# Are Refugee Bilingual Children Disadvantaged in Their Cognitive and Linguistic Abilities?

**Özlem Yeter[1], Hugh Rabagliati[2], Duygu Özge[1]**
**[1]Middle East Technical University, [2]University of Edinburgh**

Over 3.6 million Syrian people, including nearly a million children, fled to Turkey after the war broke out in 2011 (UNHCR, 2020). Ensuring cognitive and linguistic development of these displaced children is an important priority, but the right methods for doing so are currently unclear as we have no systematic information on their cognitive development, or the contexts that promote bilingual language development. We used a set of cognitive and linguistic tasks and compared a sample (n=25) of bilingual Syrian refugee children (M=9;5) to non-refugee bilingual children from a minority group in Hatay (a city in southern Turkey) matched in age (M=9;4) and language background (Arabic and Turkish).

The Syrian refugee children in this study provided lower scores in tasks of working memory, fluid intelligence, and shifting ability, compared to non-refugee children. They also lagged the non-refugee-bilingual children in terms of Turkish vocabulary skills and narrative production, while their scores were significantly higher than the Hatay group for Arabic. The analysis of linguistic tests showed that both groups were roughly matched in their linguistic abilities: refugee children's Arabic skills appeared to be similar to non-refugee children's Turkish skills, and vice versa. This is important in the context of the refugee children showing lower performance across the cognitive tasks assessed; their matched language abilities indicate that these cognitive tasks may not be picking up on inherent differences between the groups, but rather differences that are a function of the children's very different backgrounds, including significant traumatic experiences in the refugee children.