

Abstract:

Can refugees' acquired attributes and effort to integrate offset—at least partially—existing biases based on their immutable identity characteristics such as ethnicity or religion? And do those attributes weigh in differently depending on the type of (economic, social, or political) integration? These questions bear significant policy implications for successful refugee integration, especially in Turkey—a Muslim-majority country hosting more than 3.5 million refugees—which is considered by the EU as the ideal place to accommodate most of the Syrian refugees. We conduct an online conjoint survey experiment in Turkey among about 2,400 respondents, in which we present them with pairs of Syrian refugee profiles that vary by gender, age, marital status, ethnicity, religion, education, social connection with local citizens, knowledge of Turkish language, fighting experience and victimization in the Syrian civil war. We then ask our respondents which of the two profiles of refugees they would prefer to be their neighbours (social integration), whom they would support giving a work permit (economic integration), and whom should be granted citizenship (political integration). We find little support for economic competition arguments. Instead, structural factors—religion and to a larger extent ethnicity—affect support for integration. In particular, Christian, and even more so Kurdish, and Arab refugees are disliked relative to Sunnis, Alawites, and Turkomans, respectively. In addition to structural factors, we also find that refugees with a college degree receive more support for integration. In addition, knowing the Turkish language and having social ties with locals can ameliorate some identity-based biases they might be facing. We refer to these strategies—learning the local language and developing local connections—as proactive steps that either the refugees themselves, or organizations seeking to promote their integration can undertake. That said, we also find a very strong bias against Arab refugees, for whom education, knowing the language, and having Turkish friends have very limited, if any, effect on support for their integration. These strategies are much more beneficial for Kurdish and Christian refugees. For Arab refugees, being victims of torture in the civil war promotes support for social and economic integration. Overall, our findings shed light on the channels that condition natives' attitudes towards refugees and inform public policies that aim at facilitating their integration in their host communities. They also suggest that in some cases such policies might have a limited effect.