



Migration and development dynamics in Kilis, Turkey

Mass emigration to Kilis during the Syrian civil war led to rapid spatial, cultural, and demographic transformation. Despite humanitarian interventions, Kilis faces challenges in infrastructure and social cohesion.

The increased population and the closing of the Turkey–Syria border brought about major transformation for Kilis, including infrastructure and social protection reform.

There is a pervasive perception of abandonment by the state, and many feel there are limited opportunities for them in Kilis.

Just under half (46%) of surveyed young adults grew up in Kilis. Of the Syrian respondents, 30% grew up elsewhere in Turkey; 62% grew up in another country – mostly Syria (98%).



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Photo: Pinar Ensari for MIGNEX.

Kilis is a city and province in south-eastern Anatolia in southern Turkey, located on the border with Syria.

Over the last ten years, mass emigration from Syria has transformed Kilis. Its population has almost doubled since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, due to forced displacement. Kilis is now home to around 237,000 people – approximately 146,000 Turkish and 91,000 Syrian citizens.

Amid increased pressure on municipal resources, rapid spatial and cultural

transformation, and increased competition in the labour market, Kilis faces major livelihood collapse. One third (33%) of young adults surveyed in Kilis are unemployed, and the majority (74%) consider it difficult to earn a living and feed a family.

Before the civil war in Syria, major livelihood activities included smuggling and agriculture. The closing of the Turkey-Syria border and construction of a 764 km-long wall between Turkey and Syria, completed in 2018, has since contributed to a sharp decline in smuggling. Large-scale border trade and agriculture continue, yet small-scale trade and construction have become major sources of livelihood. One fifth (18%) of young adults are engaged in casual work. Most young adults (74%) in Kilis consider it difficult to earn a living and feed a family.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data of Turkish and Syrian respondents. The MIGNEX team also conducted research in Hopa and Yenice and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Turkey.⁴

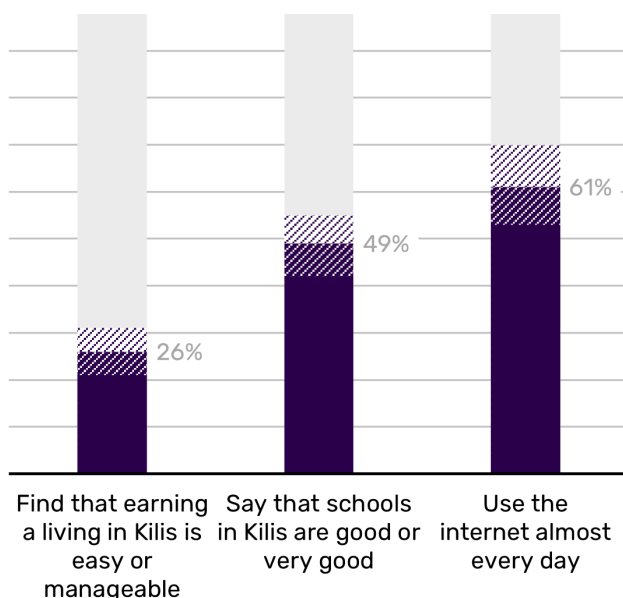


Figure 1. Indicators of development

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

Migration from Kilis

Prior to the Syrian civil war, Kilis was not a prominent area of origin for international out-migration. As in other cities of Turkey, Kilis saw some labour migration in the 1960s

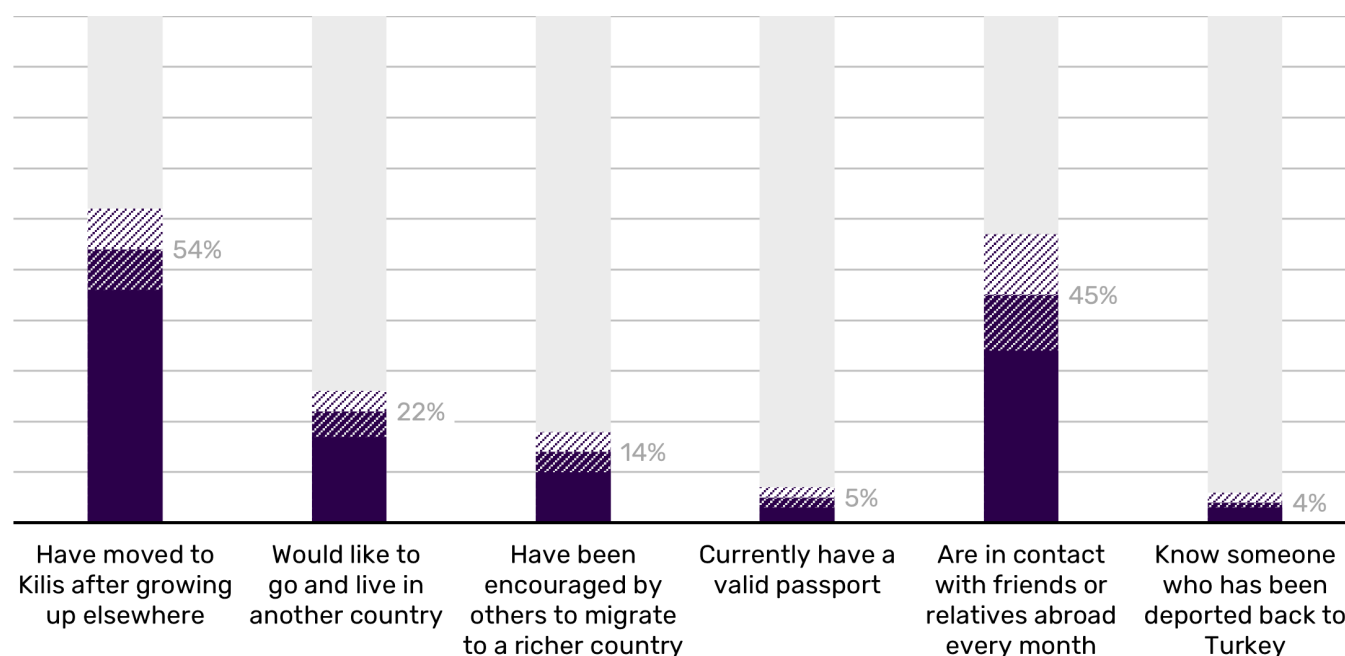


Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

and 1970s to Europe, though this has since reduced. That said, nearly half (43%) of surveyed young adults have family or friends living abroad, many of whom are in Germany (56%), Syria (23%) and Canada (9%). Around half of 51% of Syrian respondents have family and friends living abroad, compared to only 35% of Turkish respondents.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, many educated and highly skilled Syrians in Kilis received refugee status and resettled in third countries. Amid concerns of ‘brain drain’, the Government of Turkey made it more difficult for qualified Syrians to receive asylum in another country, often by granting Turkish citizenship. Moreover, feasibility of these migration pathways has since reduced. The majority (70%) of Syrian young adults expect to stay in Kilis within the next five years, compared with 46% of Turkish young adults.

Nearly one-quarter (23%) of young adults know of someone from Kilis who has migrated internally in the past five years. Syrians under temporary protection do not have the right to move to another city. Considerably fewer (19%) Syrians in Kilis have seriously considered internal migration in the past year, compared to 30% of Turkish residents.

In 2016, missile attacks from Syria led to the death of 21 people in Kilis. A considerable

number of people left for other cities in Turkey; some for good, while others later returned.

Migration aspirations

Economic instability, financial crisis, and soaring inflation in Turkey, alongside increasing demographic pressures in Kilis, are impacting social cohesion. Many Syrians feel there is some hostility towards them, while they are trapped in Kilis with limited social and economic opportunities.

Most would prefer, at least, to move to a bigger city in Turkey for improved economic opportunities. Close connections with the Syrian diaspora in Europe and North America – and information shared on the education and job opportunities available there – also inform migration aspirations.

Kilis is a truly wonderful city in terms of its gastronomy, handicrafts, talents and humanity. But it has been so neglected. Opportunities are limited.

Focus group participant

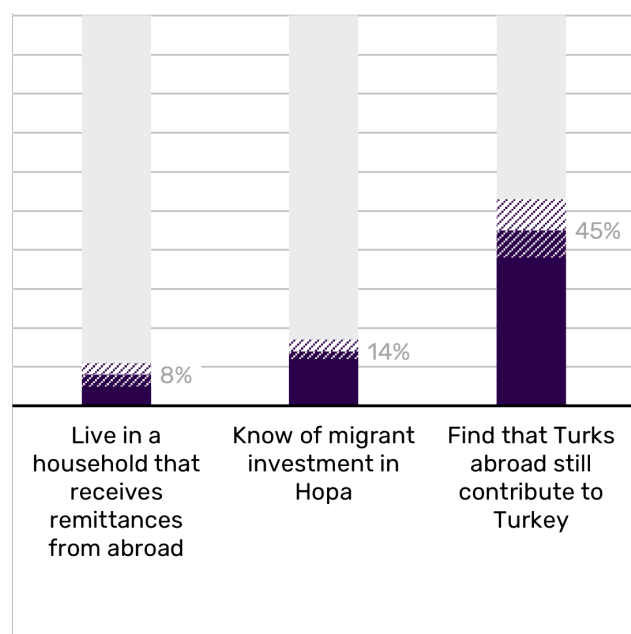


Figure 3. Migration–development interactions

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

In-migration

In 2011, Turkey commenced an open-door and humanitarian policy, and the population has doubled since the Syrian civil war began. Just under half (46%) of surveyed young adults grew up in Kilis. Of the Syrian respondents, 30% grew up elsewhere in Turkey and 62% in another country - mostly Syria (98%).

With the arrival of Syrian refugees, Kilis became a more bilingual, multicultural, and lively city. Many Turkish locals welcomed the refugees when they first arrived. However, some issues with social cohesion have developed since, largely due to rapid demographic change, insufficient municipal services, competition in the labour market and increasing youth unemployment.

There is also a widespread perception among locals that the state has abandoned

them. As for the Syrians, many are experiencing psychological distress due to the trauma of the war as well as issues with education, employment, and social cohesion.

Links between migration and development

Transnational ties are strong in Kilis, though they vary between Syrian and Turkish respondents. Some 91% of Syrian respondents have monthly contact with migrant family, relatives or friends, compared to 63% of Turkish respondents. Some Syrian families receive remittances from relatives in Europe and North America, and some send remittances to relatives in Syria.

Since the arrival of Syrian refugees in Kilis, funding from the European Union and international non-governmental organisations has supported major development and social protection reform in Kilis. This has included psycho-social support, social cohesion, and livelihood projects. Yet this remains insufficient due to the drastic increase in population, pressures on municipal services and specific challenges faced by the Syrian population amid prolonged displacement.

Notes

1. Based on MIGNEX key informant interviews.
2. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Pinar Ensari and Nilay Kavur in September 2021. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by Frekans Research in July 2021.

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration-Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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