

Refugees, Xenophobia, and Domestic Conflict: Evidence from a Survey Experiment in Turkey

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Abstract

What factors influence attitudes towards refugees? Do negative attitudes towards refugees also influence attitudes towards conflict in the host countries? Previous studies suggest that an influx of refugees, and locals' reaction to them, may destabilize receiving countries and lead to conflict. In particular, actual or perceived negative effects of refugees' presence, such as increased economic competition with the locals, disruption of ethnic balance in the host country, and arrival of people with ties to rebel groups may lead to an increased likelihood of civil conflict in countries that receive refugees. These effects can lead to instability by changing the locals' incentives and opportunities of engaging in violence. Indeed, some studies find a positive correlation at the cross-national level between influx of refugees and conflict in receiving countries. We contribute to this literature by experimentally manipulating information about the externalities of hosting refugees. We conducted a survey-experiment in the summer of 2014 in Turkey, a country that hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees. We examine how different messages about the possible effects of hosting refugees—increased economic burden, disruption of ethnic balance, ties with rebels, as well as a positive message of saving innocent women and children—affect locals' perceptions of the refugees and their attitudes towards the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. We find that some messages cause locals, especially majority non-Kurds, to hold more negative views of the refugees, and in some cases to view them as a threat. Yet on the whole, this information does not affect support for the peace process within Turkey. Rather, fundamental factors, such as partisanship, and previous exposure to conflict are better predictors of attitudes towards peace.

Keywords

refugees, civil wars, Turkey, Syria, survey experiment, conflict

Introduction

The number of refugees and displaced persons worldwide has surged to its highest levels since World War II due to several ongoing conflicts, and in particular, the Syrian Civil War (UNHCR, 2015: 2-3). Syrian refugees have fled primarily to neighboring countries, with the largest group of them residing in Turkey (UNHCR, 2015: 15). We study the attitudes and perceptions of the local population in Turkey towards Syrian refugees, and whether exposure to refugees affects the locals' willingness to resolve conflicts in their own country to avoid escalation.

Several factors are hypothesized to increase negative attitudes towards refugees: (1) competition over economic resources and social services (Scheve & Slaughter, 2001; Burns & Gimpel, 2000); (2) "disruption" of the host country's ethnic balance and increase in intergroup tensions (Loescher & Milner, 2004); and (3) concerns that refugees may bring weapons, have connections to rebels, and experience in fighting that may fuel conflicts in the receiving country (Weiner, 1992-93). Importantly, locals' perception of these factors, and not necessarily their objective impact, is argued to increase tensions in host countries (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006: 342-344). Several studies find a positive correlation between the arrival of refugees and the spread of conflict, but also acknowledge that such links may be confounded by, or conditioned on other factors, such as the ability to control the country's borders and the incumbent government's perceived legitimacy (Weiner, 1992-93; Whitaker, 2003). Other studies that use subnational data on refugees and conflict do not find that the arrival of refugees leads to more conflict in places where the refugees settle (Fisk, 2014; Shaver & Zhou, 2015).

We contribute to this debate by exploring how messages about refugees influence the perceptions of refugees looking at the case of Syrian refugees in Turkey. We conducted a survey experiment in June and July of 2014 among 1,257 local residents in central, eastern, and southeastern Turkey. We randomly assigned respondents to different primes that reflect refugee-related messages (negative and positive). These primes are not only grounded in the literature on the effects of hosting refugees, but also reflect the Turkish media discourse about Syrian refugees. Thus, we also bring a note of realism into our study by manipulating information about refugees that is similar to elite discourse in

Turkey. We examine the effect of these primes on attitudes towards refugees, and on support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process.

The effect of information on attitudes towards refugees and towards domestic conflict is important for several reasons. First, perceptions of refugees' impact on the host country are one of the channels through which refugees may spread instability (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006: 342). We explicitly focus on messages that manipulate perceptions of the potential impacts of refugees on the host society. We do not examine whether the 'actual' impact of refugees affects the likelihood of domestic conflict in Turkey. Second, attitudes towards conflict offer a lower bar to test for the negative effect of information about refugees on a host country. This is because actual violence may not accurately reflect latent attitudes as it is also conditioned on other factors, such as opportunity and resources. Additionally, while attitudes and behavior are not perfectly correlated, they are positively associated (van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013), and attitude change can be used to predict future violence (Hirose, Imai & Lyall, 2016).

We have five key findings. 1) Messages about negative effects of refugees lead to negative views about the refugees and their effects on Turkey, but primarily among non-Kurdish (majority Turkish) respondents. This result is especially important because it shows that negative messages about mostly-Muslim refugees can negatively impact attitudes towards them even in a middle income, Muslim majority country such as Turkey. 2) There is some evidence of co-ethnic bias—Kurdish respondents exhibit more positive views towards Kurdish refugees than towards other refugees, and more than non-Kurdish respondents. Sunni refugees are not as disliked as the other groups following our negative treatments. 3) Additionally, even though some of our primes negatively affect attitudes towards refugees (especially the message that refugees may be bringing arms), they do not lead the respondents to be less supportive of the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. This calls into question previous studies that argue that negative perceptions of refugees, and generally a higher salience of conflict, may increase support for violence (Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006; Kuran, 1998). 4) Locals who report high level of exposure to refugees in their daily life express more negative views of and higher threat perceptions of refugees. However, exposure to refugees does not change the effects of

our treatments. 5) Finally, partisan identification matters: supporters of the governing party (AKP) are less likely to view the refugees as a threat.

While information may induce negative attitudes towards refugees among some respondents, it does not appear to change attitudes towards domestic conflict. Instead these are shaped to a greater extent by geography and partisanship. Our study makes three important contributions. 1) We study a major host country (Turkey) that has received the largest number of Syrian refugees compared to other host countries.¹ 2) While much of the media and policy debates on Syrian refugees focus on their effects on Europe, the vast majority of refugees are hosted in surrounding countries, such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan (Arar, Hintz & Norman, 2016). This pattern is not unique to the Syrian refugee crisis, as refugees from other civil wars also tend to flee primarily to neighboring countries (Moore & Shellman, 2007). 3) Finally, by examining the individual-level perceptions that are said to affect the locals' response to refugees, we show that although anti-refugee appeals may have some traction, they do not increase support for conflict in the host country.

We proceed first by providing background on Syrian refugees in Turkey, and on the main policy issue that coincided with their arrival—the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. We then review previous studies on the effect of refugees on their host countries, followed by a brief discussion of our survey design and sampling (a detailed description is in the Appendix), and present our findings. We conclude by outlining the implications of our study for understanding the impact of refugees on public attitudes of the locals.

Background: Syrian refugees and Turkey

In response to the arrival of first Syrian refugees in early 2011, Turkey opened several refugee camps to provide food, health care, and education. At the time of our survey, 22 camps were operational in 10 provinces (see map in Figure A.1 in the Appendix). Despite these efforts, only 219,688 out of over 900,000 refugees in Turkey resided in camps

¹There were over 900,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey at the time of our survey, and nearly 3 million as of June 2017 (UNHCR, 2014). Although Turkey itself is a populous country, in some of the areas we survey, refugees constitute a significant portion of the local population (see Table A.1 in the Online Appendix).

during our survey. The remaining refugees lived amongst the local population, primarily in provinces with camps (UNHCR, 2014).

Relations between Syrian refugees and the local residents have been relatively peaceful.² Nonetheless, locals showed signs of discontent: some blamed the refugees for the increase in housing prices (Sak, 2014), the rise in unemployment, competition with local businesses (Çetingüleç, 2014), and even for social ills such as thefts, murders, smuggling, and prostitution (Erdoğan, 2015).

Media coverage reflected those negative sentiments, but also contained positive depictions of refugees. We searched the archive of *Hürriyet*—a leading newspaper website—between April 2011 and June 2014 and found 112 articles directly related to Syrian refugees in Turkey.³ The most frequent negative theme is the possible connection between refugees and rebels (Hürriyet, 2012). Other articles highlight the economic burden of hosting the refugees, especially in border provinces (Hürriyet, 2014), and the refugees' ethnic identity as a contributor to sectarian tensions. For instance, Alawite refugees are reluctant to reside in majority Sunni refugee camps (Yezdani, 2013). Finally, a number of articles highlight the positive humanitarian aspects of hosting refugees (Erkuş, 2014). This theme echoes messages of the AKP government, and the open-door policy and assistance to Syrian “brothers” fleeing from the violence of a cruel regime.⁴ These different aspects of the refugee crisis form the basis of the treatments in our survey experiment.

Turkish-Kurdish peace process

At the time of our survey, one of the main issues at the forefront of Turkish domestic politics was the Turkish-Kurdish peace process—negotiations between the government and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to end a 30-year long conflict in exchange for

² A notable exception is the Reyhanlı bombing in May 2013 that killed 52 people. Although responsibility and possible motives for the attack remain unclear (Daloğlu, 2014), some locals protested the presence of Syrians in Reyhanlı in the aftermath of the bombing, and many refugees fled the city (Deutsche Welle, 2013; BBC, 2013).

³ The search results are available here:

<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/Default.aspx?pageID=260&at=Refugees&ew=&om=&sd=4/1/2011&ed=6/1/2014&so=0&a=-1&c=-1&uw=&pp=100&ot=0&sbmt=1> (accessed May 26, 2017).

⁴ See for instance, Australian Associated Press (2014) for Erdoğan's statements.

political reforms.⁵ The peace process began at the end of 2012 when the government announced negotiations with the jailed PKK leader Öcalan (Haberturk, 2012). Although the exact details of these talks are not fully known, the broad outlines of a potential deal included a ceasefire and withdrawal of the PKK, democratization, and PKK's disarmament and normalization (Yeğen, 2015).

Turkish public opinion in 2014 was divided with respect to these negotiations (Yılmaz, 2014). While 57% supported the peace process, about 38% opposed it. Ethnicity and partisanship were the two strongest determinants of attitudes towards the peace process, with the Kurds and the AKP supporters being more in favor of this initiative than others.

Attitudes towards refugees and the peace process

Locals may harbor negative attitudes towards refugees for several reasons. For instance, they might be concerned that refugees alter the demographic balance in the host country (Loescher & Milner, 2004). This is especially true if refugees are ethnic kin to one of the aggrieved groups (for instance, the arrival of Kurdish refugees from Syria in Turkey). Locals may also mobilize into a “sons of the soil” movement if they feel that refugees threaten their long-standing status in their native regions (Weiner, 1992-93). For example, around the time of our survey, there were reports of tensions in Hatay between Turkish Alawites and Arab Sunni refugees from Syria,⁶ and concerns over the arrival of Sunni Arab refugees to the historically Kurdish areas (Çağaptay & Menekşe, 2014).⁷

Besides fomenting negative attitudes, information about refugees may affect positions about conflict and cooperation in the host country. First, perceptions that refugees have connections to rebel groups may contribute to the locals' sense of insecurity, not only making them more negative towards refugees, but also fueling existing conflicts, or spurring new disputes (Schweitzer et al., 2005; Lischer, 2005; Faulkner et al. 2004). For

⁵ For a history of the Kurds, see McDowall (1996). For an in-depth analysis of the Kurdish question in Turkey, see Kirişçi & Winrow (1997). For a study of the PKK insurgency, see Marcus (2007).

⁶The Alawites in Hatay are ethnically and religiously related to the Syrian Arab Alawites, who are also referred to as Nusayris (Dressler, 2008; Nisan, 2002), and are fighting Arab Sunnis in Syria.

⁷Two of the camp provinces--Mardin and Adıyaman--previously belonged to the state of emergency (OHAL) or OHAL-adjacent zones due to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict.

example, Turkey's assistance to Sunni Arab rebels and an "open-door" policy that brought many Sunni Arab refugees, some of whom were possibly connected to rebels (Hakan, 2012), may harden Kurdish negotiation positions. In this context, the Turkish-Kurdish leader Demirtaş suggested that "developments in Syria might come to a stage to block the Kurdish peace process in Turkey" due to the government allowing support to flow from Turkey to radical Islamists in Syria, who are attacking Kurds there (Yetkin, 2013). Moreover, Forsberg (2014) argues that when an ethnic group engages in an ethnic conflict in one country, it may encourage kin in neighboring countries to rebel as well. In this context, the fact that the Syrian Kurds play such a central role in the Syrian Civil War may encourage the Kurds in Turkey to harden their negotiation positions as well. Since refugees often settle along ethnic lines (Rüegger and Bohnet, 2012), exposure to Kurdish refugees coming from Syria may further lower their willingness to compromise with the Turkish government. In addition, the perception that refugees exacerbate economic competition may lead to conflicts between the locals and the refugees over jobs, housing, and public goods (Loescher & Milner, 2004; Salehyan & Gleditsch, 2006). Indeed, rents in Gaziantep, an industrial city of 1.4 million people (around 300,000 of which are Syrians) doubled with the arrival of refugees. This has led to fights between locals and refugees, and anti-Syrian rallies in the city (Kütahyalı, 2014). Moreover, refugees' arrival and the government's integration policy may lead to conflict, or at least lower the locals' willingness to compromise with each other, by augmenting the salience of ethnic-based grievances among the locals (Kuran, 1998). For instance, the Kurds may accuse the government of a 'double standard' for allowing Syrian refugees to receive education in Arabic while not permitting education in Kurdish in Turkish public schools (Kirişçi, 2014: 25). The Kurds in Turkey have long demanded education in Kurdish language; with both Kurdish politicians and the PKK suggesting this should be part of the reforms agreed upon through the peace process negotiations (Yeğen, 2015: 13). Conversely, government assistance to refugees, and the fact that some of them are Kurdish and are more likely to settle among the Turkish Kurds (Rüegger & Bohnet, 2012) may predispose the latter to compromise with the government.

Attitudes towards refugees and their effect on conflict are likely not uniform, with different parts of the local population taking different views. For instance, negative attitudes towards newcomers are often more prevalent among members of the ethnic

majority who fear that their status may be threatened (Valentino, Suhay & Brader, 2008; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Common religion may also attenuate negative attitudes towards refugees. However, as Lazarev & Sharma (2017) show in the context of Syrian refugees in Turkey, economic concerns may trump the effects of shared identity. Residing in a place previously affected by political violence increases altruism (Gilligan, Pasquale & Samii, 2014), and may positively predispose respondents towards refugees, although in some cases members of such communities become more hawkish towards the outgroup (Getmansky & Zeitzoff, 2014). Partisan identification may also shape the locals' position towards refugees. Indeed, AKP supporters in Turkey are more sympathetic towards Syrians (EDAM Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, 2014). Lastly, political elites in host countries can play a decisive role in framing public opinion (Zaller, 1992; Hainmueller & Hopkins, 2014). Ordinary citizens are often not well informed about refugees, so elites may try and inflame (or downplay) the perceived threat from newcomers as a way to increase their own political support (Gadarian & Albertson, 2014).

In sum, primes about an influx of refugees may exacerbate negative attitudes toward refugees, particularly when emphasizing the negative externalities of hosting them (i.e., economic competition, disruption of ethnic balance, connection to militants). Whether negative perceptions of the refugees translate into lower support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process is less clear. Negative primes may increase the salience of ethnicity, further exacerbating ethnic tensions, and reduce support for compromise between Turks and Kurds. Yet, ethnicity is also likely to moderate the effect of our primes about refugees given that Kurds and Turks have different economic status and reside in places with different exposure to past violence.

Research design and data

Sampling

We employed a stratified sampling procedure to produce variation on three key factors associated with refugees and Turkish politics: refugee presence, past support for the

incumbent party (AKP), and a history of Turkish-Kurdish violence. More detailed discussion of our sampling procedure is in the Appendix (section A.3). Figure 1 depicts our sample’s geographic distribution. Table A.2 in the Appendix lists the provinces, districts, and the number of respondents in each district.

Figure 1 in here

We surveyed 1,257 respondents, and our response rate was 34%.⁸ Our sample includes non-Kurds (58%) and Kurds (42%). Similarly to previous studies of public opinion in Turkey (Yılmaz, 2014; Kalaycıoğlu, 2009; Kalaycıoğlu & Çarkoğlu, 2007; Çarkoğlu & Toprak, 2007), we classify someone as Kurdish if they list their first language as Kurdish.⁹ Sample demographics are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 in here

The Kurdish and non-Kurdish samples are well balanced on gender, age groups, AKP support, and residing in an urban district. 43% of Kurds in the sample live in provinces that were previously under state of emergency rule (*OHAL*) due to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, whereas only 13% of non-Kurds lived in these provinces (see section A.3 in the Appendix for the list of these provinces). As we would expect from a marginalized minority, Kurds on average have lower household income, and are less likely to own some household goods. They are also slightly less educated than the non-Kurds. Kurds also appear to be more religious, as demonstrated in questions about alcohol use, frequency of prayer, and whether women in the family cover their hair. Finally, Kurds

⁸ American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Response Rate 1 formula.

⁹ Most Kurds, speak and understand Turkish as well as Kurdish. 97% of interviews were conducted in Turkish, and only 3% (43) in Kurdish. We also asked how much each respondent identifies him/herself as Turkish, Kurdish, and as a member of other minority groups. There is a strong correlation between listing Kurdish as the first language and identifying as a Kurd ($\rho \approx 0.65$).

report slightly lower levels of refugee exposure in their daily lives except when it comes to seeing them on the streets.¹⁰

Treatments

We randomly assigned subjects to one of five experimental conditions (Table 2). In the *Control* condition, subjects did not receive any information about refugees. In the other four treatments, the enumerator read a brief statement heightening the refugees' salience in Turkey, and then subjects received treatments (see section B.1 in the Appendix for the exact wording of our treatments). The *Economic Cost*, *Ethnic Balance*, and *Militant Ties* treatments were all meant to heighten a key negative aspect of hosting refugees. The *Women and Children* treatment was meant to balance out the negative tone of the treatments with a more positive tone, and to reflect AKP's justification of its open-door policy towards the refugees. By including the positive prime, we can also see whether it is the negative aspects of hosting refugees, or simply mentioning refugees, that affects public opinion. We present randomization checks in section C in the Appendix.

Table 2 in here

Dependent variables

Following the treatment, the enumerators asked subjects about their views on our main dependent variables: sympathy towards different groups of refugees,¹¹ whether respondents view the refugees as an economic threat and as a threat to safety, and support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. The exact wording of specific items is in section B.2 of the Appendix.

¹⁰See section B.2 in the Appendix for the questions behind these variables.

¹¹To measure sympathy, we used feeling thermometer questions similar to those that have been previously used to measure sympathy towards political actors in public opinion surveys in Turkey. See e.g. Kennedy et al. (2011a); Kennedy et al. (2011b).

Figure 2 shows the distribution of our dependent variables. We present the responses of Kurds and non-Kurds separately because group identification is an important cleavage in Turkey, and likely affects the way respondents view refugees (Valentino, Suhay & Brader, 2008; Koopmans & Olzak, 2004). Moreover, Kurds are the biggest minority group in Turkey, and the peace process concerns their welfare directly, especially in regions that we surveyed. There are noticeable differences between Kurds and non-Kurds. The four upper panels of Figure 2 show that: (1) Kurdish respondents have warmer attitudes than non-Kurds towards all groups of refugees; (2) Kurdish respondents exhibit the warmest attitudes towards Kurdish refugees, and then towards Sunnis. Non-Kurds express slightly warmer attitudes towards Sunni refugees, and treat the other groups equally. This suggests that common religion may be associated with a more sympathetic attitude towards refugees,¹² but not as much as common ethnic identity. The four lower panels show that both Kurds and non-Kurds are concerned that refugees are making Turkey less safe, and that they pose an economic threat to Turkey. These views are slightly more prevalent among the non-Kurds than among the Kurds. Finally, the figure also suggests--similarly to other studies (Yılmaz, 2014)—that Kurds are more supportive of the peace negotiations than non-Kurds.

Figure 2 in here

Findings

Empirical Strategy

We are interested in how information about different externalities of hosting refugees (our treatments) affects the dependent variables while controlling for fundamental attributes—partisanship, refugee exposure, living in areas that experienced political violence, and ethnicity. Our empirical specification for individual i in province j is the following OLS model:

¹²Most Turkish citizens---both Kurds and non-Kurds are Sunni.

$$Y_i = \alpha_1 \times T_i + \alpha_2 \times Kurd_i + \alpha_3 \times Kurd_i \times T_i + \beta_1 \times AKP_i + \beta_2 \times OHAL_i + \beta_3 \times Refugee\ Exposure_i + \gamma \times X_i + \mu_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

where Y_i is the individual response to our dependent variables, T_i is a vector of binary treatment indicators, $Kurd_i$ is a binary indicator of whether respondent i 's first language is Kurdish, AKP_i is an AKP supporter binary indicator, $OHAL_i$ is a binary variable equal 1 if individual i lives in an OHAL province.¹³ *Refugee Exposure_i* is the individual (self-reported) level of refugee exposure,¹⁴ and X_i is a vector of individual controls.¹⁵ The inclusion of these parameters allows us to investigate how individual-level ethnicity and party identity, as well as residing in an area of conflict, affect views of the refugees and their impact on Turkey. We control for other province-level covariates by including a province-level dummy μ_i . ε_i is a normally distributed error. We allow for differential treatment effects for Non-Kurds (α_1) and Kurds ($\alpha_2 + \alpha_3$) based on our theoretical underpinnings that messages about refugees are likely to influence minorities and majorities differently. We are also interested in the effect of the key observational variables (β).

Results

We have three principal research questions. (1) Do the different primes about Syrian refugees change attitudes towards refugees relative to the *Control*? (2) How do they influence attitudes towards the Turkish-Kurdish peace process? (3) How do fundamental attributes—partisanship, refugee exposure, living in a place with past experience of violence, and ethnicity—influence attitudes towards refugees and domestic conflict? We

¹³Thus the interpretation of *OHAL* is the common variation explained by being in the OHAL, and the remaining individual province-level variation is explained by the province-level dummies. OHAL does not refer to individual-level exposure to past violence, but rather to residing in a community affected by violence in the past.

¹⁴We discuss this measure in the Appendix, and show correlations between this variable and other variables in Table D.6. It is important to note that we also control for province fixed effects, so this individual measure is a more accurate measure of refugee exposure different from the common province-level variation.

¹⁵It includes age, religiosity index, education, wealth index, sex, dummies for urban resident and for whether the interview was conducted during Ramadan (only 10% of the surveys were completed during Ramadan). Details about these variables are in section B.2 in the Appendix.

present bootstrapped coefficient plots of the treatments and observational variables of interest in Figures 3-4. The full regression results are in Tables E.7-E.8 in the Appendix. All the dependent and independent variables (that are not dummy variables) are rescaled to lie between 0 and 1. In the Appendix, we show that our main results hold when we estimate our models using weighted regression.¹⁶ In addition, our results hold when we estimate the models without control variables (Tables F.11-F.12, and section F.2 in the Appendix), split the sample into non-Kurds vs. Kurds (Tables F.22-F.25 in the Appendix), and use an ordered probit model instead of OLS (Tables F.20-F.21 in the Appendix). We discuss additional robustness checks below.

Attitudes towards refugees

Figure 3 demonstrates that the *Militant Ties* and the *Women and Children* treatments make non-Kurds less likely to express positive attitudes towards refugees than non-Kurds in the control group. In particular, with respect to Arab, Alawite, and Kurdish refugees, these treatments lower the response of non-Kurds by 9 to 12 percentage points compared to the response of non-Kurds in the control group (with a 95% confidence interval of [1, 20] using bootstrap standard errors).

Figure 3 in here

Whereas the negative effect of *Militant Ties* treatment is intuitive, the result with respect to *Women and Children* is surprising. One might expect that reminding the respondents that many refugees are innocent women and children would increase positive attitudes towards them. We believe that this negative effect is driven by the fact that over 75% of the refugee population in 2014 was women and children (UNHCR, 2014), and the perception that women and children are unproductive populations that would continue to require support in the future.¹⁷ Orhan & Gündoğar (2015) provide support for this interpretation, and find that seeing Syrian children begging on the streets in Turkey

¹⁶See Tables F.18-F.19 in the Appendix, and they indicate that it is not simply the extra efficiency gained by our stratified sampling which is driving the results.

¹⁷For an illustration of the negative perception of women and children, see Evin (2015).

increases the negative perception of refugees amongst the locals. An additional factor that may contribute to the negative effect of the *Women and Children* prime are reports around the time of the survey that local men are marrying Syrian refugee brides as second or third wives. Erdoğan (2015) reports that instances of polygamy and child marriages involving Syrian refugees generate discontent amongst the locals towards young Syrian females. The increase in divorce rates has also been blamed on marriages between Turkish men and Syrian women (Orhan & Gündoğar, 2015). Thus a seemingly positive treatment about saving Syrian women and children may have also reminded respondents of specific demographic-related, negative externalities that come with hosting young women and children refugees.

Our treatments do not influence the attitudes of Kurds towards the refugees, with the exception of the *Economic Cost* treatment, which leads Kurdish respondents to express more positive attitudes towards Kurdish refugees (not towards other refugees), compared to Kurds that do not receive such treatment (significant only at 90% level (p -value is .06)). We interpret this as weak evidence of co-ethnic bias in treatment of refugees, especially when Kurdish respondents are informed that the Turkish government is spending resources on refugees who also include members of their own ethnic group, the Syrian Kurds.¹⁸

The *Militant Ties* treatment has no significant effect on Kurds' attitudes towards refugees. This may be partially because Kurds in Turkey have sympathies for the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed wing, Popular Defense Units (YPG), most of whose recruits are also Kurdish (Paasche, 2015). Therefore, the Kurds in our sample may have interpreted the refugees having ties to armed groups not necessarily as a negative development. However, this account fails to explain why the Kurds do not show negative attitudes towards other groups of refugees, such as Arab refugees, when they receive the *Militant Ties* treatment.

Finally, attitudes towards Sunni refugees are not influenced by our treatments. The only exception is the *Women and Children* treatment that makes non-Kurds more negative

¹⁸An alternate view is that the *Economic Cost* treatment signals to Kurds that the Turkish government is helping refugees, some of whom are Syrian Kurds, and thus it is more acceptable to express pro-Kurdish views.

towards Sunnis, but this result is significant only at 90% level. Following all other treatments, respondents become neither negative nor positive towards Sunni refugees compared to the control group. This is consistent with Lazarev & Sharma (2017), who also find that shared religion is not a strong determinant of pro-refugees attitudes.

Among the non-experimental variables, living in provinces previously under *OHAL* (provinces that experienced political violence due to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict) is strongly associated with more positive attitudes towards all groups of refugees. Self-reported daily exposure to refugees (*Refugee Exposure*) is not associated with negative attitudes towards refugees (in the case of Arab and Alawite refugees, it is associated with more positive attitudes towards these groups, and these results are significant at 90% and 99% levels, respectively). This is contrary to the arguments that contact with refugees is likely to foment xenophobic sentiments among the locals. Finally, partisanship (*AKP*) is not a significant determinant of respondents' attitudes towards refugees. *AKP* supporters are somewhat positive towards Sunnis, but this result is marginally significant (90%).

In sum, our results suggest that 1) primes related to possible military ties of the refugees, as well as the arrival of women and children negatively affect attitudes towards the refugees; and 2) these primes affect non-Kurds that receive these treatments relative to non-Kurds in the control group, and do not affect Kurds (ethnic minority). Finally 3) residing in a province with a history of violence (*OHAL*) is associated with warmer feelings towards refugees. As a robustness check, we show in the Appendix that the differences between Kurds and non-Kurds are not due to the fact that the Kurds are less exposed to Syrian refugees in their daily life.

Refugees as a threat

In the upper panel of Figure 4, we observe a similar pattern of negative attitudes towards refugees among the non-Kurdish respondents. Following the *Women and Children* treatment, non-Kurdish respondents are 9 percentage points more likely to view the refugees as an economic threat, compared to non-Kurdish respondents in the control group (95% confidence interval of [0.4, 17]). The same treatment causes the non-Kurds to be 8 percentage points more likely to agree that refugees are making Turkey less safe

compared to non-Kurds in the control group (95% confidence interval of [0.1, 17]). Non-Kurds are also 9 percentage points more likely to say that refugees are a safety threat following the *Militant Ties* treatment compared to non-Kurds in the control group (95% confidence interval [0.4, 17]). Kurdish respondents are not more likely to view refugees as an economic or a safety threat following the *Militant Ties* treatment. Similar to our explanation for the *Militant Ties* treatment not affecting Kurds' attitudes towards Kurdish refugees, this result can be explained by the fact that Kurds in Turkey sympathize with, or at least are less threatened by the PYD and its armed wing, the YPG. Therefore, Kurds in our sample may have interpreted the refugees having ties to armed groups not necessarily as a threat.

Figure 4 in here

The non-experimental variables also exert a strong effect on attitudes towards refugees. *AKP Supporters* are significantly less likely to view refugees as a threat, in line with the AKP platform. Respondents from *OHAL* provinces are not particularly threatened by the refugees. There is even some indication that they have lower perception of economic threat, though it is significant only at 90% level. Conversely, higher self-reported exposure to refugees (*Refugee Exposure*) is associated with a heightened threat perception. 43% of the Kurds in our sample live in former OHAL provinces,¹⁹ and the primes do not increase Kurds' negative feelings towards the refugees. Taken together, these two points strongly suggest that Kurds are more welcoming and less threatened by the refugees than non-Kurds. In the robustness checks section, we demonstrate that this result is not due to their lower exposure to refugees.

Refugee primes and attitudes towards peace

In the lower panel of Figure 4, we look at the effect of the experimental primes and the key non-experimental variables on support for the peace process. We chose to focus on the peace process because our goal is to examine whether refugees affect attitudes

¹⁹Also, 71% of our sample that is in former OHAL provinces is Kurdish.

towards domestic conflict; and the PKK insurgency, and the efforts to end the insurgency through peaceful means was the main issue of domestic conflict in Turkey at the time of our survey.

The only treatment that has a significant effect is the *Economic Cost* treatment for the Kurds on support for the peace process. Specifically, there is an increase of 12 percentage points in support for the peace process among Kurds in *Economic Cost* group compared to Kurds in the control group, with 95% confidence interval of [5,20] using bootstrap standard errors. Apart from this, our treatments do not affect respondents' view on the peace process.

For the non-experimental variables, *AKP Supporters* are more supportive of the peace process, reflecting a strong partisan effect on political attitudes. Other non-experimental variables are not statistically significant, except for respondents in former OHAL provinces who are more supportive of the peace process but this effect is significant only at the 90% level. This finding is not surprising because this region suffered the most from the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, and the majority of the respondents from former OHAL provinces are Kurdish (71%). Overall, these results show that partisanship has the strongest effect on the respondents' positions on domestic conflict while the treatments do not have significant effects except the *Economic Cost* treatment on the Kurds' support for peace process. One explanation of this finding is that Kurds, hearing that the government is spending resources on helping the refugees who also include their ethnic kin (Syrian Kurds), become more in favor of the peace process, which aims at expanding the political rights of the Kurds in Turkey.

Robustness Checks

So far we find that Kurds and non-Kurds respond differently to our treatments: Kurds do not express negative attitudes towards refugees, do not view refugees as a threat, and become more supportive of the peace process. There are two alternative explanations for this finding: 1) Kurds are less likely to interact with refugees in their daily lives compared to non-Kurds. Indeed, Kurds are more likely to reside in the OHAL region,

where the reported exposure to refugees is lower; and 2) Kurds as members of a minority group may provide favorable answers to sensitive political questions.

To explore the first possibility—that Kurds’ answers are driven by their low exposure to refugees—we repeat our tests using data on provinces with camps where refugee exposure is higher.²⁰ We explore this in Tables F.13 and F.14, and section F.3 in the Appendix. Our main results hold. Even if we focus only on provinces with camps, where exposure to refugees is higher, Kurds still do not express negative attitudes towards refugees, view them as a threat or become less supportive of the peace process.

It is also possible that Kurds do not express their ‘true’ views, but instead, as an ethnic minority, provide socially desirable answers. To explore this possibility, we also asked the respondents to what extent they identify with Turkey. This question is sensitive in the Turkish context (Şirin, 2013: 81), and to the extent that social desirability is an issue, we expect it to be evident in this question. Specifically, if the Kurdish respondents express “politically-correct” views, then the variable *Kurd* should have no association with the level of identification with Turkey. However, the Kurds in our sample are less likely to identify strongly with Turkey than the non-Kurds, which suggests that they do not necessarily provide socially desirable answers. Results are in Table F.15 in the Appendix.

One of our strongest findings is that respondents from provinces with a history of violence (OHAL) have warmer attitudes towards the refugees. To examine whether we observe the same relationship with a more nuanced measure of political violence at the province-level, we estimate our models using the province-level PKK fatalities data in Tezcür (2015).²¹ Similar to the results with the *OHAL* dummy, the results show that respondents from provinces with larger number of PKK fatalities have warmer attitudes towards refugees, and are more favorable to the peace process.

²⁰ Respondents from provinces with camps report higher levels of exposure to refugees (*difference*=0.11 and $t=5.81$ and $p<0.00002$). This suggests that our sampling strategy indeed accounted for individual exposure to Syrian refugees; and that respondents were likely to be truthful about their level of interactions with Syrian refugees.

²¹ Because the province-level PKK fatalities data are collinear with the province dummies, we drop the dummies in these regressions but include a dummy variable for camp province, and the log of district distance to the border -- two variables that can potentially affect public attitudes towards refugees and the peace process. See Tables F.9 and F.10 in the Appendix.

An additional concern may be that response rates vary systematically, and that refusal to participate in the survey is higher in the former OHAL region. In fact, refusal rates are slightly lower in OHAL provinces ($p < 0.01$). This strongly suggests that our results are not driven by respondents from areas with past conflict refusing to participate.

Finally, a critique may be that our experimental findings would be different if we conducted the survey today, with nearly 3 million refugees currently residing in Turkey (as of June 2017). Two of our results provide some clues, and suggest that the experimental results would not be so different. First, we explicitly studied areas in Turkey's southeast, some of which were already experiencing significant refugee presence. Importantly, as we show in the Appendix (Tables F.16-F.17), exposure to refugees does not moderate the effects of our treatments, so those with high levels of daily exposure to refugees do not respond differently to our treatments relative to those who have lower refugee exposure. This suggests that additional influx of refugees should not change our experimental findings.

Summary and implications

We examine how messages about Syrian refugees affect attitudes of local residents in Turkey towards refugees and towards the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. We show that priming commonly hypothesized negative effects of refugees (especially *Militant Ties*), as well as a positive prime (*Women and Children*) increases negative attitudes towards refugees and threat perceptions among members of majority group (Non-Kurds). Yet these primes do not lower support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process. Conversely, for Kurds, the *Economic Cost* treatment actually makes them more supportive of the peace process.

The non-experimental variables also provide several interesting findings. Supporters of the ruling AKP party are not fonder of the refugees compared to supporters of other parties, but they are systematically less likely to see refugees as a threat. There is strong evidence that residing in a province with a history of political violence (OHAL) is associated with more positive feelings towards refugees and greater support for the peace

process. This is consistent with previous findings that community-level experience with political violence is associated with an increase in altruistic attitudes.

This is not to say that refugees do not have negative externalities, and that emphasizing these externalities does not heighten negative attitudes towards refugees.²² Yet we show that in the context of one of the largest refugee crises, and against an ethnically tense backdrop (Turkey-PKK conflict), locals' political attitudes are not as malleable as many hypothesize. While information about refugees may affect perception of refugees among some respondents, it does not affect support for the peace process. Rather preexisting factors (partisanship and place of residence) shape attitudes towards peace.

It is also important to highlight that the finding that primes change attitudes, but not policy preferences is in line with other survey experiments that find similar effects of information (Kuziemko et al., 2015). Relatedly, Grigorieff, Roth & Ubfal (2016) demonstrate that while information about immigrants affects the locals' attitudes towards them, it has a limited effect on immigration policy preferences of the local respondents. In our case, we provide information about possible externalities of hosting refugees from a civil war in a neighboring country, thereby increasing the salience of the negative effects of civil conflict. We show that some of this information moves attitudes towards refugees and even threat perception, but has no effect on policy preferences related to solving a domestic conflict.

One concern might be that the recent ethnic tensions between Kurdish groups and the Turkish government potentially call into question our findings that refugees do not necessarily heighten local tensions. For instance, a Kurd from Turkey, who received training in the Islamic State camps in Syria, perpetrated a suicide attack in the border town of Suruç in Turkey that killed 32 individuals and triggered the collapse of the peace process (BBC, 2015). Hence, this attack might be considered as evidence for the transnational rebel networks mechanism identified in the literature. However, the recent round of violence in Turkey seems to have more to do with electoral dynamics (İdiz, 2015), or foreign policy related to the Syrian civil war (Çağaptay, 2015), rather than the influx of refugees. Moreover, an equally plausible, alternative interpretation of the Suruç

²²After all, we find that respondents who report high self exposure to refugees also have a heightened threat perception.

attack is that Turkey's open-door policy was the cause of both the large Syrian refugee flows as well as the higher chances of armed conflict in Turkey.

It is also important to acknowledge that some features of Turkey may set it apart from other recipients of Syrian refugees, especially the European countries. In particular, Turkey is a predominantly Sunni-Muslim country hosting mostly Sunni refugees, and the effect of refugee-related messages on the locals may differ if there are religious differences between the locals and the refugees. Yet it is also the case that most refugees flee to neighboring countries that tend to be similar to their country of origin.

Finally, our findings have important policy implications. Many NGOs and governments seek to reduce the locals' anxiety and promote positive views of the refugees.²³ However, we show that emphasizing positive messages featuring women and children refugees does not necessarily make the locals more supportive of the refugees, and can actually backfire, depending on how these messages are interpreted by the locals. Another implication that emerges from our finding is that information that the refugees may have weapons and ties with militant groups has a particularly strong effect on attitudes and threat perception of the locals. Thus, addressing these concerns and reassuring the local population that refugees are not a threat should be an important priority.

Replication data

The dataset and the do-file for the empirical analysis can be found at <http://www.prio.org/jpr/datasets/>.

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²³E.g., the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's response to the migrant crisis in Europe, and Germany's decision to accept hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in 2015 (Economist, 2015).

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Table I. Sample demographics

Variable	<i>Non-Kurds</i>					<i>Kurds</i>				
	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max	N	Mean	Std. dev.	Min	Max
Female	716	0.50	0.50	0	1	526	0.48	0.50	0	1
Age group	716	2.43	1.10	1	4	526	2.44	1.09	1	4
Married	715	0.70	0.46	0	1	524	0.76	0.43	0	1
AKP supporter	681	0.50	0.50	0	1	479	0.51	0.50	0	1
OHAL	716	0.13	0.33	0	1	526	0.43	0.50	0	1
Urban district	716	0.72	0.45	0	1	526	0.75	0.44	0	1
Ramadan survey	716	0.12	0.32	0	1	526	0.09	0.29	0	1
Education	716	3.99	1.42	1	8	524	3.45	1.65	1	8
Household income	697	5.50	2.87	1	16	487	4.21	2.12	1	16
<i>Components of wealth</i>										
Smart phone	716	0.33	0.47	0	1	526	0.17	0.38	0	1
Car	716	0.31	0.46	0	1	526	0.20	0.40	0	1
Computer	716	0.51	0.50	0	1	526	0.25	0.44	0	1
Washing machine	716	0.93	0.26	0	1	526	0.89	0.31	0	1
Dish washer	716	0.65	0.48	0	1	526	0.45	0.50	0	1
<i>Components of religious</i>										
Cover hair	702	5.00	1.96	1	7	518	6.19	1.51	1	7
Alcohol not OK	709	4.35	2.30	1	7	524	4.72	2.64	1	7
Pray	682	3.88	2.03	1	7	512	5.03	1.56	1	7
<i>Components of self-reported refugee exposure</i>										
Public transport	708	0.67	0.37	0	1	503	0.50	0.42	0	1
Street	707	0.64	0.37	0	1	502	0.69	0.36	0	1
Business	706	0.28	0.40	0	1	499	0.23	0.38	0	1
Social life	702	0.47	0.42	0	1	495	0.36	0.40	0	1
Market	702	0.62	0.38	0	1	503	0.56	0.40	0	1

[†]*Wealth, religious, and refugee exposure* are factor variables created using the components listed below each item. The differences in the number of respondents are due to missing values.

Table II. Experimental conditions

<i>Treatment</i>	<i>View on refugees</i>	<i>Description</i>
Control	---	
Economic cost	Negative	Syrian refugees impose large costs on government resources, and increase unemployment among Turkish citizens.
Ethnic balance	Negative	Syrian refugees upset Turkey's ethnic balance.
Militant ties	Negative	Syrian refugees have ties to militant groups that make Turkey less safe.
Women and children	Positive	Turkey's refugee policy has saved many innocent women and children.

Sample Strata (districts)

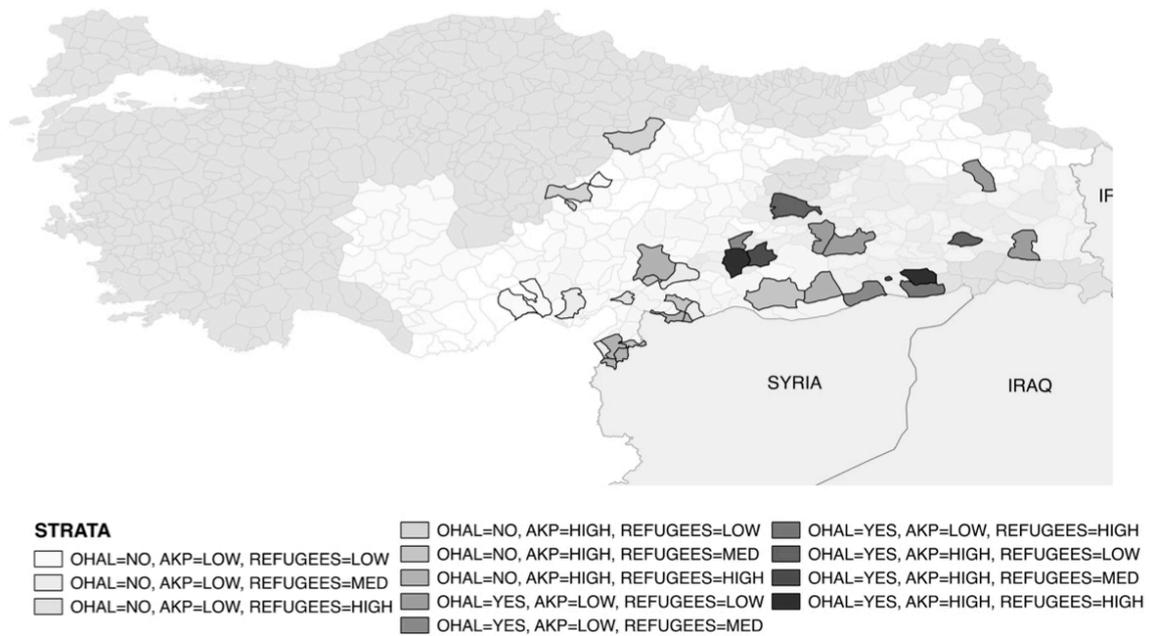


Figure 1. Map of the sampled districts

The white areas represent our sampling frame, and the districts with dark borders are those where our survey took place. As the map and the strata legend show, our survey experiment involved respondents from a diverse set of districts--close to and far from the border; high, medium, and low level of refugee presence; high and low support for the incumbent; and high and low exposure to past violence due to the Turkish-Kurdish conflict. The definitions of high, medium, and low are in section A.3 in the Appendix.

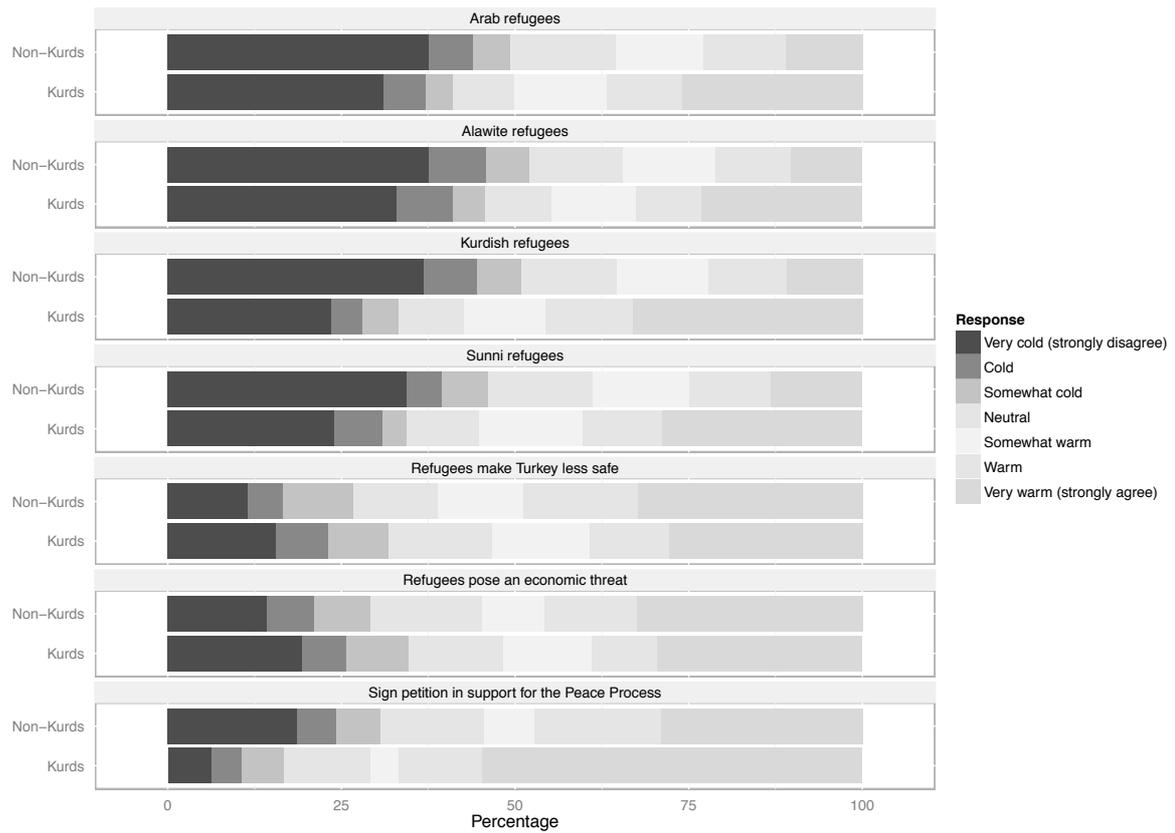


Figure 2. Responses to the main dependent variables questions – Kurdish / Non-Kurdish respondents comparison

The top four panels present the distribution of respondents' feelings towards particular groups of refugees on a scale from 1 (very cold feelings) to 7 (very warm feelings). The following three panels depict the distribution of respondents' agreement with the statements that refugees pose an economic threat / make Turkey less safe, and respondents' willingness to sign a petition in support of the peace process (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree).

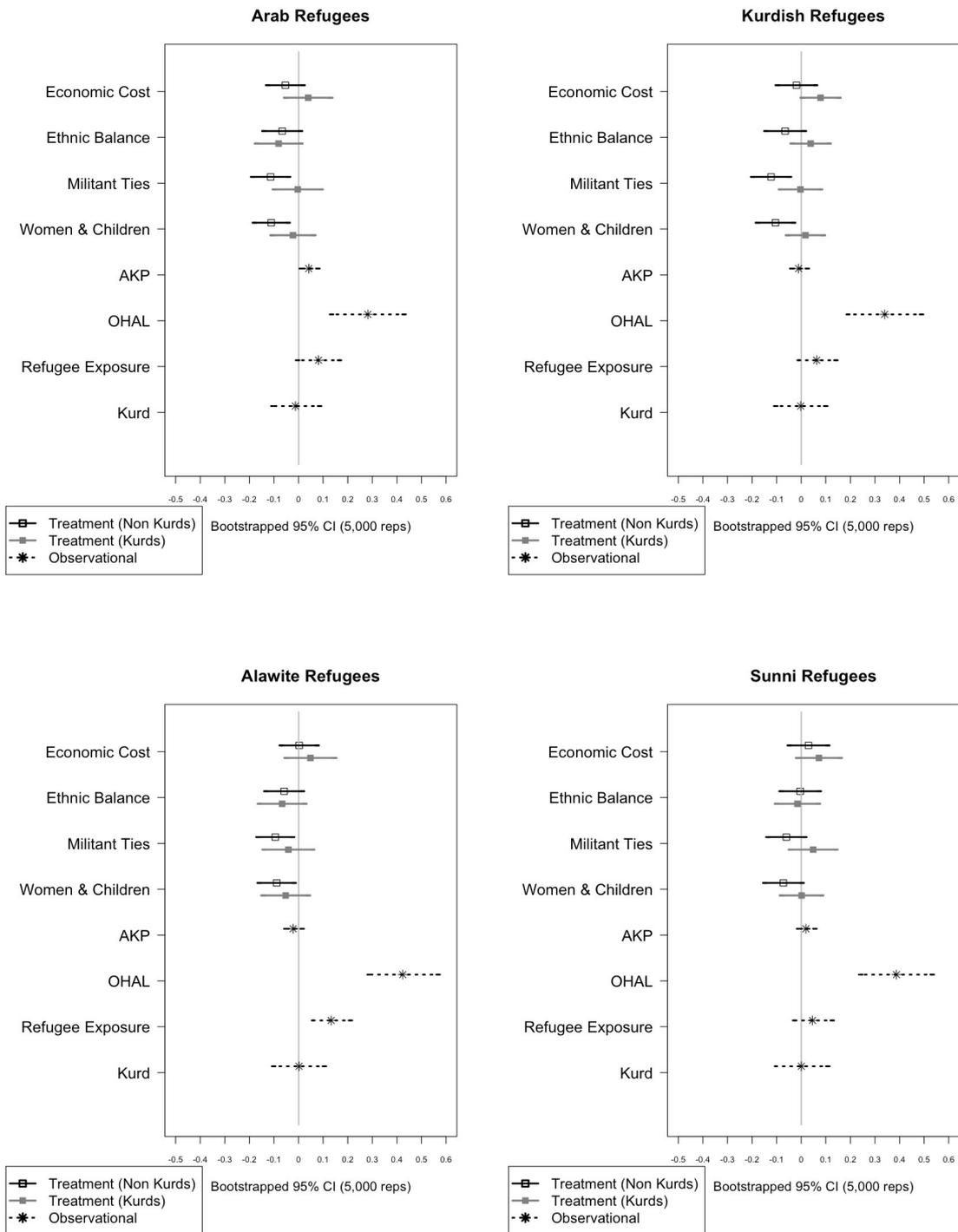


Figure 3. Positive attitudes towards different groups of Syrian refugees

These figures depict the marginal effect of our treatments and several observational variables on attitudes of Kurdish and non-Kurdish respondents towards Arab, Alawite, Kurdish, and Sunni refugees. Negative values imply that respondents feel cold (negative) towards the refugees, and positive values suggest warm (positive) feelings. We present 95 % confidence intervals.

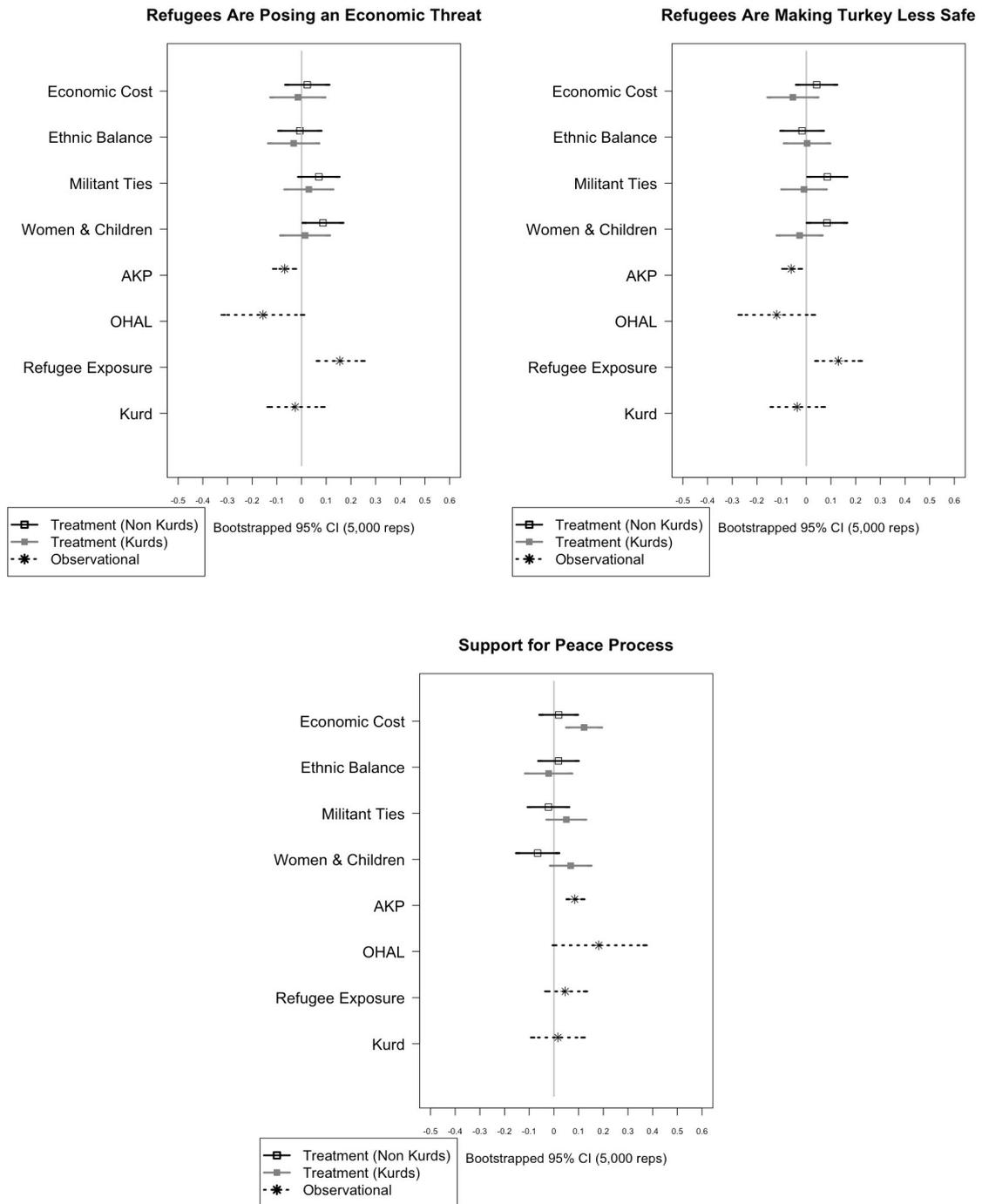


Figure 4. Refugee primes, threat perceptions, and support for the Turkish-Kurdish peace process

These figures depict the marginal effect of our treatments and several observational controls on Kurdish and non-Kurdish respondents' threat perception and willingness to support the peace process. In the two upper panels, negative values imply that respondents feel less threatened, and positive values suggest they feel more threatened. In the bottom plot, negative values mean respondents are less willing to support the peace process, and positive values mean they are more willing to do it. We present 95 % confidence intervals.