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Social cohesion among Syrian and Turkish children, adolescents, and young adults in Turkey

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Abstract

Turkey has received a large influx of Syrian refugees since the start of Syrian civil war in 2011. Integration and social cohesion have become important issues for public policy in Turkey. We study social cohesion among young Turkish nationals and Syrian refugees. Our study sample comprises of adolescents and young adults (12–30 years), and children (6–11 years) who participated in events of the “Education Program for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities” (BILSY) program conducted by the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ). Social cohesion among adolescents and young adults is measured along three dimensions: sense of belonging, trust, and relational capacity. For children, we use behavioural games to measure two dimensions of social cohesion – altruism and trust. Our results show high social cohesion for both age groups, though lack of trust among Turkish nationals towards Syrian nationals is an area of concern. We also evaluate the impact of participation in BILSY program events using a randomised design and find that it had no impact on social cohesion. Our article adds to the limited literature on social cohesion among children and youths in countries affected by forced displacement.

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INTRODUCTION

By the end of 2021, the global refugee population reached ~89 million (UNHCR, 2022). In host countries which experience a sudden change in their demographic structure, the concept of social cohesion takes centre stage as a foundational element for societal functioning due to its fundamental connection with crucial dimensions of socio-economic well-being (Colletta & Cullen, 2000; Devereux et al., 2011; Ferroni et al., 2011; Hayami, 2009; King et al., 2010).

Durkheim (in Larsen, 2014) labelled nonmaterial similarities, such as shared beliefs, morality, and emotions, as collective conscience or social cohesion. It is a multidimensional concept which focuses on societal relationships, encompassing both horizontal connections between individuals and vertical interactions between individuals and institutions. Despite lacking a universal definition, the literature consistently identifies common dimensions for social cohesion, including social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, quality of life, and (in)equality (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017).

In Turkey over 3.6 million refugees from Syria have resettled and constitute 4.5% of the country's total population (DGMM, 2020; UNHCR, 2022) (Figure 1). The rapid demographic shift and the persistence of the crisis has led to tensions between newly arrived refugees and host communities, potentially deteriorating social cohesion (Erdoğan, 2017, 2020). Some Turkish nationals blame Syrians for price increases, crowding out employment opportunities and consuming public resources, and increased crime (İçduygu, 2015; International Crisis, 2018; Korkut, 2016), among other things. Erdoğan (2017, 2020) constructs a measure of social distance, an indicator of social acceptance, showing that the social distance perceived by Turkish nationals towards Syrians has increased over time. In contrast, Syrians report positive perceptions of Turkish nationals and society, with minimal perceived social distance (Erdoğan, 2017, 2020), implying asymmetry in perceptions of social cohesion in the two groups. Furthermore, Şimşek (2020) argues that Syrians in Turkey go through a "class-based integration", leaving marginalised classes even more excluded from social life in the country. These studies focus on adults, and perceptions among younger age groups may differ. Kuhnt et al. (2019) and Barron et al. (2021) studied youth and children in Jordan, respectively, and find higher social cohesion among these age groups.

The "contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954) suggests that increasing interactions can reduce stereotypes towards members of other social groups. Studies show that interaction between Syrians and Turkish nationals is very limited, despite living in close contact (Kınıklıoğlu, 2020) and Seyidov (2021) recommends that increasing contact between the two groups could be beneficial. Empirical literature has found support in favour of the contact hypothesis (Betts et al., 2022). Meta analyses by Paluck et al. (2019) and Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) also confirm that positive contact reduces prejudice towards out-groups in different settings. However, these studies primarily

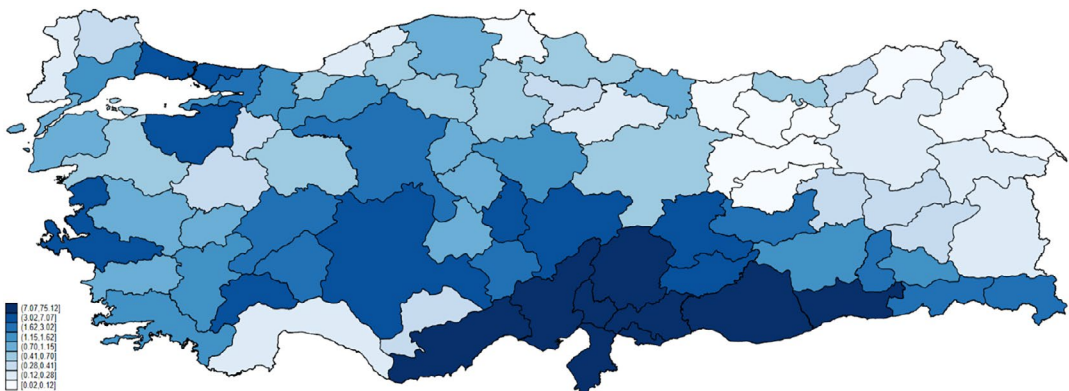


FIGURE 1 Share of Syrian refugees over total population by province (2021). Note: Drawn by author using Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management data (2021).

focus on high-income countries, and recent research in low- and middle-income countries affected by war and forced migration is not conclusive. Alan et al. (2020, 2021) find evidence supporting the contact hypothesis among elementary school children in Turkey. Boucher et al. (2020) find that among 5-years old Syrian and Turkish children exposure to different ethnicities increases interethnic friendship. Furthermore, improving language skills of Syrian children can mitigate ethnic bias in creating bonds. However, Zhou and Lyall (2021) show that prolonged interaction does not necessarily reduce stereotyping between internally displaced persons and host communities in Afghanistan. Mousa (2020) finds a positive effect of intergroup contact in Iraq. There was no significant impact on attitudes towards out-groups in other social contexts. In addition to inconclusive evidence, there are some conceptual criticisms of the “contact hypothesis” as well. It has been criticised for being a too mild solution to solve structural problems and victimisation of marginalised communities (Erasmus, 2010). In particular, prejudice is not an “individual pathology” but a social phenomenon deriving from an unbalanced power structure (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Denis, 2015; Erasmus, 2010). Prejudice needs to be understood as the result of unequal societal structures that relegate some groups to the margins. However, it also true that processes of marginalisation on the basis of ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation are first and foremost processes of dehumanisation. Thus, positive interaction can provide a tool to humanise out-groups. The purpose of this study is not to suggest a unique solution to prejudice and victimisation, but rather to test whether programs promoting positive interaction can constitute an effective tool that can be used to create cohesive societies.

In this study, we examine differences in patterns of social cohesion among young Turkish nationals and Syrian refugees, and assess the impact of the BILSY program (Education Program for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities) on social cohesion among children (aged 6–11 years) and youths (aged 12–30 years). This age group represents over 60% of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey (UNHCR, 2019) and may settle permanently in Turkey. Therefore, understanding patterns of social cohesion for this group is particularly important. For adolescents and young adults, we evaluate three dimensions of social cohesion – sense of belonging, trust, and relational capacity – through questionnaire-based interviews. In the case of children, we employ behavioural games to estimate their levels of altruism and trust. Data covering 685 children and 1305 adolescents and young adults was collected between November 2018 and January 2019 in Ankara, Istanbul, and bordering cities with significant refugee populations. Respondents were randomly interviewed before (control group) or after (treatment group) participating in events of the BILSY program. We use data from the control group to understand patterns of social cohesion in Turkey, and data from both groups to evaluate the impact of the BILSY program. Our research contributes to the limited evidence on social cohesion among children, adolescents and young adults in war-affected communities, unlike existing studies that often concentrate on adults (Erdoğan, 2017, 2020; International Crisis, 2018; WFP, 2018). Moreover, our study stands out by considering the perceptions of both Turkish nationals and Syrian refugees, adding valuable insights to the literature. Additionally, while some studies focus on refugee children's inclusion in Turkey (Alan et al., 2020, 2021; Boucher et al., 2020), our research diverges by examining the effectiveness of an intervention outside school, in an informal environment.

SAMPLING DESIGN AND VARIABLES

Sampling design

Data for our study was collected through a primary survey conducted between November 2018 and January 2019, funded by GIZ. The data collection was carried out in Ankara, Istanbul and the border cities of Mardin, Gaziantep, Hatay and Şanlıurfa, where a large share of the refugee population resides.

Between 2016 and 2019, the GIZ implemented the BILSY program to enhance access to formal and informal education for both Syrian refugees and Turkish hosts, with the goal of fostering social cohesion within and between communities. The program comprised two components: formal and non-formal education. Our focus is on

the latter. For this component, local and international social workers trained volunteers, comprising both Turkish and Syrian nationals. These volunteers were encouraged to organise various activities referred to as “events”, including sports, education, and recreational activities. According to GIZ program documents, the recruitment process for children, adolescents, and young adults was contingent upon the specific community and the nature of the event. For initiatives aimed at adolescents and young adults, volunteers primarily utilised social media as a means to publicise events. Conversely, promotion of events involving children relied more on word of mouth, and in the case of volunteers serving as teachers, it was carried out through schools.

We used a cluster randomised sampling design at the event level to select our study sample. First, for each age group, we collected information on all events taking place within the sampling area during our data collection period and the number of participants in each event. From the list of all events, we randomly selected those to include in our survey using probability proportional to size (PPS) method. This means that events with a higher number of participants had a higher probability of being selected. We randomly selected 60 events for adolescents and young adults, and 27 for children. Then, we randomly assigned half of these selected events to the control and the rest to the treatment group. The control group was surveyed before the start of the event and the treatment group at the end of the event, to assess the immediate impact of participating in events of the BILSY program on social cohesion. Finally, we used PPS to determine the number of participants to be selected from each event and each participant was selected randomly from the list of all participants within a given event. At the individual level, we assigned a different probability of being selected to Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals for both age groups, in order to reflect the actual composition of the program participants. Overall, the sample included 1305 adolescents and young adults and 685 children from both treatment and control group. Adolescents and young adults responded to a questionnaire while children participated in behavioural games (details in following subsections). Since the primary objective of this study is to examine social cohesion among Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals, we only use data from the control group in Sections Social Cohesion among adolescents and young adults, Social cohesion among children to describe levels [Measuring social cohesion – Adolescents and young adults](#), [Measuring social cohesion – Children](#), [Social cohesion among adolescents and young adults](#), [Sense of belonging](#), [Trust](#), [Relational capacity](#), [Social cohesion among children](#) to describe levels of social cohesion, and the full data to evaluate the impact of participating in BILSY program events on social cohesion in Section [Immediate impacts of the Bilsy program](#). The analysis in Sections Social Cohesion among adolescents and young adults, Social cohesion among children is based on a sample [Measuring social cohesion – Adolescents and young adults](#), [Measuring social cohesion – Children](#), [Social cohesion among adolescents and young adults](#), [Sense of belonging](#), [Trust](#), [Relational capacity](#), [Social cohesion among children](#) is based on a sample of 666 adolescents and young adults (12–30 years) and 350 children (6–11 years).

Measuring social cohesion – Adolescents and young adults

Despite lacking a universal definition, the literature consistently identifies common dimensions for social cohesion, including social relations, identification, orientation towards the common good, shared values, quality of life, and (in)equality (Schiefer & Van der Noll, 2017).

Social cohesion implies the inclusion of all the members of a society and alludes to the forces that keep an individual within their group (Friedkin, 2004). Some authors have limited the concept to a few dimensions. For instance, Ferroni et al. (2008) defines two aspects of social cohesion: capacity to cooperate and trust in fellow citizens, institutions, and societal rules. Other authors opt to include more dimensions to the concept. In fact, according to Berger-Schmitt (2002), the core elements of this concept encompass the robustness of interpersonal connections, feeling of belonging to a shared community, trust among members of the group, parity in opportunity, the degree of disparities, social divisions, and exclusion within a society.

We include both in-group and out-group perceptions in our measure of social cohesion for adolescents and young adults. Similar to Kuhnt et al. (2019), we focus on the dimensions of sense of belonging and trust. Additionally adapting from WFP (2018), we add a third dimension to the measure of social cohesion – relational capacity. Thus, we focus on the social relation and identification dimension identified by Schiefer & Van der Noll (2017).

The first dimension of *sense of belonging* focuses on the relationship with individuals or groups that have a similar trait/identity marker as the respondent. Respondents were asked to report their perception of sense of belonging with 10 different groups (listed in Table 2).

The second dimension relates to *trust*. Respondents reported their perception of trust towards seven groups (listed in Table 2). Trust towards people of same nationality as the respondent measures perception towards in-group. Trust towards people of different nationality to the respondent measures out-group perception but only between Syrian and Turkish nationals. Trust towards all other nationalities is covered in the last group – trust towards a third (non-Syrian non-Turkish) nationality (out-group).

The third dimension, *relational capacity*, relates to social interactions which can contribute substantially to social cohesion. This dimension can be further divided into two subcategories. The first subcategory is *willingness to make friends*. Respondents were asked about their willingness to make friends with three groups (listed in Table 2). The second subcategory refers to *interaction* and sharing space. In this subcategory, respondents were asked about their perception of working together with others (listed in Table 2). This subcategory considers overall perceptions towards other members of the society and does not focus on a particular group identity (that is, no nationality was specified).

Responses for all groups for all three dimensions were recorded on a 4-point hedonic scale – strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. We also re-classified the 4-point hedonic scale in two categories – agree (combining strongly agree and agree) and disagree (combining strongly disagree and disagree) for each group/concept of the three dimensions of social cohesion, to create a dichotomous variable.

This questionnaire was administered to adolescents and young adults. Though the developmental processes and individual experiences vary for these two groups, we decided to use a common set of questions for both groups as this allows for comparability and consistency in our analysis. It is not uncommon among other work in developmental psychology to merge diverse age ranges for research purposes (Grunewald et al., 2022; von Soest et al., 2020). To ensure that we are able to balance age-related nuances while maintaining a level of generalizability, we carefully created context specific survey questions which capture various dimensions of social cohesion relevant to both age groups by collaborating with Turkish and Syrian professionals, including educators from the BILSY program.

Measuring social cohesion – Children

Questions using proxies of social cohesion such as those used for adolescents and young adults may be too abstract for children. Therefore, we use behavioural games to estimate social cohesion in this age group. Adapting from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011), we employ *altruism* and *trust* as meaningful dimensions for our analysis, which were elicited via the dictator game and the trust game, respectively. These games are widely used in the literature to assess altruism and trust for both adults and minors (Benenson et al., 2007; Chen et al., 2013; van den Bos et al., 2012). Many studies (Alan et al., 2020; Gilligan et al., 2014; Osborne et al., 2018) have used them in contexts of forced migration, war, and post conflict settings to measure variations in social cohesion.

Each child played only one of the two games. Both games were played in two rounds – once with a Turkish partner and once with a Syrian partner – in random order. Therefore, each child was paired with a randomly selected Turkish and Syrian child. Participating children had to make decisions on the allocation of tokens between themselves and their partner in both games. In both games, the participant only knew the nationality of their

partner and no other characteristics. They were also informed that their identity was kept anonymous from their partner. At the end of the experiment, participants exchanged the tokens they won for stickers. After the game, enumerators distributed stickers to all children, even if they did not engage in the game.

Dictator game

Each participant (dictator) was given an endowment of four tokens before the start of each round which they had to allocate between themselves and their partner (receiver). Children could donate all, some or none of their tokens. After the dictators made their choice, they put their donation in an envelope that the enumerators delivered to the receivers.

Using the information on tokens donated, and nationality of the dictator and the receiver, we construct two new variables – donations made by the dictator to the receiver of same nationality (in-group) and donations made by the dictator to the receiver of different nationality (out-group). Both variables are count variables that take integer values from 0 to 4.

Trust game

We designed a simplified version of the trust game used by van den Bos et al. (2012) due to time and organisational constraints. Participating children (trustor) chose between the following two options – keeping two tokens for themselves and allocating no tokens to their partner (trustee) or to allocate four tokens to the trustee and leave the allocation decision to the trustee. If a trustor chose the second option, they were additionally asked how many tokens they expected the trustee would allocate to them, referred to as “expected trustee's transfer”. Once the game was over, the interviewers delivered to each child the tokens they chose.

We use the responses from this game to construct two sets of variables. The trustor's choice was coded as a binary variable – taking value 0 if the child chose not to trust the trustee (the first option) and taking value 1 if the child chose to trust the trustee (the second option). Similar to the dictator game, we further construct two binary variables – trust towards the trustee of same nationality (in-group) and trust towards the trustee of different nationality (out-group). A second set of variables is based on the number of tokens the trustor expected the trustee to allocate back to them. These variables were constructed only for those trustors who selected option 2. Again, we construct two new variables – expected trustee's transfer from trustee of same nationality and of different nationality. These variables take integer values from 0 to 4 depending on how many tokens the trustors thought they would receive back from the trustee.

SOCIAL COHESION AMONG ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

The average age of respondents in the adolescent and young adult sample is 17 years (Table 1). The percentage of females among the Syrian sample is 40 per cent, which is similar to the estimated share of females among Syrian refugees in Turkey (Cagaptay & Yalkin, 2018). About 56 per cent of respondents are Turkish nationals and 44 per cent are Syrian refugees. On average, Syrian refugees in our sample had been in Turkey for almost 5 years. Most of our sample is from urban areas, as almost all refugees are now located in urban areas. Syrians are more likely to belong to minority groups in their neighbourhood as compared with Turkish nationals. 74% of the sampled individuals were in school, while 26% had finished, stopped, or never went to school. A significantly higher percentage of Turkish nationals attended school than Syrian refugees, reflecting issues in integration of Syrian children into the Turkish education system. Years of schooling is also significantly higher among Turkish nationals. About 90 per

TABLE 1 Summary statistics for adolescents and young adults (aged 12–30 years).

Variables	Full sample (1)	Syrian refugee (2)	Turkish national (3)	Difference (2)–(3) (4)
Age (years)	17.5 (0.2)	17.3 (0.3)	17.6 (0.3)	–0.3 (0.04)
Female (%)	46.5 (1.9)	40.3 (2.9)	51.3 (2.6)	–11.0 (3.9)***
Attending school				
Currently, yes (%)	73.7 (1.7)	59.7 (2.9)	84.6 (1.9)	–24.9 (3.4)***
Went in past (%)	23.1 (1.6)	34.8 (2.8)	14.1 (1.8)	20.7 (3.3)***
Never went (%)	3.2 (0.7)	5.5 (1.3)	1.3 (0.6)	4.2 (1.5)***
Schooling (years)	9.1 (0.2)	7.7 (0.3)	10.2 (0.2)	–2.4 (0.4)***
Religion (%)				
Muslim Sunni	64.6 (1.8)	67.2 (2.8)	62.5 (2.5)	4.7 (3.7)
Muslim Alevi	10.4 (1.2)	6.2 (1.4)	13.6 (1.8)	–7.4 (2.3)***
Working (%)	18.8 (1.5)	19.3 (2.3)	18.3 (2.0)	1.0 (3.1)
Place of residence (%)				
Urban areas	87.8 (1.3)	79.7 (2.4)	94.1 (1.2)	–14.5 (2.7)***
Rural areas	8.0 (1.0)	13.4 (2.0)	3.7 (1.0)	9.7 (2.2)***
Refugee Camp	1.4 (0.4)	3.1 (1.0)		
Others	2.9 (0.6)	3.8 (1.1)	2.1 (0.7)	1.7 (1.3)
Time since in Turkey (months)		56.1 (1.5)		
Have work permit (%)		5.5 (1.3)		
Participation in vocational training (%)	33.2 (1.8)	26.9 (2.6)	38.0 (2.5)	– 11.1 (3.6)
Living condition (%)				
Better than other	45.3 (1.9)	35.2 (2.8)	53.2 (2.6)	–18.0 (3.8) ***
Same as others	43.4 (1.9)	44.1 (2.9)	42.8 (2.6)	1.3 (3.9)
Worse than others	11.3 (1.2)	20.7 (2.4)	4.0 (1.0)	16.7 (2.6) ***
Minority group in neighbourhood ^a (%)				
Yes	29.3 (1.8)	41.4 (2.9)	20.0 (2.1)	21.4 (3.6)***
No	57.5 (1.9)	37.9 (2.8)	72.6 (2.3)	–34.7 (3.7)***
Speak Turkish	95.3 (0.8)	89.7 (1.8)	99.7 (0.3)	–10.1 (1.8) ***
Speak Arabic	48.5 (1.9)	97.9 (0.8)	10.4 (1.6)	87.6 (1.8) ***
Observations (#)	666	290	376	

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Analysis for control group only.

^aThe rest answered don't know.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

cent of Syrian refugees in our sample could speak at least some Turkish. Language is considered a barrier to integration of Syrian nationals in Turkish society (Batalla & Tolay, 2018), but it seems this is less relevant in our sample.

Below we report the responses of the study participants for the three dimensions of social cohesion. We present results for the constructed dichotomous variable (described in [Measuring social cohesion – adolescents and young adults](#)) in Table 2. Responses by nationality are presented in columns 2 and 3, and difference between the two is presented in the last column. Responses to a four-point hedonic scale are presented in [Figures S1–S4](#).

TABLE 2 Perceptions of adolescents and young adults (aged 12–30 years) on three dimensions of social cohesion, by nationality.

	Full sample	Syrian refugee	Turkish national	Difference (2)–(3)
Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Sense of belongingness				
With family	0.96 (0.01)	0.95 (0.01)	0.97 (0.01)	–0.02 (0.02)
With people of				
Same age	0.87 (0.01)	0.86 (0.02)	0.88 (0.02)	–0.02 (0.03)
Religion	0.84 (0.01)	0.86 (0.02)	0.83 (0.02)	0.03 (0.03)
Gender	0.83 (0.01)	0.82 (0.02)	0.83 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
Similar interest	0.87 (0.01)	0.87 (0.02)	0.88 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.03)
Same neighbourhood	0.74 (0.02)	0.74 (0.03)	0.74 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
Same country of origin	0.80 (0.02)	0.82 (0.02)	0.78 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Same language	0.83 (0.01)	0.83 (0.02)	0.83 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
Living in same city	0.77 (0.02)	0.78 (0.02)	0.77 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
Living in Turkey	0.81 (0.02)	0.81 (0.02)	0.81 (0.02)	0.00 (0.03)
Trust towards				
Family	0.83 (0.01)	0.84 (0.02)	0.82 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)
Friends	0.88 (0.01)	0.88 (0.02)	0.89 (0.02)	–0.01 (0.02)
Strangers	0.49 (0.02)	0.43 (0.03)	0.54 (0.03)	–0.11 (0.04)***
Neighbours	0.70 (0.02)	0.63 (0.03)	0.75 (0.02)	–0.12 (0.04)***
People of same nationality ^a	0.77 (0.02)	0.75 (0.03)	0.79 (0.02)	–0.04 (0.03)
People of different nationality ^a	0.70 (0.02)	0.72 (0.03)	0.68 (0.02)	0.05 (0.03)
Any third (non-Syrian non-Turkish) nationality	0.61 (0.02)	0.54 (0.03)	0.67 (0.02)	–0.13 (0.04)***
Relational capability				
Making friends with people of				
Same nationality ^a	0.92 (0.01)	0.90 (0.02)	0.93 (0.01)	–0.03 (0.02)
Different nationality ^a	0.87 (0.01)	0.89 (0.02)	0.86 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Any third (non-Syrian non-Turkish) nationality	0.81 (0.02)	0.75 (0.03)	0.86 (0.02)	–0.11 (0.03)***
Interaction				
Working together with others	0.90 (0.01)	0.92 (0.02)	0.88 (0.02)	0.04 (0.02)*
Learning together with others	0.86 (0.01)	0.92 (0.02)	0.81 (0.02)	0.11 (0.02)***
Willing to help others	0.84 (0.01)	0.86 (0.02)	0.82 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Solving problems with others	0.89 (0.01)	0.92 (0.02)	0.87 (0.02)	0.05 (0.02)**
Observations (#)	666	290	376	

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Analysis for control group only. The respondents reported their perceptions using a 4-point hedonic scale. The responses were converted to binary variables where value 1 implies positive perception (higher social cohesion) and 0 implies negative perception (lower social cohesion). The estimates in the table are based on the binary variables.

^aSame nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Sense of belonging

The majority of the respondents (over 95%), irrespective of the nationality, feel a strong sense of belonging with their families (Table 2, column 1). However, this sense of belonging decreases slightly as we move away from direct personal interactions to community-based interactions. 82%–87% of the respondents feel a sense of belonging to people with same attributes, such as age, gender, religion, country of origin, speaking the same language and having the same interests. About three-quarters of our sample report having a sense of belonging with the people in the same neighbourhood and same city. There is no statistically significant difference between the sense of belonging reported by Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals (Table 2, column 4 and Figure S1).¹ While a high sense of belonging is considered a direct measure of social cohesion, these groups do not explicitly capture perceptions towards out-groups, which are equally important for cohesion in a diverse society.

We also asked respondents to rank the three groups they feel the strongest sense of belonging to. While family is the first response for most of the sample, there are differences in what ranks second. People with same interests rank second for Turkish nationals, while Syrian refugees rank people of same religion in second place.

We also checked whether there is any statistically significant difference in the sense of belonging by gender, as women bear a higher burden of war and displacement (Asaf, 2017). We find that, compared with Syrian men, Syrian women are significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging with their family. Also, in comparison to Turkish men, Turkish women are significantly less likely to feel a sense of belonging towards their neighbours.

Trust

Next, we consider the *trust* dimension (Table 2 and Figure S2). As with *sense of belonging*, we begin by enquiring about trust towards family members, gradually broadening the spectrum to local community, country and rest of the world. Three variables – trusting people of the same nationality, trusting people of different nationality and trusting people of any third nationality – are particularly interesting here. These help us to understand out-group perceptions between Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals which are not captured in the *sense of belonging* dimension.

A high percentage of respondents report trust towards friends (about 87%) and family (about 83%); (Table 2, column 1). Respondents are significantly more likely to trust people of the same nationality in comparison to people of a different nationality.² Only 50% of our sample report that they trust strangers.

There are, however, significant differences between perceptions of Turkish nationals and Syrian refugees towards some groups (Table 2 and Figure S2). The gap between trusting people of same and different nationality is higher for Turkish nationals compared with Syrian refugees. This supports the evidence found in other studies for adults (Erdoğan, 2020) that out-group perceptions are poorer among Turkish nationals, compared with Syrian refugees. Also, compared with Turkish nationals, Syrian refugees are less likely to trust strangers, neighbours, and people of a third, non-Syrian non-Turkish, nationality.

As above, we examine if there is a statistically significant difference between the perceptions of females and males. We find that compared with males, females are significantly less trusting, especially towards these groups – family, neighbours, and people of different nationality. We also find that compared with Turkish males, Turkish females are significantly less likely to trust family and neighbours, and in comparison to their male counterparts, Syrian females are significantly less likely to trust strangers and Turkish nationals.

Relational capacity

Ninety two per cent of respondents report that they are willing to make friends with people of the same nationality and 87% are willing to make friends with people of different nationalities (Table 2 and Figure S3). There is no statistical difference between Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals for both groups. However, Turkish nationals are significantly less willing to make friends with Syrians than they are to make friends with other Turkish nationals (Table 2, column 3). Syrian refugees report no statistically significant difference between willingness to make friends with other Syrians or Turkish nationals. Gender differences are only significant for Syrian women; Syrian women are less willing to make friends with other Syrian women, compared with the willingness of Syrian men to make friends with other Syrian men.

The last panel of Table 2 and Figure S4 presents results for the second subcategory of relational capacity – interaction. More than 80% of the respondents report willingness to interact with others on all four aspects considered in the study (Table 2, column 1). This could be driven by the nature of the program: people more willing to interact with others are probably more likely to participate in the BILSY program. But there are significant differences by nationality. Syrians show a higher willingness to interact with others for three of the four aspects of this subcategory. They are more open and receptive to integration with Turkish society. This has been reported by Erdoğan (2017) as well. Similar to results from other studies (WFP, 2018), as compared with males, females in our sample are significantly more willing to interact with others.

SOCIAL COHESION AMONG CHILDREN

Our sample comprises 350 children; 182 took part in a dictator game, and 168 in a trust game (Table 3). The mean age of our sample is 9 years, and the sample is evenly distributed between males and females. The distribution by nationality in this age group is similar to what we observe for adolescents and young adults.

Dictator game

On average, dictators gave 2.7 tokens out of 4 to receivers of the same nationality and 2.2 token to receivers of a different nationality (Table 4); the difference between the two is statistically significant. When comparing by nationality of the dictator, we find no statistically significant difference in the average number of tokens given to the receiver, irrespective of the nationality of the receiver. In both cases, dictators donated more than 50 per cent of the endowment, which reflects high levels of altruism.

TABLE 3 Summary statistics for children (aged 6–11 years), by type of game.

Variables	Full sample (1)	Dictator game (2)	Trust game (3)
Age (years)	9.1 (0.1)	9.5 (0.1)	8.6 (0.1)
Female (%)	46.3 (2.7)	46.7 (3.7)	45.8 (3.9)
Syrian	45.1 (2.7)	44.0 (3.7)	46.4 (3.9)
Speak Arabic (%)	48.6 (2.7)	47.2 (3.7)	50.0 (3.9)
Speak Turkish (%)	90.0 (1.6)	92.3 (2.0)	87.5 (2.6)
Observations (#)	350	182	168

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Analysis for control group only.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

TABLE 4 Outcome of dictator game and trust game played with children (aged 6–11 years), by nationality of the participant.

	Nationality of player			
	Turkish	Syrian	Turkish	Syrian
	Same nationality partner		Different nationality partner	
Dictator game				
Number of tokens donated	2.8 (0.1)	2.7 (0.1)	2.2 (0.1)	2.2 (0.1)
Trust game				
Percentage choosing to trust the trustee	77.7 (0.5)	65.4 (5.4)	67.8 (4.9)	80.8 (0.5)
Expected trustee's transfer	3.1 (0.1)	2.5 (0.2)	2.7 (0.2)	2.3 (0.1)

Note: Standard errors in parenthesis. Analysis for control group only. Same nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups. Sample size is 182 for dictator game and 168 for trust game.

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Figure 2: Number of tokens donated in the Dictator Game

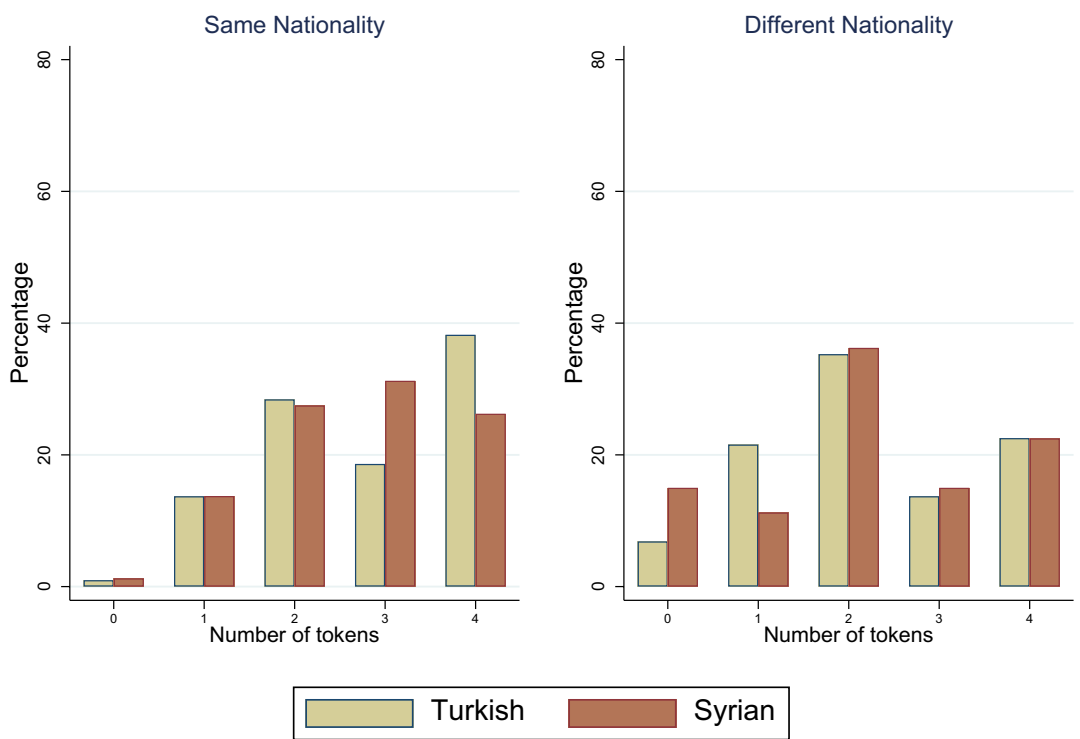


FIGURE 2 Number of tokens donated by the dictator in the dictator game played by children (aged 6–11 years). *Note:* Same nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups.

The distribution of the number of tokens donated according to the nationality of the dictator is presented in [Figure 2](#). We find some differences by nationality of the dictator here. When the receiver was of the same nationality, we find no statistically significant difference at the lower end of the distribution: about 1 per cent of

Figure 3: Choice made in the Trust Game

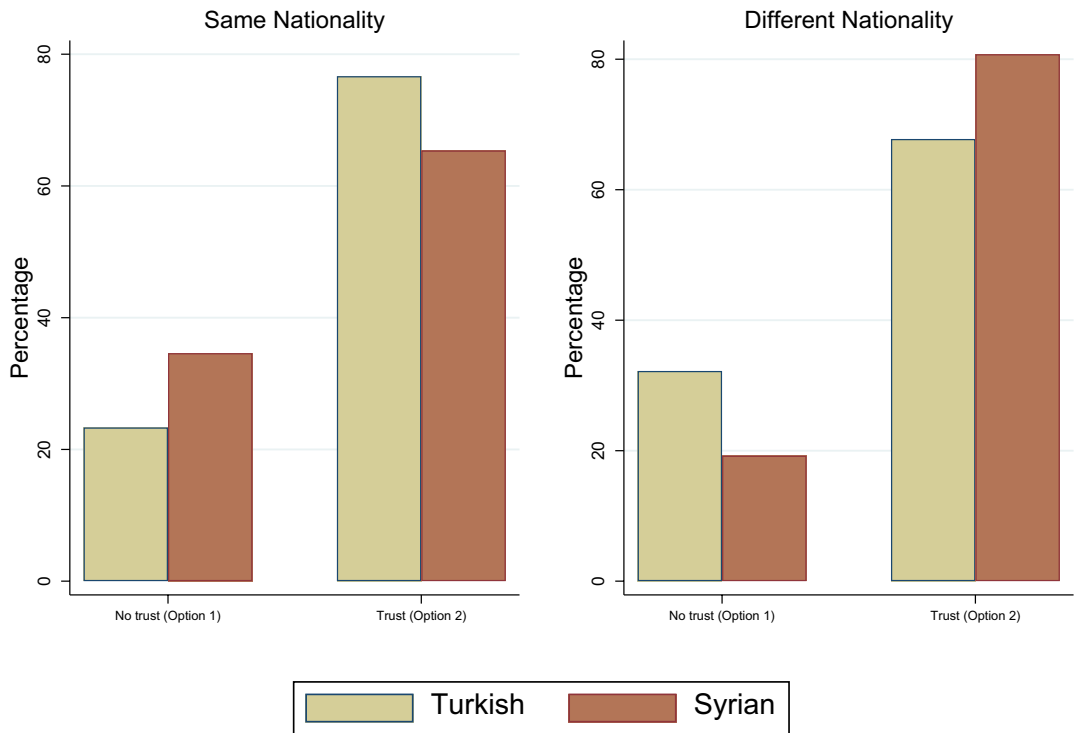


FIGURE 3 Choice made by trustor in the trust game played by children (aged 6–11 years). *Note:* Trustor was presented with two choices, to trust or not trust the trustee. Same nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups.

dictators of both nationalities gave nothing to a receiver of same nationality. But at the upper end of the distribution, 38 per cent of Turkish and 26 per cent of Syrian dictators gave all 4 tokens when the receiver was of same nationality. The difference between Turkish and Syrian dictators is statistically significant. Compared with Syrian dictators, Turkish dictators were more likely to donate all 4 tokens to a receiver of same nationality.

When the receiver is of different nationality, there is a significant difference in the behaviour of the dictators at the lower end of the distribution. About 7 per cent of Turkish and 15 per cent of Syrian dictators gave nothing when the receiver was of different nationality, that is, compared with Turkish dictators, Syrian dictators were more likely to not donate anything to a receiver of a different nationality. There was no such difference at the upper end of the distribution: 23 per cent of dictators of both nationalities gave all 4 tokens when the receiver was of different nationality. When the receiver was of different nationality, dictators from both nationalities were more likely to split the tokens evenly.

Trust game

Figure 3 shows the choices made by children in the trust game. Choosing option 1 corresponds to the trustor not trusting the trustee and option 2 to trustor trusting the trustee. There is no statistically significant difference between trustors of both nationalities when it comes to trusting a trustee of same nationality. However, compared with Syrian trustors, a Turkish trustor was less likely to trust a trustee of a different nationality. This result for Turkish children is similar to what we observed for other age groups.

Figure 4: Expected trustee's transfer from the Trust Game

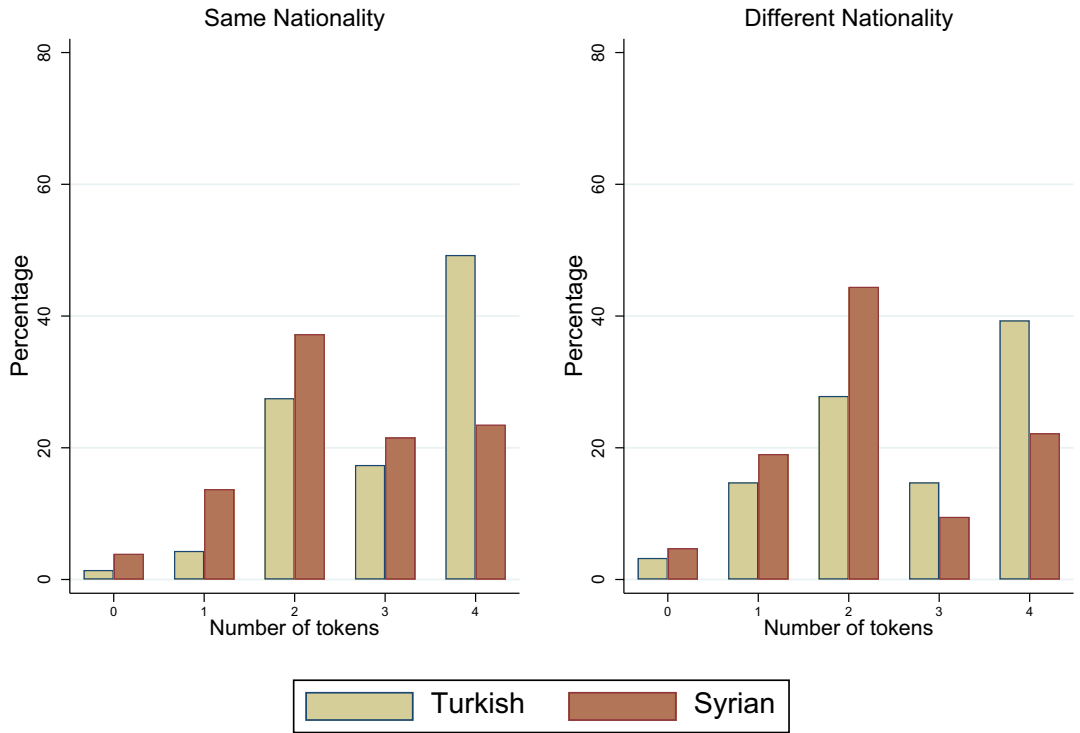


FIGURE 4 Expected trustee's transfer by the trustor in the trust game played by children (aged 6–11 years). *Note:* Trustors were asked to guess how many tokens they expect the trustee to allocate back to them. Same nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups.

Next, we discuss the expected trustee's transfer. [Table 4](#) presents that on average, trustors of both nationalities expected more than an equitable transfer from their trustees. As with dictator games, there is no statistically significant difference between behaviour of Turkish or Syrian trustors. Additionally, both Syrian and Turkish trustors expected a higher allocation from a trustee of the same nationality, compared with a trustee of different nationality. The percentage of trustors who expected zero transfers is very low ([Figure 4](#)).

IMMEDIATE IMPACTS OF THE BILSY PROGRAM

To evaluate the BILSY program, we leverage the unique structure of the program to simulate a randomised controlled trial (RCT). Since all study participants eventually received the treatment, we employed random assignment of the time of interview (at the event level) to identify the treatment effect. Thus, participants interviewed post-intervention form the treatment group, while those interviewed pre-intervention are considered as control group. The program effect can be identified with such methodology if the treatment assignment between the two groups is completely random.

Since we could not collect data before and after treatment participation, we cannot establish that there is pre-intervention balance between the treatment and control groups. However, we use key variables unaffected by the program to show balance between the two groups. [Tables S1–S3](#) demonstrate no statistically significant differences between the two groups across all observables for both age groups, with the exception of “years of

TABLE 5 Immediate impact of the BILSY program on adolescents and young adults (aged 12–30 years) – coefficients from LPM model.

Variables	Treatment	Syrian	Treatment*Syrian
Sense of belongingness			
With family	−0.03 (0.19)	−0.02 (0.21)	0.01 (0.73)
With people of			
Same age	0.01 (0.75)	−0.03 (0.39)	−0.01 (0.83)
Religion	0.00 (0.94)	0.02 (0.48)	0.02 (0.70)
Gender	−0.02 (0.65)	−0.01 (0.87)	0.04 (0.45)
Similar interest	0.02 (0.58)	−0.01 (0.84)	0.00 (0.97)
Same neighbourhood	0.05 (0.29)	0.01 (0.80)	0.01 (0.93)
Same country of origin	0.06 (0.14)	0.04 (0.29)	0.00 (0.95)
Same language	0.00 (0.98)	0.00 (0.93)	0.02 (0.70)
Living in same city	0.03 (0.45)	0.02 (0.64)	0.01 (0.88)
Living in Turkey	0.01 (0.88)	0.00 (0.95)	0.02 (0.79)
Trust towards			
Family	−0.01 (0.87)	0.01 (0.61)	0.00 (0.93)
Friends	−0.04 (0.24)	−0.01 (0.71)	0.05 (0.26)
Strangers	0.03 (0.59)	−0.07 (0.31)	0.11 (0.24)
Neighbours	0.01 (0.82)	−0.10 (0.07)*	0.11 (0.15)
People of same nationality ^a	0.00 (0.92)	−0.05 (0.32)	0.07 (0.24)
People of different nationality ^a	0.04 (0.55)	0.06 (0.30)	0.04 (0.60)
Any third (non-Syrian non-Turkish) nationality	0.06 (0.22)	−0.07 (0.13)	0.05 (0.48)
Relational capability			
Making friends with people of			
Same nationality ^c	0.01 (0.60)	−0.04 (0.14)	0.02 (0.58)
Different nationality	−0.03 (0.43)	0.04 (0.28)	0.03 (0.51)
Any third (non-Syrian non-Turkish) nationality	−0.04 (0.28)	−0.07 (0.03)**	0.10 (0.05)**
Interaction			
Working together with others	0.01 (0.70)	0.05 (0.07)*	−0.01 (0.76)
Learning together with others	0.02 (0.70)	0.12 (0.00)***	−0.09 (0.06)*
Willing to help others	0.02 (0.58)	0.02 (0.47)	0.00 (0.99)
Solving problems with others	0.03 (0.37)	0.06 (0.04)**	0.00 (0.93)

Note: Standard errors were bootstrapped using wild bootstrap due to few clusters. Analysis based on 1305 respondents, 666 in the control group and 639 in the treatment group. The respondents reported their perceptions using a 4-point hedonic scale. They were converted to binary variables where value 1 implies positive perception (higher social cohesion) and 0 implies negative perception (lower social cohesion). The estimates in the table are based on the binary variables. The models were estimated using linear probability model. Other controls in the model include age and gender of the respondent, location (urban or otherwise), dummy for survey areas closer to the border and a project line fixed effects.

^aSame nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals. Different nationality refers to cohesion between the two groups.

p-value from wild bootstrap in parenthesis. *Significance after wild bootstrapping the standard error ****p* < 0.01, ***p* < 0.05, **p* < 0.1.

schooling” among youths and adolescents. The combination of balanced observables and the random allocation of the interview time leads us to believe that imbalance in baseline outcomes is unlikely.

Another threat to the validity of our results in the absence of pre- and post-intervention data is from systematic shocks affecting one group more than the other, potentially introduced by a policy change or a specific social/political event. However, the data for treatment and control group was not collected chronologically. This flexibility was feasible due to the short duration of each event, occurring throughout the 3 months of data collection.

Balance between control and treatment could also be affected by self-selection bias, where the refusal of less (more) socially cohesive participants could lead to an overestimation (underestimation) of coefficients of interest. However, this was mitigated as 98 per cent of invited children, adolescents, and youths participated in our data collection.

While it would have been ideal to have baseline characteristics for both groups, we argue that despite the limitations of this method, we are able to limit the potential sources of biases.

Immediate impact – Adolescents and young adults

The total sample comprises 1305 respondents, of which 666 belong to the control group and 639 to the treatment group. We use linear probability models to examine the impact of program participation on the three dimensions of social cohesion used in the study (Table 5). We use the binary variable for each group for all three dimensions as an outcome variable, and regress it on a treatment dummy, a nationality dummy and an interaction between the two. Other controls include age and gender of the respondent, location (urban or otherwise), a dummy for survey areas closer to the Syrian border and project line fixed effects (the informal component of the BILSY program was organised through 4 project lines).

We find no impact of the program on the *sense of belonging* and *trust* dimensions of social cohesion for respondents of either nationality. For the third dimension, *relational capability*, we find that compared with Turkish nationals, Syrian refugees are significantly more willing to make friends with people of a third nationality (non-Syrian non-Turkish) after participating in the program. This finding is, however, not robust to adjustment for multiple hypothesis testing. No other results were statistically significant.

Immediate impact – Children

Our sample size comprises 685 children, among whom 351 participated in the dictator game (182 in the control and 169 in the treatment group), and 334 participated in the trust game (168 in the control and 166 in the treatment group). Depending on the outcome variable, we used two types of regression models. Negative binomial regression models were used for the outcomes of tokens donated and expected trustee's transfer. A linear probability model was used for the outcome variable trust towards trustee. In both models, the coefficient on treatment dummy, nationality dummy and an interaction between the two were of primary interest. Other controls included age and gender of the child, and project line fixed effects.

For the dictator game (Table 6), we find that participation in the BILSY program has no immediate effect on the number of tokens given by the dictator to a receiver of the same nationality. However, when the receiver has a different nationality, the treatment has a positive effect on the number of tokens donated. There is no difference by nationality of the dictator. For the trust game, we find no immediate impact of the treatment on the probability of the trustor trusting the trustee. This holds irrespective of the nationality of the trustor and trustee. For the expected transfer amount, the only significant immediate impact is observed when trustor is Turkish and the trustee is Syrian: Turkish trustors expect a lower trustee's transfer from a Syrian trustee after participating in the BILSY program. However, the findings for both the dictator and the trust game are not robust to an adjustment for multiple testing.

TABLE 6 Immediate impact of the BILSY program on children (aged 6–11 years).

Variables	Dictator game		Trust game			
	Tokens donated to the recipient (incidence-rate ratios) ^a		Probability of trusting the trustee in trust Game ^b		Expected trustee's transfer (incidence-rate ratios) ^a	
	Same nationality ^c	Different nationality ^d	Same nationality ^c	Different nationality ^d	Same nationality ^c	Different nationality ^d
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Treatment	0.93 (0.46)	1.20 (0.02)**	0.07 (0.33)	0.01 (0.91)	0.93 (0.23)	0.82 (0.04)**
Syrian	0.96 (0.77)	0.98 (0.73)	−0.09 (0.26)	0.16 (0.06)*	0.80 (0.06)*	0.83 (0.35)
Treatment*Syrian	0.93 (0.63)	0.80 (0.42)	0.08 (0.24)	0.00 (1.00)	1.08 (0.56)	1.43 (0.08)*
Age	1.03 (0.05)*	1.00 (0.94)	0.01 (0.36)	0.01 (0.52)	1.02 (0.26)	0.99 (0.43)
Female	1.06 (0.60)	1.11 (0.36)	0.01 (0.78)	0.04 (0.49)	0.99 (0.86)	1.19 (0.10)
Project line 2	1.08 (0.28)	1.19 (0.16)	0.17 (0.09)*	0.06 (0.63)	1.09 (0.27)	1.06 (0.58)
Project line 3	1.02 (0.86)	1.03 (0.89)	0.10 (0.28)	0.22 (0.03)**	0.98 (0.74)	0.90 (0.43)
Constant	2.09 (0.02)**	2.06 (0.03)**	0.57 ^{†††} (0.00)	0.43 (0.08)*	2.63 ^{†††} (0.00)***	2.90 ^{†††} (0.00)***
Observations (#)	351	351	333	333	257	252

Note: Standard errors were bootstrapped using wild bootstrap due to few clusters.

^aThe model was estimated using negative binomial model.

^bThe model was estimated using linear probability model.

^cSame nationality refers to within group cohesion for Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals.

^dDifferent nationality refers to cohesion between Syrian refugees and Turkish nationals.

p-value from wild bootstrap in parenthesis.

*Significance after wild bootstrapping the standard error and [†]significance after Bonferroni's correction ***, ^{†††}*p* < 0.01, **, ^{††}*p* < 0.05, *, [†]*p* < 0.1.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We can derive several key conclusions from the findings of our study. First and foremost, the level of social cohesion among adolescents and young adults in our sample stands out as notably high when compared with similar studies (Kuhnt et al., 2019; WFP, 2018). This extends to children, where our results indicate a heightened degree of altruism, surpassing the level of cohesion observed in both conflict and non-conflict settings in other studies (Alan et al., 2020; Engel, 2011).

Secondly, our analysis reveals a lower out-group bias within our sample when juxtaposed with findings from other studies. While other articles show favourable bias towards co-ethnic groups and a bias against out-groups (Mironova & Whitt, 2018), Syrian and Turkish children in our sample exhibit increased altruism towards peers of

the same nationality. Notably, when paired with a child from a different nationality, there is a tendency to equitably share endowments.

Turning to trust dimension, our results align with existing studies, indicating lower reciprocal perceptions of trust among Turkish nationals compared with Syrian refugees. Turkish nationals exhibit a reluctance to form friendships and interact with Syrian refugees, a sentiment not reciprocated. This trust disparity extends to children, where a noteworthy proportion trusts their counterparts, yet the level of trust among Turkish children towards Syrian children is comparatively lower. This discrepancy is further compounded by a prevailing higher social distance perceived by Turkish nationals, suggesting a lower level of social acceptance.

The fourth conclusion revolves around a notable lack of cohesion among females, particularly Syrian females, specifically for sense of belonging and trust. Similarly, Erdoğan (2020) highlights higher social distance perceived by Turkish women towards Syrians, in contrast to Turkish men's perceptions. This could be partially explained by the fact that Syrian women are less exposed to Turkish society and have fewer opportunities to practice the Turkish language (Yücel et al., 2018).

Lastly, exploring the third dimension of relational capability, we find an intriguing departure from the previous dimensions. Female adolescents and young adults demonstrate higher social cohesion than their male counterparts. This outcome contradicts the patterns identified in other dimensions but is consistent with findings from WFP (2018) that women are gradually becoming more open towards Turkish nationals over time. Yücel et al. (2018) further supports this, indicating that Syrian women, despite limited contact with local communities, place importance on establishing relations with Turkish nationals.

Individuals tend to form in-group preferences at early stages of cognitive development (Bindra et al., 2020). The developmental roots of in-group preferences underscore the enduring nature of these social tendencies, suggesting that the bonds formed during childhood and adolescence persist during adulthood (Emerson et al., 2002). The implications are profound in a social landscape characterised by increasing perceived social distance, as the strong social cohesion observed among younger age groups becomes a potential source of resilience and unity. As these preferences are likely to persist over time, they contribute not only to the formation of enduring social bonds but also to the creation of positive community environment (Zhou et al., 2019).

Results for the effectiveness of BILSY program should be interpreted cautiously due to the voluntary BILSY program participation. While voluntariness is a common feature of such programs, our findings indicate a lack of strong effects on social cohesion. This could be attributed to the brief duration of activities, with 70 per cent lasting a day or less. Successful interventions in related studies emphasise prolonged exposure to positive interactions, underscoring the potential limitations of short-duration activities. Additionally, the heterogeneity in the types of activities may have contributed to the observed lack of significant effects. The nuanced nature of these events could mean that some were more effective in enhancing social cohesion than others. Finally, the enduring impact of traumatic experiences related to war and displacement emerges as a significant factor shaping attitudes towards in-group and out-group members, presenting challenges for change.

These results may also indicate that positive contact alone is not sufficient to decrease marginalisation and increase social cohesion. Future interventions should take these limitations into account and understand positive contact as part of broader range of programs and collective action to tackle other key determinants of social cohesion.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

PEER REVIEW

The peer review history for this article is available at <https://www.webofscience.com/api/gateway/wos/peer-review/10.1111/imig.13346>.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data will be made available in a dataverse after publication together with a data descriptor.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee at University of Goettingen, Goettingen, Germany.

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ENDNOTES

²We present figures for only six groups out of a total 10, which had the most contrasting results. Others can be made available on request.

³Note that within these questions or games, the different nationality is either Syrian or Turkish, but not a third nationality.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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