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The Different Approaches of Academic Disciplines to the Phenomenon of Migration

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Syrian Population Flow and Its Spill-Over Effects in Turkey[1]

M. Onur Arun[2]
Mine Karakus Yetkin[3]

Introduction

The self-immolation of a street vendor, namely Sidi Bouazizi, in Tunisia is commonly referred as a spark that has triggered one of the most historical uprising waves in the Middle East. Looking at various political consequences of these uprising waves that are, in broad strokes, known as the "Arab Spring", it becomes apparent after a decade that these political movements did not result in formation of more democratic regimes in the Middle East and bring forth colossally democratic socio-political transformations. Contrary to this, in some countries, the process known as the Arab Spring has both appeared as and resulted in violence, escalation of radicalism and extremist movements, political and social turmoil, and loss of thousands of lives. An example of such consequences was the civil war in Syria that can be considered as the last phase of the Arab Spring and has led to serious political, economic and social questions for both Syria and neighbouring countries. It should, in fact, be noted that protests and uprising movements in Syria had initially started in 2011 as peaceful movements and flash mobs. However, they did not continue in such a peaceful way after they have encountered disproportionate power of official forces. By Spring and Summer 2011, the peaceful protests were not only confronted with the police and the Mukhabarat, but the military also organised operations against unarmed protestors as well as rebellious cities such as Latakia, Homs and Hamas (Baczko, et.al. 2018, p. 101). Military operations bombarded Sunni districts and cities, paving the way for armoured Syrian regime forces to enter these centres (ibid. 102). As of 2012, new actors came forward as the first instances of armed rebellious groups; and the armed conflict became the arena of struggle among international powers through bureaucratised and internationally financed armed organisations, especially after 2013 (ibid. 115-123).

One of the most dramatic consequences of the war in Syria was obviously the forced movement of millions of Syrian people from their home country to other countries including Turkey. The fact is that Turkey lies at the crossroads between Syria and more prosperous regions. Thus, starting from the first days of the civil war in Syria, it has become both a major transit country as well as a buffer zone. Sharing 911 km of border with Syria, it is one of the countries that is most affected by population flows from the Syrian civil war. The implications of the uprisings in Syria and the violent response of al-Assad's government have generated a humanitarian crisis leading to waves of refugees entering Turkey. Current statistics suggest 3.587.779 Syrians are registered in Turkey and 63.948 of them live in camps (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Temporary Protection Statistics, March 2020). 1.67 million of the Syrian population in Turkey is even

[1] Bu makale, 20-22 Mayıs 2021 tarihlerinde Ankara'da çevrimiçi olarak gerçekleştirilen Uluslararası Göç Kongresinde sözlü bildiri olarak sunulmuştur.

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younger than 18 years old (ibid.) and predominantly live in the metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Antep, Hatay, Urfa, Adana and Mersin as well as Kilis where there are high densities of the Syrian population (ibid.). A striking fact is that Syrian population movement to Turkey is today considered as one of the largest forced displacements after the Second World War.

Research's Objective and Context

The question at that point appears as what are the spill-over effects of the Syrian population from to Turkey? This research aims to reflect on this question with a particular focus on its effects on radicalisation, extremism and violence. More precisely saying, the primary objective of this research is to provide an insightful perspective concerning spill-over impacts of the flow of Syrian population to Turkey in terms of its potential in leading to escalation of radicalism, extremism and violence within the given socio-political structure of Turkey. To achieve this aim, first of all, it is crucial provide a snapshot regarding the current living conditions of the Syrian population in Turkey, which will be helpful to contextualise the research objective.

Looking at the current living conditions of the Syrian population in Turkey, it can be seen that they live in severe destitution in terms of employment, schooling and sheltering. With regard to employment, Syrians are predominantly found in the informal unqualified jobs sector working under insecure, dangerous, inhumane conditions and earning below the minimum wage. Although some reports estimate between 950.000-1.200.000 Syrians in Turkey are employed (International Crisis Group; 2018, p. 5; INGEV and IPSOS, 2017; Erdogan, 2019), only 31.000 have legal work permits and almost 95 per cent of the employed Syrians do not have access to formal employment (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, Labour Statistics). The unemployment rate among Syrians is also as high as 50 per cent (INGEV and IPSOS, 2017). Looking at access to education among children, it seems that more than a million children are of school age, yet only 684.919 of them have access to education (Ministry of National Education, Lifelong Learning Directorate General, October 2019). Moreover, many adolescents and young people have limited access to language classes, relevant technical and vocational training and higher education. The number of Syrians under temporary protection enrolled in universities in Turkey is around 20.000, but this still represents an enrolment rate of less than 4 per cent compared with the pre-war enrolment rate of 20 per cent in Syria (UNHCR, 2017-2018). Shelter is also an important issue concerning the Syrian population, of whom 98 per cent are left to meet their need for shelter themselves (see: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Temporary Protection Statistics, March 2020). A government analysis published in 2013 found that 25 per cent of Syrians were living in ruined buildings or under make-shift arrangements and 62 per cent lived in housing units together with eight or more people, which results in severe overcrowding.

In addition to such forms of severe destitution in which Syrian population live, their living conditions are dramatically shaped by the quality of interaction with the local population. This is because the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion also set the limits and circumstances of employment, housing and education. Some research addresses that the host communities "perceive Syrians as a threat to their economic and political wellbeing" (International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 6) leading to tensions and hostilities between Syrian and local communities. Negative perceptions,

coupled with the negative images presented in the media, have stirred up resentment among the population leading to mob violence and even to lynching (Kolukırık, 2009, p. 6). In this regard, it seems that there is an increasing negative perception of Syrians that can lead to the formation of anti-refugee or anti-migrant movements.

Source of Information: Method, Data and Analysis

As noted above, the primary focus of this research is to explore the spill-over effects of the Syrian population flow to Turkey in terms of its role in escalating radicalism, extremism and xenophobic tendencies within the given socio-political structure of Turkey. This particular focus of the research inevitably involves an examination of how these impacts have been influencing the current social, cultural political polarisation in Turkey as well. It is also inevitably accompanied by an investigation of how this polarisation resonate at the discursive level in politics and in the everyday life of the local community too.

With the purpose of responding these questions, this study has required an extensive data contained within the existing academic literature, policy and research reports. However, data of the existing empirical evidences from the given literature is also needed to be supplemented with a more immediate accounts providing insights into emergent extremist and radicalising narratives and drawn from published newspaper and social media contents. The latter, in particular, allows the study to capture popular narratives as well as the statements of politicians mostly coming from nationalist perspectives and known for their anti-Syrian rhetoric and anti-Syrian groups frequently using social media to disseminate their messages. The official social media accounts of political parties are also used to gather official statements on Syrian population movement to Turkey. In collecting the data and scrutinising the materials from both conventional and social media, particular attention was paid to the meaning and discourse that the subject narrates to convey her/his position to the public. This required critical examination of the narratives presented in the context of the recent history and contemporary social-political atmosphere of Turkish society.

Methodologically speaking, the data retrieved from both academic literature and mainstream media as well as social media were analysed using critical discourse analysis. Epistemologically, critical discourse analysis is appropriate for this study as it recognises discourse as a social practice that constitutes the social world and is shaped by it (Fairclough et. al., 2011, p. 358) and, it follows, that "discursive practices produce and reproduce unequal power relations" between different social groups (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249). Considering that an individual's discourse is structured by dominance and power and that dominance is legitimised by the ideologies of powerful hegemonic groups (Wodak, 2001, p. 3), critical discourse analysis becomes a powerful way of analysing how the extremist/radicalising anti-Syrian discourses are generally produced and legitimised. Hence, with critical discourse analysis the inherent power inequality is unravelled between Syrians, who escaped from the civil war in Syria, and local communities in Turkey. This is particularly because such inequality is produced and reproduced semiotically in everyday use of language in the discourses of humiliation and grievance.

Concerning the qualities of data drawn on in this study, it should be first noted that the findings of existing empirical research from surveys conducted by research centres as well as academic studies

are employed to present an overall picture of attitudes towards the Syrian population in Turkey while the particular discursive reflections of humiliation and grievances towards Syrians are elicited from new empirical research into the opinions expressed on social media platforms. In addition to this, this work has analysed social media platforms in the form of Twitter trend topics. The platforms were selected according to number of posts and their popularity, measured by their status as trend topics. All posts were reviewed from the beginning of the hashtags and trend topics; and common themes as well as discourses on humiliation and grievance were identified and classified. The sample of the research includes tweets posted on the topics such as #suriyeliler (Syrians) #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum (I don't want Syrians in my country) and #suriyelilersuriyeye (Syrians move to Syria). Lastly, it should also be noted that news reports about Syrians were also searched through the online web pages of mainstream printed newspapers to follow how the mainstream media reflects the reactions towards Syrian population in Turkey. These news reports were analysed using critical discourse analysis and employing the same coding as for the social media content. The type of news that came up after searching with key-word "Syrians", the headlines highlighting alleged adverse impacts of Syrians to the society gave more than expected information about the standing of the newspapers and messages with anti-Syrian discourse conveyed through mass media.

Key Findings in Brief

It is an undoubtful fact that the sudden influx of population as a result of the Syrian civil war brought an additional burden to Turkey, already struggling with economic stagnation, unemployment, poverty, and inadequate public services. The introduction of a highly vulnerable foreign population into this already difficult situation has had an sociological outcome that the Syrian community is blamed for the social and economic problems that the local population has already been facing, which involves a danger in leading to extremist tendencies, discriminatory and xenophobic speeches. The "temporariness" of the status of Syrians has been reinforced by the representation of Syrians as "guests" in the mainstream media and wider hegemonic discourse, which has created a perception that newly arrived Syrian populations should stay in Turkey for a limited amount of time and be largely invisible. Such expectations, created through various means of media and public speeches of politicians, have led local communities to become alarmed by any slight instance that is outside of their expectations of "subservient", "non-demanding", and "guest" Syrians. Such expectations are coupled with suspicion and concerns over security towards the newcomers due to open border policies and increasing competition especially among low-income groups over public services. In other words, with the unprecedented influx of Syrians and social as well as economic problems, new issues arise about "exclusionist and xenophobic attitudes" towards the newcomers (Saracoglu and Belanger, 2019, p. 364). For instance, an interview conducted by BBC Turkey reporter in Fatih/Istanbul, captured the following opinions among small businesses owners who find themselves in competition with Syrian businesses:

> *Because they (Syrians) are refugees they take advantage of our country. We cannot take such advantage from our own country.*

> *They have priority in hospitals. Wherever you go they have priority. It is as if they are citizens.*
>
> *They don't conform to our norms and traditions. They are laid-back people. As if they live in Hawai, we live elsewhere. I'm 32 years old, I haven't lived such comfortable life in this country, that's all I say.* (Girit, 2019)

According to various public opinion surveys and field research, negative perceptions about Syrians are on the rise. To illustrate, comparing the results of EUROSTAT Perception Surveys conducted in 2006 and 2015 in Istanbul and Ankara, anti-foreigner attitudes appear to be on the rise. In Istanbul, 15 per cent of those surveyed in 2006 responded "strongly disagree" to the question "Do you think foreigners are good for your city?". By 2015, the proportion had risen to 34 per cent. The findings in Ankara were similar: 19.7 per cent in 2006, rising to 35.0 per cent in 2015 (Düşündere and Çilingir, 2017, p. 4). To the question "Do you think foreigners living in your city are well integrated" in Istanbul, only 9.3 per cent expressed strong disagreement in 2006; but in 2015, 40 per cent of the city population strongly disagrees with that statement and 24 per cent partially disagrees (ibid. 3).

Another survey conducted by the Economist Platform (2017) based on a sample of 1,500 people in 12 major cities in Turkey revealed: Almost %70 of participants regard Syrians joining the labour market as negative or very negative.%70 of participants think that Syrians are the reason for the unemployment of Turkish people.

%78 of participants believes Syrians create security problem and cause public disorder. Another study conducted by a research team from the Political and Social Research Institute of Europe in 2017 provides qualitative data on the nature of this negativity (Eşigül et al, 2017, p. 8). In the report it was noted that few of the participants present discourses of marginalisation and humiliation:

> *They lower the quality of our country. On my way to the bridge (across the Bosphorus) I can come across Syrian beggars, Syrian street vendors in at least in five or six different places... They get financial help that we don't have... Almost 1500-1600 TL money they get per person. Despite this they go out on the streets (to beg) (Woman, 49).*
>
> *Our country is already in a difficult situation; the uneducated scumbags should go. If there are doctors, professors, businessmen with lots of money they can stay. (man, 33)* (Eşigül, et. al., 2017, p. 22)

Syrian Barometer, the research for which is conducted by Konda Research Agency, also provides insightful data about how local people perceive Syrians (Konda, 2016, p. 13) in relation to economic and security issues. It is seen that those who to a certain extent agree (somewhat agree, agree and strongly agree) the statements of "cities are less secure with Syrian asylum-seekers", "asylum-seekers are a threat to the economy in Turkey", "no more asylum-seeker should be allowed into Turkey from now on" and "employment opportunities have decreased because of the Syrian asylum-seekers" are %74, %72, %63, and %71, respectively. In addition to this, the violent confrontation in the village of Izmir shows how economic constraint and competition over limited job opportunities in agriculture work to inflame tensions. In a poor neighbourhood at the periphery of Izmir's Torbalı town, the main

economic activity is agricultural labour. After the settlement of Syrians, most local agricultural workers lost their jobs since the employers prefer cheaper and non-demanding Syrian labour over locals (International Crisis Group, 2018, pp. 5-6; Ulu, 2017). In April 2017, simmering tensions between the Syrian and local population reached a peak after a rumour spread through the neighbourhood that a 12-year-old Turkish boy and his family had been beaten to death by a group of Syrians. The Chief of the Neighbourhood told a newspaper reporter that:

> *They first took our jobs. Then they stole our valuables. They engaged in sexual intercourse in the cemeteries. And finally, they tried to take our lives*. (Ulu, 2017)

According to an interview conducted by the International Crisis Group (2018, p. 3) with an anonymous international organisation "that tracks refugee related social tension and criminal incidents", there were 181 such incidents in 2017 resulting in 35 deaths (24 of them Syrian). The formation of ghetto-like low-income neighbourhoods in which Syrians and locals live in close proximity have the potential to intensify hostility (ibid. 4). For instance, in Istanbul on 28th June, 2019, a social media group named İkitelli Youth Group started a provocative twitter hashtag of "#Ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum" ("I Don't Want Syrians in My Country") based on an unfounded rumour that a child had been molested by a Syrian youth in İkitelli, a poor working-class district of Istanbul. The rumour spread across the whole district and crowds poured onto the streets storming Syrian businesses and houses. Police used force to disperse the crowd with tear gas and water cannon. Subsequently, 16 people were arrested for spreading provocative messages which triggered the attacks against Syrians (Sözcü, 2019; Hürriyet, 2019).

Existing empirical evidences indicates a common negative perception of Syrians among locals, particularly with reference to economic and welfare rights. However, it should also be noted that such perception is instrumentalised by various political actors in their narratives criticising opponent political actors, which involves a serious potential danger in leading to escalation of radicalisation and violence among grassroot supporters of these actors by deepening the exiting polarisation in Turkey. For instance, in his speech in the Great Assembly, the RPP (Republican People's Party) group deputy chairman blamed JDP (Justice and Development Party) policies for the "refugee problem" adding that giving citizenship rights to Syrians with the agenda of gaining additional voters is politically immoral (Şimşek, 2017). Another MP from RPP accused the JDP of putting self-interest ahead of the interests of the nation by claiming that JDP decision makers have a covert political agenda, such as giving Syrian people citizenship in exchange for their votes in future elections (ibid.). An interview with a representative of Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants summarises how due to "the vagueness of their status and lack of permanence" Syrians in Turkey have become a domestic political tool mobilised in "governing and opposition parties" campaigns while the governing party uses the threat to "open borders and set all Syrians free to pass into Europe" as a tool in its relations with the EU (Hayatsever, 2018).

Besides, political polarisation over the issue of Syrians in local politics can be observed in social media accounts, especially in Twitter. In the analysis of such tweets, radical expressions were encountered frequently and such messages were approved and liked by hundreds of other users. For instance, a pro-JDP user, in a post (dated 1 July 2018) proposes that expelling RPP supporters to Syria

and letting Syrians stay in Turkey as an excellent idea. Such messages do not seem to be marginal as they are liked and applauded by hundreds of other users also. On the other hand, under the hashtag of #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum ("I don't want Syrians in my country"), RPP and GP (Good Party) supporters blame the JDP for the "problems" brought by Syrians. Most of the accounts posted in the hashtag share the view of a post, dated 14 January 2019, which blames the government for filling the country with radical political actors. The account user bitterly criticises the government's Syrian policy questioning how the government can regard radicals from Idlib, who have decapitated many people there, as friends. Another tweet, using vulgar expressions, posted on 29 October 2019 expresses grievance towards Syrians and the government. The post includes a video of Syrians enjoying their free-time in an indoor swimming pool and claims that while Turkish soldiers are sacrificing themselves for Syrians in Syria, Syrians are enjoying their free-time in swimming pools in Turkey. All of these demonstrate that movement of Syrian people to Turkey and their existence in the country are to a certain extent instrumentalised by political actors and their grassroot supporters in way that illustrates a potential danger by deepening the existing polarisation that can easily lead to escalation of radicalism and extremism against each other.

In fact, a reciprocal relation should be considered, especially when discussing the relationship between the escalation of anti-Syrian sentiments in the grassroot and instrumentalization of these anti-Syrian sentiments by various political actors. This means that on the one side anti-Syrian sentiments play a role of incentive for some political actors to instrumentalise them with the purpose of political gain whilst anti-Syrian political narratives also reinforce the escalation of xenophobic tendencies in society; and thus this reciprocal process serves to consolidation of a Syrian image as a social identity of "negative other". For example, an MP in a tweet complained, saying that "Unbelievable. Health Care System demands payment from a veteran who took a bullet to his face, lost his tongue and teeth but for Syrians it is free" (Yeniçağ, 2019). Such a vivid depiction of an antagonism between "a patriotic citizen who did not hesitate to fight and take a bullet for his beloved country" and "Syrians" involve a serious danger that can stimulate emergence of a social atmosphere in which widespread and prevalent anti-Syrian sentiments can easily be consolidated and flared up even further. Another MP from the same political movement says that "by 2040, 10 per cent of the Turkish population will be Syrians". He goes on to assert that "by 2040, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Hatay will be no longer cities of Turks; half of the Adana and Mersin population will lose their Turkish identity" (Yeniçağ, 2019). By triggering nationalist sentiments that "the future of the nation is at stake" and presenting Syrians as threats to national identity involves a danger of fuelling extreme hostility towards Syrian populations.

Lastly, it should be added that existing surveys demonstrate negative sentiments towards Syrians from across the political spectrum. Indeed, while supporters of competing parties are divided on almost every other issue, they agree on the question of Syrians in Turkey. However, by shifting the focus from the general population to those using the anonymity afforded by social media to express more marginal positions, the analysis of social media posts reveals how strong or extreme supporters of the pro-government and opposition parties express their hatred and antagonism towards each other by instrumentalising the Syrian issue. Thus, the apparently positive stance towards Syrians expressed in the social media posts of JDP supporters is actually an expression of hatred towards the opposition groups, namely RPP and PDP. As for the opposition groups, extreme anti-Syrian xenophobic

discourses target the ruling party and its supporters. These groups blame JDP and its supporters for opening the borders and allowing the infiltration of Syrians at the cost of social cohesion and welfare. From these analyses, it becomes clear that Syrians become the object of extremist confrontation between opposing political groups. This instrumentalization reinforces the xenophobic tendencies in society in two ways. Firstly, locals blame Syrians for the structural problems they also experience. Secondly, for the host Turkish society Syrians become the "negative other" who are regarded as incompatible with the local society and culture.

Conclusion

This work has discussed the spill-over effects of the Syrian population flow to Turkey in terms of its potential in leading to escalation of radicalism, extremism and violence within the current socio-political structure of Turkey. While exploring the effects of the Syrian population flow to Turkey in relation to extremism and radicalisation, this work has attempted to frame its discussion by placing various contextual cleavages of the country at the centre of research and aimed to explore how this population flow resonates at the discursive level in the grassroots of different social, political and cultural groups. Within this objective, this work first of all has set the scene through locating the Syrian Civil War within the context of the "Arab Spring", particularly considering it as the last phase of the process of social uprising and turmoil in the countries of the Middle East. After briefly noting transformation of peaceful protests into a civil war in Syria and providing the official statistics concerning magnitude of the population flow from Syria to Turkey as a consequence of the civil war, it provided a brief snapshot regarding the current living conditions of the Syrian population in Turkey, which illustrate a sheer destitution and deprived conditions especially in terms of employment, access to decent schooling conditions and sheltering. Following this, this work has provided a short explanation of the method and data collection and then moved to present an overall picture of the impact of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey.

Drawing on a vast magnitude of empirical evidences from both existing empirical materials of different research institutions and various social media platforms, this research provided three interconnected arguments. First, it addressed negative perceptions towards Syrian population in Turkey by drawing on both quantitatively and qualitatively collected empirical evidences and underlined that competition over scarce pubic services and welfare provisions among low-income groups leads to emergence of a discriminative account against Syrian population that mostly depicts them as scapegoats of their inability to access better socio-economic conditions, which involves a serious danger in escalation of radicalism. Secondly, this work underlined that Syrian population turned into a group that represent a new "other" who are blamed with various accusations at grassroot level; and this is instrumentalised by some political actors with some political gain against their rivalries through creating a language of hostility and antagonism between local and Syrian population at the discursive level. This work underlined that such attempts can potentially serve to accelerate extremist attitudes. Lastly, this work has also taken attention on reciprocal relationship between escalation of anti-Syrian sentiments in grassroot and instrumentalization of anti-Syrian sentiments by various political actors; and discussed that this is a warning sing of escalation of extremism since both anti-

Syrian sentiments and political instrumentalization of such sentiments serve to feed each other and help to consolidate a particular image of Syrian people as "negative other".

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