feel like people stopped having any tolerance for anything, so I feel like things got worse; not only for Syrians, but for everyone.” Similarly, participant 3 from Germany expressed that COVID-19 increased racism both against people of Chinese descent and refugees, “especially, in the beginning, where lots of people would get away from Chinese people, I’ve seen videos on the internet like, ‘Yeah, you people are bringing us the virus, get away from here, go back to where you come from.’ And I also heard lately about this whole discussion on who is getting the vaccine and who not, and that some of those who are not getting the vaccine are refugees. I don’t know if the studies really say so, but it’s just another kind of racism.”

Discrimination and Prejudice. When respondents were asked to share their experiences of discrimination and prejudice, both respondents from Turkey and Germany predominantly described situations where they faced negative behavior or reactions in public, from people unknown to them. Notably, in Turkey the majority of these experiences were reported to be directed at Syrians only, and that being Syrian in Turkey is considered qualitatively worse than being a foreigner. This form of discrimination against Syrians is expressed, for instance, in the statement of participant 1: “One of the hardest things I faced here was finding an apartment. Especially as a Syrian. There is the thing of ‘we don’t rent apartments to *yabancis* [foreigners]’[...]. But it’s so obvious that because we are Syrians they don’t want to give us the place, and because they don’t want to be racist they just grab the word *yabanci* [foreigner].” Participant 6 confirmed this and added, “Once I called and they [the real estate agent] said ‘we don’t rent to *yabancis* [foreigners], and then my friend called the same guy—and my friend is from Ecuador—and he was like ‘*tamam*

[okay].’ So Ecuador is not *yabanci* [foreigner]?”

In Germany, respondents frequently reported to be subject to discrimination due to being or looking Muslim. For instance, participant 1 expressed, “I experienced racism and discrimination, but it was mainly in the period where I had the hijab on. I had it [the hijab] for a couple of years here when I was in Germany. And you just like feel it, or I felt it. Even like the way people looked at me was pretty different. And once I had this incident where someone, just out of nowhere, started, like, yelling at me, literally saying I should go back to my country, even though he didn’t know where I came from.” Likewise, participant 6 stated that “Well, I think if I was religious or if I looked more Arab, I would have faced more [racism]. The thing is, I don’t look Arab. I got called sometimes Spanish or Italian before people get to know me. So, that’s why I don’t face racism, I think.”

Another dominant way by which respondents both from Turkey and Germany expressed experiences of discrimination and prejudice is through stereotypical and false beliefs and generalizations about Syrians. Both respondents from Turkey and Germany reported being confronted with stereotypical beliefs about Syrians’ looks, their educational level, and their financial situation: all Syrians are expected to be dark-skinned and brunette, to have low levels of education, and to receive financial aid from the government. Arrogance and presumptuous comments from German and Turkish citizens were another means through which the focus group participants experienced discrimination and prejudice. Notably, in the sample from Turkey, this type of discrimination was particularly faced by male respondents, who were frequently harassed for having left and not fighting for their country. Respondents from Germany, on the other hand, often reported facing an attitude of superiority from Germans, implying that they know better than Syrians concerning what Syrians are supposed to do, and what is good for them and what not is. Finally, the focus group respondents both from Turkey and Germany reported facing discrimination through media and/or social media and in the form of bureaucratic obstacles mainly related to their residential status. An overview of the domains of discrimination together with illustrative examples from the interviewees is presented in the following table.

Negative Reactions in Public Life	TR	P3: "Because when they see there are foreigners, they immediately raise their mask, or they command you to put a mask on, or they stay away from you, and they think that you are a 'virusful' person."
	GER	P1: "I just remembered that it happened several times to me, when I was like walking on the street talking on the phone. It happened like three times, I guess, where, like, just random people on the street would tell me, like, randomly that 'Wir sind in Deutschland' [We are in Germany]. Yeah, that I should speak German. And it's really shitty when that happens, because it feels like, I don't know, it feels like <i>Beleidigung</i> [insult], you know. Like, this is none of your business. I'm in the street, I'm like a citizen here, I live here, I can speak whatever language I want. And, if I was speaking in English, no one would ever approach me and say, 'Oh, wir sind in Deutschland' [Oh, we are in Germany], you know."
Stereotypes and False Beliefs	TR	P6: "The problem now is that Turkish people's opinion about Syrians is still based on that [stereotypes]. So whenever they meet any [atypical] Syrian, they are like, 'Aren't Syrians dark-haired/skinned? How are you blonde and Syrian? How do you have money and you are Syrian?'[...] I think that is what creates the problem. Turkish people are not changing their mind about Syrians. First impression and that's it."
	GER	P3: "For example, you say like, 'I'm from Syria,' they already have the prejudice; you know, like, that you are a Muslim, that you don't drink alcohol, that you don't go out partying, that you don't have higher education, that blah, blah, blah. And, of course, I'm not generalizing here, but I feel like people do get really surprised when you tell them that you are in university."
Arrogance / Accusation	TR	P1: "They [the Turkish] are like, 'Everyone should go and fight for their country,' and mostly these people are, like, really patriotic, so they think, like, if something would happen to their country, it would be so easy to deal with it. Because they don't know that dealing with four others within your country is really hard. The situation in Syria is not two parties fighting. You don't just join the army and fight for your country. I don't want to fight for the army, because they are the ones who are killing you. It is okay to leave your country, it is not the worst thing to do, because you do it, and also everyone does it for better opportunities."
	GER	P4: "When I arrived to Europe, I was in France, and my mother was an asylum seeker in France, and she is a psychoanalyst. So, her surrounding, her friends, the people whom we were meeting were also psychoanalysts; so, people with higher education. And there was a French psychoanalyst and a German psychoanalyst, and they had this discussion right in front of us, where they were telling us where we should—me and my brother—seek asylum. The French one was telling us to go to Germany, and the German one was telling us, 'No, stay in France.' And they had some sort of argument about where we should go, as if they knew best, and as if we don't know anything, and as if it was their decision to make."
Media / Social Media	TR	P11: "I think the media, especially the Turkish media, focuses a lot on what bad things the Syrians do, and doesn't look where the good Syrians are or what they are doing on the good side. And now most people or most old people, they are the ones who watch the news and stuff, so most likely they are the ones affected. So they have more hate for the Syrians than the younger ones."
	GER	P1: "Since I took off my hijab, I've been experiencing racism merely on social media, for example, when I comment stuff or post something. A lot of people have no problem in, like, being purely racist in their comments, saying that we should be grateful to be here, we should be grateful that we have the things we have, and that we will never really belong to the German society, because... I don't know, because we just have like other <i>Weltanschauungen</i> [world views]."
Obstacles due to Status	TR	P1: "The worst thing for me was governmental issues, legal issues. Because I don't think anyone else has it, I have the 'under protection thing,' which is very degrading, very disrespectful. Because in COVID, even when they open the restrictions, we weren't able to travel. As someone with 'under protection,' you have to go to the Göç İdaresi [Migration Authority] and talk to them, and you have to get your own <i>izin belgesi</i> [permission] for travelling."
	GER	P10: "I just wanted to talk about the systematic racism, that all of us probably face with, like, IDs, with having an asylum status, and so on. If you want to, like, move from a city to another city, that's, like, really problematic. My family cannot leave the city where they live right now, and my mother lives there since 2018, my father since 2020. And I moved to study in 2018, and I was like for six months not able to register myself in the city where I studied. Because of, yeah, I don't know, systematic problems and bureaucracy. It's, like, hard to do anything, because we are refugees. And you can't, like, think about travelling outside of Germany, it's like a big problem."

Notes: TR = Turkey; GER = Germany; P = Participant.

Reactions to Discrimination. The focus group respondents also reported how they personally react to or cope with incidents of discrimination. Reactions in both groups were either of a more active or of more passive nature. On the active side, respondents both from Turkey and Germany

mentioned that they try to counter the negative stereotype against Syrians by serving as positive examples. Additionally, respondents from Turkey also mentioned that they actively try to learn the language, which substantially decreased their discrimination experiences, and that they confront

Turkish people with counter arguments that may challenge their presumptions. For instance, participant 6 from Turkey reportedly argues the following when he is accused of having not fought for his country: “I’m telling them that if I could fight for my country, maybe I would. But if I stayed in Syria, I would have a collection of rocks that I can throw at tanks and airplanes. So, it is not fighting, it’s just me sitting there and dying, it’s stupid. Even you wouldn’t do it.” In terms of passive strategies to cope with prejudice and discrimination, both respondents from Turkey and Germany reported that they hide their identity, especially through not speaking Arabic in public if not necessary, and that they ignore incidents of discrimination, because they just “don’t feel like arguing anymore” (participant 1, Turkey). Additionally, the respondents from Germany reported that they try to escape discrimination by leaving or avoiding situations that might get them into trouble by, for instance, seeking treatment from doctors who are Arabic or Turkish (but not German), or by moving to a town or school with a higher portion of immigrants, as expressed by participant 9: “So, it was like me and two Syrian friends with me in the school, and it was horrible. We had to switch after one year, we couldn’t really handle the situation there. The teachers, the students, they were all trying to give us the feeling that we were like aliens in a way, that we don’t belong to this school, that we have to do something other than *Abitur* [university entrance degree], because we are not good enough. So, the next step I made, I switched to a school in Kreuzberg, where so many *Ausländer* [immigrants] are in the school that we had just one German guy in the whole school.”

Even though the literature suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic can minimize tensions between groups,²⁵ and even though there is some evidence both from Turkey²⁶ and from Germany²⁷ that supports the ostensibly “appeasing” effect of the pandemic between majority group members and refugees, the experience reported by Syrians does not confirm this notion. In the focus group interviews it was repeatedly emphasized that the COVID-19 pandemic actually worsened the situation of Syrians. Participant 2 from Germany, for instance, noted, “Actually, having to, like, wear masks and the whole COVID thing, it made it harder for

people who look like refugees than, for example, for other people. It hasn’t made it easier at all, I don’t think there is a positive side to that [the pandemic], because people have been inside a whole bubble throughout the last two years, and it’s harder. People became more aggressive, more with COVID, more with having to be afraid of other people.” When being directly asked to comment on previously published survey results that seem to suggest that the tension between Turkish nationals and Syrians has decreased since the COVID-19 pandemic,²⁸ participant 1 from Turkey impressively commented, “Sometimes they [Turkish citizens] seem cute and happy and love us on paper, but it is always somehow different in the field [...] Because they [Turkish citizens] don’t feel what they are doing. You only feel what you receive. So, you wouldn’t feel and think that you are hurting someone. The aggressor doesn’t feel the aggression.”

Overall, the focus group results are indicative of COVID-19 having further exacerbated the negative sentiments toward Syrians both in Germany and Turkey. Notably, respondents from both groups consistently reported that discriminatory behavior and negative reactions were more likely to be experienced from older, more conservative, less educated, and less affluent people, and that within the university context people are generally more friendly and open. While this picture fits well with our German survey results showing that university-educated young adults viewed refugees rather positively, it is somewhat contradictory to our Turkish survey data—which was collected from the same university’s students as the focus group data—where the broad majority of university-educated young adults reported rather negative feelings toward refugees. This may suggest that even though university-educated Turkish people feel extremely negative toward refugees, these feelings would not be externalized and do not translate into overtly discriminatory behavior. Or, it may suggest that such a negative view of refugees among university-educated individuals just emerged recently, as a consequence of the extremely high levels of realistic threats that they perceived due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, the results—especially for Turkey—suggest that there is both a need for successful intervention and a chance that such intervention will result in positive change. Against

this backdrop, finding sustainable solutions for preventing the negative impact of COVID-19 on intergroup relations becomes even more urgent. The fact that even university-educated young adults from Turkey feel extremely negative toward refugees calls for timely action, as university students represent a key population for shaping and guiding the future of societies.

Recommendations for Change

The focus group respondents were also asked to share their recommendations for how to build a more peaceful and friendly climate for Syrians living in Turkey and Germany. The answers and suggestions largely converge with the literature and evidence from the field of prejudice intervention. The focus group respondents highlighted the crucial role of politics and politicians, (social) media organs, education and economic prosperity, togetherness, and psycho-social support services. The following box provides an overview about the factors that may promote positive societal change.

Politics. Over the last decade, right-wing populism has increased worldwide,²⁹ and anti-refugee policies have been on the agenda of political parties.³⁰ Such developments are likely to also affect public opinion on refugees and must be prevented. While data from longitudinal survey research suggests that attitudes toward migration and refugees have become more favorable during the last two decades within the member states of the European Union, including Germany,³¹ the data for Turkey supports an opposite trend: evidence from the Syrians Barometer in Turkey suggests that attitudes toward Syrians became more negative from 2017 to 2019.³² In Turkey, the issue of refugees is strongly politicized, and the debate over refugees has often been used as political leverage.³³ At the end of 2021, the mayor of the Turkish city of Bolu openly proposed charging foreigners ten times more for water bills than Turkish citizens.³⁴ Such open hate speech by political leaders targeting and scapegoating refugees both legitimizes and promotes the blatant expression of prejudice within society.³⁵ Evidence from the World Values Survey shows that in 2018, 3.3% of Germany's population under the age of 29 was unwilling to

Insights to Counter Prejudice

Some recommendations for community leaders and policy makers

- **Politics:** Political leaders and the political discourse need to stop driving citizens and groups toward discriminatory behaviors—refugees should no longer be politicized.
- **Media / Social Media:** Provocative content and false information about refugees must be prevented; positive examples and refugees' contribution to the country need to be stressed.
- **Education & Economic Prosperity:** Implement prejudice awareness programs in educational institutions; reduce perception of intergroup threat through better education and economic prospects.
- **Togetherness:** Emphasize common interests and common group belonging; create opportunities for positive intergroup contact; promote a bidirectional notion of acculturation.
- **Psycho-Social Support:** Create and extend existing initiatives and support services for refugees and their (mental) health.

have immigrants as their neighbors, while this proportion was 44.4% in Turkey.³⁶ Hence, in Turkey negative attitudes toward refugees are more openly expressed than in Germany, even by the younger generation. This may also be a factor explaining why even the university-educated young adults from Turkey did not hesitate to express their negative feelings toward refugees in our survey. Leaders must therefore be made aware of their responsibility in this regard and avoid using discriminatory language. As suggested by our participants, "Politicians should not use the Syrians, as they are doing now" (Participant 1, Turkey), and "refugees have to be more represented in politics, like, they have to talk about themselves instead of Germans talking about them and their problems" (Participant 7, Germany).

Media / Social Media. In late 2021, the “banana issue”—in which Syrians posted videos of themselves eating bananas on TikTok—went viral and resulted in increased tensions and hostility between the Turkish public and the community of Syrians living in Turkey. In response, Turkish citizens accused the Syrians of being disrespectful and insulting. But how was an act as simple as eating bananas able to upset people so much? The controversy began with a video in which Turkish citizens were complaining about Turkey’s aggravating economy and their experience of financial hardship, while Syrians ostensibly were able to buy kilos of the bananas—a fruit considered as a luxury due to its high price. In response to this video, several Syrians started a banana challenge on social media, depicting themselves with bananas, which were considered especially provocative by the Turkish public as many were not able to afford bananas. Eventually, the whole “banana issue” got out of hand and even resulted in several Syrians’ arrest and threat of deportation.³⁷ The “banana issue” illustrates the power of media to fuel intergroup hostility and how actually harmless acts such as eating bananas can be turned into a symbol of intergroup competition. Such escalation is even more likely to happen under circumstances that trigger high perceptions of threat, fear, and anxiety. In line with this reasoning, research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that exposure to news about COVID-19³⁸ and the use of social media in times of the pandemic³⁹ seem to trigger prejudice against out-groups.

Media and social media organs must become aware of their crucial role and not serve the public with (often fake) news and disinformation about refugees that fuel the perception of intergroup competition and threat. Showing accurate information about minority groups has been found to lead to more positive views and behaviors toward these groups.⁴⁰ Instead of promoting the notion of intergroup threat, the media must give more space to present positive news about refugees and keep the discussions about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic separate from debates over refugees. According to participant 8 in Germany, “What is being reported in the media is very influential. As long as the media continues to report about refugees in a negative light, what they have done, even though

it is only one single case, it [prejudice] will remain as it is. But if these reports become less, if less is talked about the negative examples, then maybe it will improve, and we will feel more comfortable. We will be able to convince the people that we are just normal people as anyone else.” Additionally, the contribution that migration and the essential work that migrants do for a nation’s economy, especially during the pandemic, should be stressed and presented in media⁴¹: “Media can contribute to show the good side of Syrians [...] because we are good people, and we try to learn and even contribute to this country. The media should also show the good side of people and Syrians and what they are contributing” (Participant 3, Turkey).

Education & Economic Prosperity. Education level plays a crucial role in the formation of prejudice and negative attitudes toward minorities. A huge responsibility lies on all educational institutions starting from kindergarten to raise awareness about racism, prejudice, and discrimination. Meta-analytic evidence based on 70 studies suggests that more negative attitudes toward refugees are generally documented among individuals that have lower levels of education.⁴² However, the multi-country research conducted by De Coninck et al. found that level of education plays out differently in Turkey as it has no association with attitudes toward refugees.⁴³ In Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden, and France, however, higher education was associated with more favorable attitudes toward refugees.⁴⁴ This indicates that higher levels of education may not inevitably serve as a protective factor against prejudice; yet, other country-level conditions may affect the association between education and attitudes toward refugees.

A migration-relevant factor in this regard may be the country’s economic situation, as worse economic conditions may trigger higher perceptions of competition between groups for scarce resources. Conflict and competition over scarce resources have repeatedly been found to foster perceptions of intergroup competition, threat, and hostility.⁴⁵ Economic instability, financial crises, and negative future prospects through harsh labor market conditions and low levels of education, together with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, bear high potential to ignite prejudice and negative feel-

ings toward stigmatized and scapegoated groups. Hence, the economic and future prospects need to be addressed and improved in order to prevent the perception of intergroup competition and threat.

As already stated, the meta-analysis by Cowling et al.⁴⁶ found that higher education and higher socioeconomic status have a protective effect against prejudice. Even though education was unrelated to attitudes toward refugees in Turkey in the research by De Connick et al., and even though feelings toward refugees were extremely negative in the present survey conducted with university-educated young adults in Turkey, the preventive role of education cannot be neglected. Instead, this result suggests that in contexts such as Turkey, higher education alone may not be sufficient to countering prejudice but must occur together with positive prospects for the future in order to become effective. This interpretation echoes the results from our survey showing that the perception of COVID-19 as a realistic threat is associated with more negative feelings about refugees, which has also been expressed by participant 6 from Turkey, who stated, “A lot of them [the Turkish people] are really friendly, to be honest. But mostly they are ... let’s say, economically a bit higher class. Because most of them don’t have the idea that we are stealing their money. It is also psychological, like when someone has financial problems, their tolerance for anyone else is less. Most of the more educated and a bit higher class people are really nice to us, actually.” It is thus of vital importance for policy makers to prevent youth unemployment and to implement professional training and empowerment programs both for the host population and refugee youth to keep at bay the perception of competing for scarce goods. This seems especially relevant for Turkey, where youth unemployment has reached critical dimensions.⁴⁷

Togetherness. As much as the COVID-19 pandemic is a challenge for societies, it is also a chance to reconstruct society to be more cohesive and inclusive.⁴⁸ If the pandemic can be used to emphasize common goals and interests, a new, superordinate, and inclusive identity can be developed,⁴⁹ preparing the ground for more friendly and peaceful intergroup relations. Positive intergroup contact represents one means for achieving such togeth-

erness.⁵⁰ Initiatives that bring members from different groups together and allow the experience of positive intergroup contact should be supported as they minimize fear and anxiety between groups and thus help to change the negative stereotypes against refugees and decrease prejudice. Results from our focus group interviews suggest that the university-educated young Syrians are already establishing superordinate and fused identities, as “a lot of Syrians at the moment love Turkey. They feel like it is their new home and they actually want to improve Turkey” (Participant 6, Turkey). Yet, togetherness also requires the host society to change their perspective and view on refugees, which is often neglected by policy makers. Participant 1 from Germany answered the question of whether she feels that she belongs in Germany: “I’ve been living here for seven years almost, and I do feel like I belong to Germany, but I don’t particularly belong to the German society. I have German friends and I get along here pretty well with them. I have developed German traits myself while living here, but I can’t really say that I feel like I’m German, you know. And maybe it’s because I came here a little bit late in my life, I came here when I was 18, and maybe it also lies in the fact that German people or German society is not that open.” Hence, the issue of integration must be reconsidered and viewed as a bidirectional rather than unidirectional process, because “It’s not just immigrants that need to be integrated to the society. I think the society needs to also adjust to our arriving. Because we didn’t just wake up one day and said, ‘Oh yes, I wanna move to Germany,’ and we didn’t force ourselves into Germany. Germany opened the borders, Germany wanted new young people in the society. So, also part of the integration has to do with German people, with French people, with Norwegian people. They also need to learn how to adapt to us being here if they want us to be here. We take lots of courses about integration, about German customs, traditions, while they don’t take a minute to try and learn about us, or at least how to pronounce our names. So, I think it [integration] goes both ways” (Participant 4, Germany).

Psycho-Social Support. An often-neglected aspect in the debate about refugees and their integration is their mental health and their need for psycho-social support. The research by Kurt et al.⁵¹

from Turkey found that Syrian refugees report high levels of depression and anxiety, and that the experience of resource loss and discrimination during the COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbates these symptoms. Hence, it seems that the stressors of the pandemic create an extra risk factor for the mental health of the already traumatized population of refugees. Therefore, psycho-social support services for refugees became more essential amid the COVID-19 pandemic. New initiatives that extend the already insufficient services in this domain must be supported and implemented immediately in order to establish sustainable and peaceful societies with healthy and resilient individuals. Participant 3 from Germany impressively touched on this issue, stating “I mean, I would find it way more beneficial if every refugee that comes gets like a couple of therapy sessions just to check on them. Not just directly send them to a German course. I mean, some things are sometimes better than other things. One of the reasons I think that there are kind of criminal refugees is that they have traumas, they are traumatized, they lived in a patriarchal society, they fled their country, came from Turkey to Germany or to Europe by road. And they had lots of difficulties. I mean it’s not normal, it doesn’t make sense that they are expected to behave normally, that they will come to Germany, learn the language in a couple of months, and just integrate into the society and live exactly like the Germans and behave like them. I think this is just way too many expectations; that just doesn’t make sense to me.”

Final Remarks

The COVID-19 pandemic has put societies across the world under a stress test, with serious effects also on intergroup relations. It is thus of vital importance to understand how a high-threat condition such as the pandemic will play out on prejudice and discrimination toward minority groups and to suggest evidence-based, policy-relevant, and state-of-the-art measures to combat this. Right now, we are standing at a crossroads: if we succeed in turning the challenges of the pandemic into a chance, we may come out from this pandemic as a more cohesive and inclusive society.

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Arzu Karakulak is a 2021/22 Mercator-IPC Fellow at IPC and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychology at Bahcesehir University.

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Istanbul Policy Center

Bankalar Caddesi Minerva Han No: 2 Kat: 4
34420 Karaköy-Istanbul
T +90 212 292 49 39
ipc@sabanciuniv.edu - ipc.sabanciuniv.edu

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ISTANBUL POLICY CENTER

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