

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From Open Doors to Closed Minds: The Transformation of Perceptions Toward Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of historical and ideological continuities in Turkey's migration policies on contemporary attitudes toward Syrian refugees. It examines how ethnic homogenization and discrimination, rooted in the foundation of the Turkish Republic, continue to shape public perceptions and policy frameworks. The research is based on qualitative methodologies, including 41 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between July and December 2021 with Syrian refugees and Turkish community members residing in Altındağ, Mamak, and Ümitköy districts of Ankara. Participants were purposively selected to provide diverse perspectives on social integration and identity formation. The findings reveal a shift from initial acceptance under religious solidarity to increasing exclusion, driven by nationalist rhetoric. Despite official claims of promoting multiculturalism, Turkish policies and societal attitudes often reinforce prejudices, fostering a socio-political environment where racial and ethnic biases persist.

Keywords: ethnic homogenisation; refugee integration; multiculturalism policy; exclusion

Introduction

During my research on Syrian refugees in Ankara, I interviewed a factory owner who employed Syrian workers as cheap labor. Observing his employees, he remarked, “*We cannot be like them; for us, the nation, the people, and the flag are important. I would say we as a society are racist.*” His words reflect a broader trend in Turkish society, where racism toward Syrian refugees has become normalized, embedded in both everyday interactions and political rhetoric. This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of “Turkish superiority,” a concept rooted in the construction of Turkish ethnic identity as a dominant national identity. The historical evolution of Turkish nationalism, influenced by colonialist logic, has led to policies that promote the supremacy of the Turkish identity over others (Gökay and

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Tunç 2016). Similar patterns of systemic racism are evident in the state's treatment of Kurds, marked by violence, discrimination, and assimilation efforts (Avci 2018; Yarkin 2022). Kurdish resistance to these policies is framed as an anticolonial struggle, challenging the state's dominant narratives (Coskan and Şen 2023). Following Barış Ünlü's interpretation, "Turkishness"¹ is a structurally reinforced identity that defines itself in contrast to the "other," perpetuating racial superiority under the guise of national unity (Ünlü 2023).

Similar patterns of exclusion can also be observed in the treatment of Syrian refugees, who have increasingly been perceived as a homogeneous group, which has fueled widespread negative attitudes toward them (Bélanger and Saraçoğlu 2019; Secen 2021). Despite the government's emphasis on shared religion and solidarity (Lazarev and Sharma 2015), Turkish citizens continue to exhibit significant levels of prejudice toward Syrian refugees. The normalization of these prejudices is especially alarming, as it has penetrated various facets of public life, including mainstream media, TV series, and comedy shows. These platforms have played a crucial role in perpetuating harmful stereotypes, while social media has further disseminated discriminatory discourses, contributing to the normalization of hatred and racism (Bozdağ 2019).

The normalization of such racism stands in sharp contrast to Turkey's initial response following the Syrian civil war in 2011. Under the administration of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), Turkey adopted an "open door" policy, which was framed around notions of religious brotherhood and solidarity. This policy was notably accepting, allowing those fleeing the war in Syria to enter Turkey with minimal checks, and continued for a period without any strict limitations on the number of refugees. As a result, approximately 3.5 million Syrian refugees settled within Turkey's borders (Çevik 2021). In the early years, this approach fostered a widespread atmosphere of tolerance among the Turkish population. However, as the number of refugees increased and economic hardships grew, perceptions shifted dramatically. Syrian refugees, once welcomed, became the target of rising xenophobia and discrimination. They are frequently labeled as criminals, blamed for stealing jobs, and scapegoated for various societal issues, leading to their marginalization (Aydin et al. 2021). Moreover, the ongoing economic crisis (Ceritoğlu et al. 2017; Hangartner et al. 2018; Kira et al. 2023), combined with polarizing political discourses (Aksoy and Yıldırım 2020; Kütük-Kuriş 2021; McCarthy 2020), has further fueled these discriminatory attitudes, deepening the divisions within Turkish society.

Research focusing on Syrian refugees in Turkey extensively covers dimensions such as access to education (Çelik and İçduygu 2018), integration strategies (Şimşek 2018), healthcare services (Achiri and Ibrahim 2022; Alawa et al. 2019), participation in the labor market (Elçi et al. 2021), and gender-specific violence (Doğutaş 2019). These studies provide critical insights into the realities and needs of Syrian refugees and illuminate the multifaceted challenges they face in the host country. On the other hand, discrimination against Syrian refugees is being researched from various perspectives. In this context, racism toward Syrian refugees in Turkey is a significant issue documented in various studies. Özdüzen et al. (2020) highlight the prevalence of digital racism and the changing categorization of Syrians in Turkey, pointing to the daily visibility and appeal of large-scale racism facilitated

by social media. Bozdağ (2019) examines the role of social media in perpetuating discrimination against refugees in Turkey, shedding light on how online platforms contribute to shaping public opinion and promoting discriminatory attitudes. Additionally, Yitmen and Verkuyten (2018) research positive and negative behavioral intentions toward Syrian refugees in Turkey, examining the roles of national identity, threat, and humanitarian concerns in shaping attitudes toward refugees.

However, it appears that the body of research on Syrian refugees in Turkey rarely ventures into examining Turkish racism as one of the primary causes of the discrimination these individuals face. Most research has focused on the emotional and political implications created by current conditions, rather than exploring the deeper, systemic roots of this discrimination. In this article, my goal is to understand the current face of racism directed at Syrian refugees, stemming from the foundational origins of the Turkish Republic, which celebrated its centennial last year, and the systematic and structural racism embedded in the national identity against all non-Turkish groups. Based on the data gathered from my six-month fieldwork in Ankara in 2021, where I conducted in-depth interviews with both local Turkish community members and Syrian refugees, I will analyze how the continuity of Republican ideology shapes the way an ordinary Turk perceives and interacts with the “other” in everyday life. I aim to explain how ordinary Turks, influenced by racist undertones and political discourses rooted in the idea of a homogeneous Turkish race as a nation-state, tend to position themselves as superior to the “other,” regardless of the identity or group being defined. This tendency, which I will discuss in more detail in the following sections, manifests as automatic and learned behaviors, with Syrian refugees being the current focus of such discriminatory practices and attitudes in Turkish society.

In this article, I will focus on the evolution of perceptions toward shared cultural and religious identities by examining the complex interactions between Syrian refugees and the host Turkish community. Initially, the migration of Syrians was viewed positively, largely due to historical ties and shared religious beliefs, fostering a sense of solidarity. However, my findings reveal a shift from initial acceptance to growing racism, where these shared cultural and religious elements, once seen as unifying, have now become the basis for discrimination. Specifically, the Arab ethnic identity has been coded as a reason for exclusion, with an increasing emphasis on the superiority of Turkishness, which influences both everyday interactions and structural approaches. Through this study, I aim to uncover the racial motivations behind the discrimination against Syrian refugees, and demonstrate how Turkishness is socially and structurally constructed, reinforcing hierarchies that position Syrians as the “other.”

To explore this further, I will first discuss the concept of multiculturalism as a conceptual framework. Then, I will examine the structural reflexes of the Turkish Republic toward mass migration movements throughout its history, often masked under the guise of multiculturalism. These structural and political responses have frequently emphasized the hierarchy between Turkish identity and the “other.” By unpacking this hierarchy, the later sections of the article will offer a deeper understanding of how this emphasis on superiority translates into the exclusionary

practices seen in everyday interactions between local community members and Syrian refugees.

Conceptual Framework: Multiculturalism, Racism, and Group Dynamics

In this article, I explore how attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Turkey are shaped through the lens of multiculturalism and social identity theory, while also analyzing how these processes reinforce social hierarchies. Multiculturalism, in theory, aims to recognize and protect ethnic and cultural diversity within a society. Thinkers like Kymlicka (1995) and Taylor (1994) have argued that multiculturalism enhances social harmony by protecting minority rights and allowing individuals to retain their cultural identities while participating in broader society. Kymlicka sees the protection of minority cultures as integral to social justice, while Taylor emphasizes that identity and recognition are essential for individuals to fully realize themselves in modern societies.

However, as my data show, multiculturalism's focus on cultural recognition often falls short of addressing deeper issues of structural racism and power imbalances. Critics like Purdie-Vaughns and Walton (2011) argue that multicultural frameworks can obscure systemic inequalities by concentrating too heavily on cultural celebration without confronting the economic and social inequities faced by marginalized groups. In the Turkish context, the rhetoric of multiculturalism has similarly masked the underlying ethnic hierarchies present in society, particularly in relation to Syrian refugees (Berry 2017; Vertovec 2010).

Through my interviews, it became evident that the Arab identity, often generalized under the label of "Syrian," is coded negatively, and this ethnic stereotyping aligns with social identity theory, which explains how individuals tend to favor their own "in-group" while negatively differentiating "out-groups" (Tajfel and Turner 1986). The Turkish identity has long been constructed as an in-group characterized by cultural superiority, while Syrian refugees have increasingly been positioned as the out-group, perceived as culturally inferior and undesirable. This dynamic is particularly visible in the way local community members view Syrian refugees through the lens of Turkish nationalism, where ethnic homogeneity is seen as a key marker of the nation-state, a perspective deeply rooted in the Republic's historical commitment to Turkishness (Ünlü 2016).

Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities" has been influential in understanding how nations are socially constructed, particularly through shared symbols, histories, and cultural narratives (Anderson 2016). In the Turkish context, the idea of a homogeneous Turkish identity has been central to the nation-building project. However, as Partha Chatterjee argues in his postcolonial critique, this form of nationalism often replicates the colonial power structures it seeks to resist. Chatterjee's revision suggests that while nationalism in postcolonial states like Turkey is framed as a resistance against external powers, it simultaneously imposes internal hierarchies by marginalizing ethnic and cultural groups, such as Kurds and Syrian refugees. This postcolonial perspective offers a critical lens through which to view the persistence of racialized national identities in Turkey, where the emphasis on Turkishness has historically excluded and marginalized groups perceived as "others." This helps explain how Syrian refugees, despite shared religious ties,

continue to be seen as an out-group, reinforcing the in-group/out-group dynamics central to both social identity theory and postcolonial critiques of nationalism.

In my interviews, this in-group/out-group dynamic manifested clearly in the participants' language. For example, one participant noted that Syrians were "dirty" and lacked the same sense of honor and national pride as Turks, reinforcing a sense of Turkish superiority and distancing Syrians as "other." Similarly, local Turkish participants frequently generalized Syrian refugees under the "Arab" label, reflecting historical and cultural prejudices that position Arabs as inferior. This prejudice was not only evident in personal interactions but also reinforced by structural practices, such as exclusion from certain neighborhoods and discrimination in the labor market.

While multiculturalism might acknowledge these cultural differences, it does little to address the power dynamics that are at play in such interactions (Goldberg 1994). As Nancy Fraser (1997) suggests, focusing solely on recognition without considering the distribution of resources and power within a society can lead to further marginalization. The temporary protection status granted to Syrian refugees, while offering a degree of safety, does not challenge the entrenched ethnic hierarchies that limit their social mobility and integration.

To overcome the limitations of multiculturalism, I argue for an intercultural approach that actively engages with these power imbalances and promotes dialog between cultural groups. Interculturalism, as described by Bouchard (2011) and Cattle (2012), emphasizes the importance of interaction and mutual influence between cultural groups, rather than passive coexistence. This approach is particularly relevant in the Turkish context, where interactions between Syrian refugees and the local community are often mediated by deep-seated prejudices and everyday racism.

My interviews revealed how local Turkish participants often expressed subtle forms of racism, such as discomfort with Syrians speaking Arabic in public spaces or assumptions that Syrians were "backwards." These everyday encounters, while seemingly minor, reflect a broader system of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1977), where the dominant group—Turks—maintains their position of power by subtly devaluing the cultural practices and identities of Syrians. Interculturalism, in this context, would not just celebrate cultural diversity but actively work to dismantle these power structures by fostering genuine dialog and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, the limitations of multiculturalism are evident in the racist attitudes and institutional discrimination that persist in Turkish society, particularly toward Syrian refugees. As my data suggest, the in-group/out-group dynamics between Turks and Syrians are reinforced by both personal interactions and structural inequalities, making interculturalism a more effective approach for promoting social integration and anti-racism. By focusing on dialog, interaction, and power dynamics, interculturalism offers a path forward that can help dismantle the deep-seated prejudices and structural barriers that continue to hinder the inclusion of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Continuity of Racism in Migration Policies

Understanding the impact of racist approaches within the context of migration policies in Turkey is of critical importance for the analysis of the data in this study. Exposed to numerous migration movements throughout its 100-year Republican history, Turkey has naturally shaped its legal-political regulations in line with ideological perspectives. Analyzing all political approaches could form the subject of a much broader article. Therefore, in this section, I will examine some significant political regulations that have had key effects in demonstrating how the founding ideological approach of the Republic has continuity in the context of migration policies toward Syrian refugees.

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 transformed Turkey's political and legal landscape, especially regarding Turkish identity and ethnic hierarchy. Nationalist-driven laws aimed to create a homogenous national identity centered on Turkish ethnicity, marginalizing non-Turkish ethnic groups. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne granted limited privileges to Armenians, Greeks, and Jews without ensuring citizenship or equality, establishing a Turkish Muslim-majority framework that prioritized Turks over non-Muslim minorities (İçduygu, Erder and Gençkaya 2014). After the Republic's founding, ethnic and religious purity gained prominence, with national identity molded around Turkishness.

With the establishment of the Republic, the pursuit of nation-state construction and ethnic homogenization was further strengthened, and these efforts gained a concrete legal framework with the 1934 Settlement Law. The 1934 Settlement Law redefined the ethnic structure of Turkey as "of Turkish descent" and "affiliated with Turkish culture," allowing for the legal shaping of pressures and assimilation efforts directed at groups outside the Turkish ethnic identity. The regulations introduced by this law legitimized discrimination and exclusion against groups outside the Turkish race and culture, especially ethnic groups such as Kurds. Within the framework of the Turkism ideology, which also contained racist practices rising in the 1930s, the approach to the Muslim migration during the establishment years was altered, leading to the emergence of policies emphasizing Turkishness, Turkish ethnicity, and the Turkish language (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya 2014). The ideological groundwork of the period led to the enactment of the 1934 Settlement Law No. 2510. This law divided the residents of Turkey into three groups: "those of Turkish descent and connected to Turkish culture," "those who do not speak Turkish but are considered part of Turkish culture," and "those who neither speak Turkish nor are part of Turkish culture," aiming to "assimilate" these groups (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya 2014).

The racist approach of the Settlement Law is evident from its initial provisions. The first article of the Settlement Law states: "In Turkey, adjustments to the population's residence and dispersion will be made according to a program implemented by the Ministers of Execution, due to the allegiance to Turkish culture. This responsibility is assigned to the Ministry of Interior" (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya 2014). This clause highlights a preference for identities inherently tied to Turkishness and sets the primary goal of redistributing the population within the framework of allegiance to Turkish culture. This approach, favoring homogeneous identities, is also apparent in the third article and suggests a significant continuity in

modern migration policies. According to this article, only “those of Turkish descent and connected to Turkish culture” have the right to immigrate and settle in Turkey. This racially and ethnically biased approach persists in Turkey’s contemporary refugee, and more broadly, its immigration and foreign policies (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya 2014).

The 1934 Settlement Law laid the groundwork for migration policy approaches during a significant period of the Republic’s history. One of the most striking examples demonstrating the continuity of racist and homogenizing foundational ideology is the approach to the migration movements termed “cognate migration,” which occurred at different times in Bulgaria for various reasons. These migration waves were encouraged within the “cognate” policy framework, linking them to the pressure and assimilation policies against Turks living in Bulgaria. Integrating these migrating groups into the Turkish identity within the context of national identity construction has also reinforced structural discrimination against other ethnic and religious groups in Turkey (Şimşir 1986). On the other hand, the migration movements of Kurds, being outside the Turkish identity, were treated differently compared to the tolerance shown to “kin” coming from Bulgaria. Particularly in the early 1990s, the mass migration of Kurds from the northern regions of Iraq to Turkey was a flight from Saddam Hussein’s oppressive policies against minorities. The pressures on ethnic and religious groups in Iraq led to the mass asylum of Kurds in Turkey. However, this migration movement was not met with the same “cognate” policy by Turkey (Kirişçi and Karaca 2015). The different approaches toward Turks from Bulgaria and Kurds from Iraq clearly display Turkey’s ethnic-centered migration policies.

In the 1980s, the concept of “cognate” re-emerged as a central theme in Turkey’s migration policies. The year 1979 marked a significant turning point in Turkey’s migration history. The Iranian Revolution and the Soviet Union’s intervention in Afghanistan triggered two major migration movements, directly impacting Turkey. Approximately 1 million Iranians sought refuge in Turkey, and one-third of Afghanistan’s population was displaced, causing significant shifts in regional migration dynamics (Buz 2008). During this period, Turkey decided to accept Afghan migrants of Turkish descent, thereby reviving the “cognate” policy. The “Law on the Acceptance and Settlement of Turkish Descent Migrants from Afghanistan to Pakistan in Turkey” facilitated the transfer and settlement of approximately 5,000 Turkish descent Afghans in Turkey. This decision illustrates the continuity of Turkey’s ethnic identity-based migration policies, which have been in place since the early years of the Republic.

In the post-Cold War period, Turkey’s migration policies continued to be influenced by an ethnicity-centered perspective. Throughout the 1990s, particularly as a transit country to Europe, many migrants tried to pass through Turkey to reach Europe (İçduygu and Yüксеk 2010). During this time, the European Union (EU) accession process and international migration rights necessitated significant changes in Turkey’s migration policies. However, profound changes in migration policies were not made during this period. For example, the Asylum Regulation issued in 1994, which slightly expanded the existing migration policies, continued the ideological approaches of the 1934 Settlement Law.

With the influence of the Justice and Development Party's (*in Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP*) liberal policies in the early years of its governance, a new Settlement Law was enacted in 2006 as part of the EU harmonization process. Although the new 2006 Settlement Law was expected to transform immigration acceptance policies, it faced criticism for perpetuating old ideological approaches (Ekmekçi 2016). This law stated that foreigners who are not of Turkish descent and not affiliated with Turkish culture would not be accepted as immigrants in Turkey, indicating the continuation of emphasis on Turkishness. Consequently, Turkey's migration policies have historically been intertwined with ethnic identity. From the final years of the Ottoman Empire through the founding years of the Republic and thereafter, legal regulations have developed Turkey's migration policies within an ethnically centered and discriminatory framework. This historical process continues to be a decisive factor in shaping migration and refugee policies today.

Following the mass migration triggered by the Syrian civil war, the 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection (*in Turkish: Yabancılar ve Uluslararası Koruma Kanunu, YUKK*) marked a new era in Turkey's migration and refugee policies, providing a more systematic and comprehensive structure for migration management. However, these innovations cannot be considered entirely independent of Turkey's legacy of ethnic identity-based migration policies. In particular, the "temporary protection" status and social integration policies applied to refugees from Syria indicate the continuation of trends toward preserving ethnic identity and national identity (Altıok and Tosun 2019; Atasü-Topcuoglu 2018). Although the rhetoric of Turkey's revised migration policies post-YUKK does not explicitly emphasize the Turkish race, the implementation continues to exhibit racist approaches, as evidenced by the 2018 "Migration Adaptation Strategy Document and National Action Plan." This document claims, "Our country, which has been a merciful society for over a thousand years, has approached people from different cultures and civilizations with tolerance for centuries" (GİGM 2018), producing a narrative inconsistent with the exclusionary and homogeneous ethnic identity-focused migration prioritized throughout Republican history. The overall Action Plan is constructed to continue this narrative, frequently mentioning terms like cultural sensitivity, effective intercultural communication, cultural diversity, and multiculturalism (GİGM 2018).

Assessing the impact of these migration policies is difficult, primarily due to the vague boundaries of the concepts and the significant methodological difficulties involved in measuring social and cultural integration. In Turkey, despite the rhetoric of "multiculturalism" produced at the discursive level and the emphasis on "cultural diversity" in official documents and policies, the implementation remains insufficient. For instance, the "Migration Adaptation Strategy Document and National Action Plan" (GİGM 2018), frequently refer to terms like "cultural diversity" and "intercultural communication." However, these discourses do not translate into tangible policies that protect the cultural and ethnic identity characteristics of refugee and immigrant groups. While international institutions mandate the inclusion of multiculturalism in projects, on the ground, refugees are often the target of hate speech by both government and opposition members, as well as local community members, driven by political motives (Çevik 2021).

One visible example of the discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is Turkey's performance in the international Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX). With a score of only 43 out of 100, Turkey ranks low across various areas of integration, such as labor market participation, political participation, permanent residency, and anti-discrimination efforts (MIPEX 2020). This data underscores the gap between the country's official stance on multiculturalism and the challenges refugees face in practice. There are no direct legal regulations allowing refugee and immigrant groups to preserve their cultural and ethnic identities, which further leads to structural exclusion, especially targeting Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Over the last two decades, the ruling AKP has maintained an ideological continuity regarding its migration policies. Initially, the "open door" policy allowed over 3.5 million Syrian refugees into Turkey under the notion of religious solidarity. However, as the economic crisis deepened and societal tensions increased, criticisms from opposition political parties gained momentum. One notable example is the rise of the Victory Party (*in Turkish: Zafer Partisi, ZP*), a party that does not hesitate to employ openly racist rhetoric, contributing to the spread of discriminatory discourse toward refugee groups. While its electoral impact remains limited, its strong presence on social media and vocal criticism of the government's migration policies have amplified broader societal discontent regarding refugee integration (Türk 2023; Erdoğan 2014).

This political shift reflects a broader public sentiment that Turkey's open-door policy has failed, especially as critics argue that the AKP's policies have been inadequate in addressing the economic and social consequences of such large-scale migration. The continuity of ethnic discrimination and nationalism within Turkey's migration policies remains evident, highlighting the long-term socio-political consequences of this ideological framework. As a result, the local community's perspectives toward Syrian refugees are shaped not only by historical and ideological continuities but also by the failures of these policies, further exacerbated by the deepening economic crisis.

Methodology

In this article, I employ qualitative research methods to explore how ethnic identities shape the approaches of local Turkish community members toward Syrian refugees. The participants are viewed as subjects shaped by the homogeneous identity ideology that has influenced migration policies throughout Turkey's Republican history. The research aims to uncover how ethnic and racial identities are constructed within social contexts and how these dynamics affect identity formation processes. To achieve this, I use semi-structured in-depth interviews to examine the relationship between ideological migration policies and everyday interactions in the communities studied.

Research Design

The research is based on a qualitative design utilizing semi-structured interviews, a method that allows participants to express their own experiences and perceptions of ethnic and racial identities in their own words. This approach fosters a deeper

understanding of intergroup relations and cultural dynamics, particularly the interactions between Syrian refugees and local Turkish community members. The interviews took place from July to December 2021 in three districts of Ankara: Altındağ, Mamak, and Ümitköy. These locations were chosen to represent different socio-economic and demographic settings, each offering unique insights into intergroup dynamics and identity formation.

- Altındağ was selected due to its high concentration of Syrian refugees, forming a relatively homogenous enclave where interactions with the local Turkish population are limited. This district has seen pogrom-like attacks targeting Syrian refugees, an event that significantly shapes local perceptions and intergroup tensions. The social segregation of this area provides a context for understanding how the isolation of refugee groups affects both their self-perception and how they are viewed by the local community.
- Mamak represents a mixed demographic, where lower- to middle-class Turkish residents live in close proximity to Syrian refugees. The presence of apartment buildings in Mamak facilitates more direct interaction between the two groups, offering insights into how everyday encounters in shared spaces shape identity perceptions.
- Ümitköy, an upper-middle-class district, was chosen for its relative lack of Syrian refugees due to high housing costs. The limited daily interaction between the groups in Ümitköy provides an opportunity to study how attitudes toward Syrian refugees are shaped in environments where direct contact is rare. The goal of studying this district is to explore the perceptions of refugees in a setting where they are largely absent but still discussed.

The research focuses on the following two main questions:

1. Impact of Identities: How do the identities of local Turkish community members affect their daily interactions with Syrian refugees?
2. Identity Formation and Belonging: How do the views and attitudes of the local Turkish community influence the formation of ethnic identities and feelings of belonging among Syrian refugees?

Data Collection and Participants

Data were collected through 41 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees and local Turkish community members residing in Altındağ, Mamak, and Ümitköy. The participants were selected using purposive sampling (Patton 2002), chosen based on their potential to provide rich data on social integration and identity formation.

1. In Altındağ, interviews were conducted with 14 Syrian refugees and 7 local community members.
2. In Mamak, 6 Syrian refugees and 6 local community members were interviewed.

3. In Ümitköy, 8 local community members were interviewed, as the district has a much smaller Syrian refugee population.

A total of 41 interviews were conducted, and data saturation was reached (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson 2006), meaning no new themes or codes emerged after the final interviews. The Syrian refugees interviewed included 7 women and 13 men, aged between 19 and 53 years old, who have lived in Turkey for 5 to 9 years. Their occupations ranged from translators, tradespeople, laborers, and technicians, to housewives. The local Turkish participants included 8 women and 13 men, aged between 29 and 72 years old, with occupations varying from retirees, tradespeople, and laborers, to housewives. Among the refugees, 17 identified as Arab, 2 as Turkmen, and 1 as Kurd. All local community members, except one, identified as Turkish.

Data Analysis

The data analysis follows an inductive approach, employing content analysis to examine the experiences of participants systematically (Neuendorf 2017). Interview transcripts were processed in detail using qualitative data analysis software to ensure the confidentiality of the participants' identities. The transcripts were broken down into meaningful units, which were systematically coded to identify emerging themes related to identities and intra-community dynamics. The analysis was iterative, involving multiple rounds of coding and refinement of the themes.

The primary objective of this analysis was to develop a deeper understanding of how interactions between Syrian refugees and the local Turkish community shape identities, as well as senses of belonging. Through this analytical process, I aimed to uncover how identity formation occurs in these specific social contexts and how these dynamics inform broader social cohesion and integration strategies in multicultural societies.

Results

Politicization of Ethnic and Cultural Differences

In Turkey, attitudes toward Syrian refugees are often politicized based on ethnic and cultural differences, leading to an increase in racist rhetoric and discrimination. Both the in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees and the local Turkish community show that ethnic and cultural differences are frequently expressed through stereotypes and discrimination. This situation reveals that the theoretical approaches of Kymlicka (1995) and Taylor (1994), which are based on multiculturalism and recognition, do not sufficiently address the risks of politicizing and transforming these differences into racism while celebrating ethnic and cultural diversity. On the other hand, it also proves that even the multicultural policies in Turkey, at least at the rhetorical level, fail to prevent the potential for racism toward Syrian refugees.

The Arab ethnic identity was the most prominent identity affiliation that emerged in my interviews. However, the definition of Arab identity carries “historically” constructed negative perceptions. In Turkey, the Arab identity is

defined as an “other” identity that played a role in the downfall of the Ottoman Empire in the context of not participating in the independence activities during the Republic’s founding process (Kaynar 2010). Therefore, the Arab ethnic identity carries different meanings for both Syrian refugees and local community members. Local community members primarily use the Arab identity similarly to the Syrian identity. Responses to questions aimed at understanding the differences between Arab and Syrian identities indicate that both identities are used in similar contexts, but there is an awareness of the “historically” constructed negative perception of the Arab identity. Syrian refugees are homogenized under the “Arab” label within the Turkish community, and this labeling carries negative connotations. “Because I am Syrian, or rather because I am Arab. They say you stabbed us in the back, you are traitors” (R2, Altındağ, 28, Male) highlights that the “historical” negative label of the Arab identity is a reality recognized by the refugees.

The local Turkish community’s perspective toward Syrian refugees is primarily shaped within the framework of the continuity of the Republic’s founding ideology. A participant commented, “Who brought them down during the Ottoman times? It was the Arabs. People don’t forget that. I might not reflect on it, but maybe tomorrow my baby will. He will say ‘I am Arab,’ and he will say ‘I am Turkish.’ What will happen then? Maybe tomorrow they will start dividing us like the Kurds. Maybe they will divide us this way” (LC10, Altındağ, 43, Male). This participant labels those coming from Syria with a historical perspective, shaping both his expressions and his emotions accordingly.

The widespread stereotyping of the Arab ethnic identity within the Turkish society is also a significant indicator of the racist approach toward Syrian refugees. “Syrians, Arabs, their cultures are different. They are different in terms of cleanliness; they are more into adornments. They have unnecessary makeup and decorations in their own way. For example, we don’t wear nail polish when we are in hijab, but they do,” (LC12, Mamak, 48, Female) directly defines the common stereotype. The analogy established with the concept of cleanliness reinforces the prevalent notion and negative attitude toward Syrian refugees. Similarly, a participant sharing her experience from her interactions with her neighbors illustrates how widespread stereotyping can be: “Their notion of cleanliness is zero; they eat directly with their hands. They don’t care if it seems dirty. They learned it when they got here, from the people around, from the Turks. They didn’t use bleach at all before” (LC11, Mamak, 41, Female).

Social and cultural stereotypes shape perceptions and attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Turkey, while the negative generalizations created by these stereotypes foster an environment of widespread discrimination and exclusion. Quotes from interview data show that Syrian refugees are negatively generalized not only under the “Arab” label but also in terms of cleanliness, behavior, and lifestyle: “As Arabs, Syrians are dirty, they smell bad,” (R18, Mamak, 53, Male). The perceptions of Syrian refugees in Turkey are based on a similar “us” and “them” distinction; where “us” is associated with cleanliness and modernity, and “them,” the Syrians, are depicted as lacking these qualities. When considering the language used and representations created by local community members toward Syrian refugees, it is evident that these stereotypes and discrimination pose significant barriers to social exclusion and integration processes.

In this context, studies on racism and discrimination in Europe and America show that the process of “othering” individuals and groups is not based solely on ethnic or racial differences, but also on cultural practices and lifestyle differences, which are decisive in this process (Feagin and Ducey 2019). Such racist stereotypes and discrimination are reinforced not only at the interpersonal level but also institutionally through structured social practices and policies. The prejudices against Syrian refugees can be seen as modern reflections of the emphasis on Turkish identity and culture, reinforced by historical legal regulations such as the 1934 Settlement Law. This law has legitimized discrimination and exclusion toward groups outside the Turkish ethnic identity, which still influences attitudes toward Syrian refugees today (İçduygu et al. 2014). The exclusionary negative attitudes originating from the foundational homogenizing ideological approach toward Syrian refugees complicate the relationship these refugees have with their own ethnic identities. “Sometimes when they ask where I’m from, I don’t even say I’m Syrian. Sometimes I’m afraid to say I’m Syrian. Sometimes I have to hide that I’m Syrian. Sometimes they curse at Syrians on the bus, and we just stay quiet,” (R2, Altındağ, 28, Male) reveals the participant’s awareness that his ethnic identity carries a potential threat at the societal level.

Syrian refugees have reached a point where they have to hide their true identities to be socially accepted. This demonstrates the challenging process faced in practice regarding the right of every individual and group to freely express their cultural identity, as emphasized by Taylor (1994) in the context of multiculturalism. To enhance the effectiveness of social integration policies for Syrian refugees, it is clear that such challenges need to be overcome. This situation indicates that social integration policies should not only celebrate cultural diversity and promote recognition policies but also address the specific challenges refugees face within the community. However, the approach in Turkey’s migration policies operates in the opposite manner. The multicultural approach carried out by the Integration Policy document mentioned above is not visible in practice. Conversely, a participant states how the societal label of “Syrian” has been turned into a slur, influenced by the negative rhetoric from policymakers and opposition parties: “Being called Syrian has become a slur. They use it the same way they curse,” (R16, Altındağ, 28, Male). Similarly, the situation described by another participant where “because my wife wears a headscarf like the Syrians, some people spit in her face, some people call her ‘damn Syrian.’ Being called Syrian has become a slur,” reveals the everyday dimensions of racism and exclusion. In this context, the use of the term “Syrian” as a negative slur illustrates how the representation of this group has been tarnished and how public perception has transformed.

Does Religious Brotherhood Prevent Racism?

Among the most significant cultural similarities between Syrian refugees and the local Turkish community are their shared religious beliefs. The Muslim identity of the refugees, who were forced to migrate due to the civil war that began in Syria in 2011, has been used as an important reference. The rhetoric of “our religious brothers” was long used as a crucial political tool to persuade the local community to accept the influx of people from Syria (Çevik 2021).

Refugees from Syria, perceived as “remnants of the Ottoman Empire,” were allowed to enter Turkey under the “open door” policy. In this political approach, the ideological groundwork of the ruling party, AKP, which includes references to the Ottoman Empire, was directly decisive (Tokdoğan 2018). In the early stages of the Syrian crisis, the AKP embraced an “open door” policy, motivated by the concept of religious brotherhood. This policy was framed within the historical and ideological continuity with the Ottoman Empire, where Muslim unity was central (Tokdoğan 2018). Refugees from Syria were perceived as “guests” and “brothers,” drawing on shared Islamic identity, with the expectation that their stay in Turkey would be temporary and that they would return once the war in Syria concluded. This approach positioned the AKP as the guardian of Muslim refugees, using Ottoman symbolism to craft a narrative of solidarity based on religion.

However, this narrative of religious brotherhood, which initially facilitated the acceptance of refugees, began to wane as the permanence of the refugee crisis became apparent. As the economic strain and social tensions escalated, the rhetoric of the AKP shifted from one of hospitality to one marked by exclusion. The religious identity that once united Turks and Syrians began to lose its significance as nationalist sentiments, deeply rooted in the ideology of Turkishness, started to dominate the discourse. This shift reveals how the AKP’s policies were grounded more in political opportunism than in a genuine commitment to long-term integration or solidarity (Çevik 2018).

The instrumentalization of Ottoman imagery and religious brotherhood by the AKP reflects what Simon (2023) refers to as a form of neocolonialism. Syrian refugees were incorporated into the Turkish socio-political landscape as symbolic extensions of the Ottoman past, yet their integration was always conditional. The underlying expectation that they would eventually return home highlights how the AKP’s policy was less about permanent inclusion and more about temporary management. As time passed, the refugee community became a convenient scapegoat for economic challenges and social unrest, further alienating them from the Turkish national identity.

This shift from religious solidarity to exclusionary nationalism is reflective of Turkey’s broader historical migration policies, where ethnic identity consistently outweighs religious commonality. The AKP’s early reliance on shared Muslim identity eventually gave way to a focus on the superiority of Turkishness, a concept that defines itself in contrast to the “other,” as described by Barış Ünlü (2020). Thus, the transformation of AKP’s policies underscores the continuity of Turkish migration policies, which have historically favored ethnic homogeneity, even when religious solidarity is used as a short-term political tool.

“Aren’t we always religious brothers, but they still practice racism. How are we religious brothers!” (R1, Altındağ, 29, Male) a Syrian refugee remarks, indicating that similarities in religious beliefs do not prevent racism. The initially tolerant approach due to the Muslim identity gradually lost its key role in fostering social cohesion as the ideology of Turkishness became more dominant. “They may be Muslims, but personally, I am uncomfortable. I do not see a good future with them, it will get worse with each one we accept. Our social structure, our children, our youth might be corrupted,” (LC13, Ümitköy, 63, Female) a participant expresses her

concerns about the ethnic disruption of the Turkish social structure, indicating that the shared Muslim identity is insignificant.

On the other hand, participants who are critical of the current ruling party, AKP's religious policies—predominantly upper-middle-class and social democrats living in the Ümitköy area—view the Muslim identity of Syrian refugees as a tool used by the government to fulfill its political-Islamic ambitions, and their critique of the government borders on racism toward Syrian refugees: “They are increasing. They have their beliefs; everyone’s belief is their own. It’s shameful to say, but their way of worship is different. Our religion might be similar, but their culture and everything else are nothing like ours. We are all Muslims, but these are different, all supporters of the government, and the government brought them here knowingly. Now they will stay here, they won’t leave. They do it for the elections. They give citizenship during elections to collect votes,” (LC20, Ümitköy, 71, Male).

Turkish Ideology and Its Reflections on Daily Life and Community Relations

The ideology of Turkishness has been central to the nation-building process in the Republic of Turkey, legitimizing forms of discrimination and racism toward groups perceived as “other.” This ideological framework promotes a vision of ethnic homogeneity and nationalism, fostering a sense of superiority and belonging within the Turkish identity (Ünlü 2016). As one participant states, “There is a very ideological thing among our people. We have racism. Now, in relation to them, they are different” (LC8, Mamak, 72, Male). This statement underscores how deep-rooted Turkish identity creates a distinction between “us” (Turks) and “them” (Syrian refugees), reinforcing ongoing racial and ethnic discrimination.

“I’m not racist, but despite our best efforts as Turks, it bothers me that they do nothing here, just sitting around in parks” (LC15, Ümitköy, 47, Female) reflects a similar pattern, where participants who claim not to be racist nonetheless express discomfort and homogenize all Syrians without direct interaction. This statement reveals how the initial disavowal of racism is quickly contradicted by negative generalizations and stereotypes.

In the early years of the Republic, the ideology of Turkishness was institutionalized through policies aimed at achieving ethnic homogeneity, such as the 1934 Settlement Law. This law laid the foundation for discriminating against groups not considered “Turkish” by race or culture. The same mindset persists today in the discourse surrounding Syrian refugees, highlighting a continuity of exclusion and marginalization. Although the “open-door” policy initially framed Syrians as “guests” under religious solidarity, the ongoing economic crisis and rising nationalism have turned this temporary rhetoric into lasting exclusion and hostility.

Such attitudes reflect the broader ideological continuity from the founding of the Republic, where ethnic homogeneity was prioritized over cultural pluralism. This tendency continues to manifest in Turkey’s migration policies and everyday interactions, reinforcing social hierarchies and exacerbating the “us” vs. “them” dynamic that shapes Turkish public opinion toward Syrian refugees (Saraçoğlu and Özhan 2014).

It is evident that the local Turkish community's view of Syrian refugees is significantly influenced by the ideology of Turkishness. "God forbid our homeland suffers. We can't be like them. No matter where we go, we can't live like them. For us, the nation, the people, and the flag are important" (LC5, Mamak, 35, Male), suggests that there are generalized differences between the Turkish community and Syrian refugees, particularly in terms of nationalism linked to the homeland and nation. Another participant criticizes refugees fleeing the war in Syria from a nationalist perspective: "A Turk has no friend but a Turk. No one looks out for us. If it were me, I wouldn't have come (referring to the refugees coming from Syria)" (LC8, Mamak, 72, Male). It's possible to say that the saying "A Turk has no friend but a Turk" has at least a hundred-year history. This perception, first introduced at the foundation of the Republic and often nurtured by subsequent governments, that the Turkish race is alone in the world, that everyone is an enemy, and that friendship is not possible, is very prevalent in Turkish society (Ünlü 2023).

The prevalence of this perception alone brings ethnic and racial distancing from the moment Syrian refugees arrive. Without any prior contact or relationship, the existing negative attitudes toward "the other" in the minds of the Turkish community can directly shape their approach to Syrian refugees. This ideological positioning is a significant feature of an ordinary Turkish individual built within the continuity framework of the Republic's nation-state founding ideology based on a homogeneous Turkish identity. For example, the impact of this ideology can be observed in the process of acquiring Turkish citizenship, especially through the necessity of learning certain information and rituals about Turkish identity. "Before becoming a citizen, you have to be tested on the history of Turkey. They must take a test before citizenship, recite our pledge, and learn the national anthem. If they are living in this country, they need to know what this country is about. Maybe then things will improve" (LC19, Ümitköy, 62, Male) highlights an understanding of integration based on assimilation rather than accepting ethnic and cultural diversity.

"The Turks are more warlike, while Arabs are used to scheming and living off others. This is their culture," (LC9, Mamak, 33, Male). This statement encapsulates the deeply ingrained discriminatory and stereotypical perceptions toward Arabs, particularly Syrian refugees, in Turkey. When analyzed through the framework of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner 1986), it provides a clear example of how social groups form the foundation of individual and collective identity. According to this theory, individuals derive a part of their self-esteem from the social groups to which they belong (in-group) and often do so by contrasting their group with others (out-group). This distinction results in a process called "othering," where those outside of the in-group are viewed through a lens of negative stereotypes, further widening the perceived gap between groups. In this context, the Turkish community positions itself as the "in-group" and constructs a collective identity based on positive traits such as strength, resilience, and honor ("warlike"), while the Arab identity is reduced to a series of pejorative and simplistic characteristics such as deception and dependency ("scheming" and "living off others"). This stark binary creates a psychological and social boundary between Turks and Arabs, which reinforces national pride and strengthens feelings of superiority among the in-group members.

The example provided is not an isolated one but is deeply embedded in the larger social and historical narratives that have long shaped Turkish-Arab relations. Arabs, particularly in the context of Syrian refugees, are often depicted in Turkish society as culturally inferior or backward, an image that is perpetuated through media portrayals, political discourse, and everyday social interactions. This process of othering not only dehumanizes the Arab population but also serves to validate and strengthen the Turkish identity by juxtaposing it against a negatively constructed “other.” In this way, Arabs become a convenient scapegoat for broader societal issues, such as economic instability or social change, allowing the in-group to maintain a positive self-image while distancing itself from perceived problems.

The division between Arabs and Turks is not limited to individual prejudices but is institutionalized through political rhetoric and state policies that reinforce these social divisions. In fact, the preference for refugees who share ethnic ties with the Turkish population, such as Turkmen, highlights the ways in which in-group favoritism shapes national immigration policies and social integration efforts. As one participant noted, “Turkmen are good, Arabs are different. They don’t look after their children; they let them roam outside. I don’t know if it’s because they are Arabs, but they seem different to me” (LC11, 41, Mamak, Female). Despite having had no prior interaction with Turkmen refugees, the participant instinctively perceives them as better or more acceptable than Arabs simply because they share ethnic ties with the Turkish identity. This reveals the significant role that ethnicity plays in determining the boundaries of the in-group and out-group, where Turkmen refugees are more easily accepted due to their perceived ethnic and cultural similarities with Turks, while Arabs are relegated to the out-group based on their ethnic and cultural differences.

The distinction between Turkmen and Arab refugees is not only a reflection of personal biases but also mirrors broader social hierarchies and power dynamics. In Turkey, ethnic identity has long been a central organizing principle in determining social status and inclusion. The historical legacy of Turkish nationalism, with its emphasis on ethnic homogeneity and Turkishness, continues to shape contemporary attitudes toward migrant and refugee populations. Turkmen refugees, who share a linguistic and cultural connection to Turkey, are seen as part of the in-group. Conversely, Arabs, whose identity is constructed as foreign and culturally incompatible, face more significant challenges to social acceptance and are more likely to be excluded from the in-group. This dynamic underscores the racialization of refugee identities, where certain groups are more readily accepted based on their proximity to the dominant ethnic identity, while others are marginalized and discriminated against.

Additionally, the emphasis on child-rearing practices in the participants’ comments highlights the intersection of cultural and racial stereotypes. Arabs are not only racialized as the “other” but are also depicted as lacking the moral and cultural values necessary to be part of the Turkish in-group. This reinforces a broader narrative of cultural superiority, where Turkish norms and practices are seen as the standard against which other groups are judged. By highlighting perceived deficiencies in Arab parenting, the participant further distances Arabs from the Turkish in-group, framing them as culturally backward and unfit to be part of the national community.

As briefly mentioned in the previous sections, the continuity of the ideological approach promoting “cognate” migration as a significant indicator of the racist approach in Turkish migration policies and its ongoing influence in shaping the approach toward Syrian refugees is evident from the following statement: “In the past, those coming from Bulgaria and such were different because they were Turks. Right upon entry, our state gave citizenship to all who were Turks from Syria. The others were Arabs,” (LC9, Mamak, 33, Male). Although there is no truth to the belief that Turkmen could directly transition to Turkish citizenship due to being Turks, it’s clear that racial affiliations define this perspective.

A participant, who is a professional in a social field that allows direct interaction with both the local Turkish community and refugee groups, shares their observations as follows: “They generally exclude Arabs, and do it even more to Syrians. They embrace Turkmen more. Our community sees Turkmen and Syrians differently,” (LC12, Mamak, 48, Female). These statements suggest that racial similarity is a significant factor shaping the local Turkish community’s perspective toward refugee groups.

Cultural similarities exist, but maybe only 10% in Turkey, the rest are not similar. For us, what matters are homeland, flag, honor, army. They don’t have a homeland or flag. Honor doesn’t matter to them since they say it’s not important because they have three or four wives, (LC6, Altındağ, 52, Male).

They are very different, nothing like us. Their culture is backwards. I spend all day among them. Their culture is not refined like ours, it’s somewhat crude, (LC3, Altındağ, 64, Female).

In the quotes above, the local Turkish community’s expressions of cultural superiority reveal a deep-seated belief that their values and norms are more advanced compared to those of Syrian refugees, whom they perceive as culturally “backward” and “crude.” This perspective aligns with Benedict Anderson’s (2016) concept of “imagined communities,” where nations are constructed around shared values, symbols, and historical narratives that unify people even when they don’t directly know each other. In Turkey, concepts such as “homeland, flag, honor, and army” are presented as central elements of Turkish national identity, with Syrian refugees often described as lacking these attributes, reinforcing the “us” versus “them” distinction within the national narrative.

However, Partha Chatterjee’s postcolonial critique expands this analysis by pointing out that the nationalism emerging in postcolonial states like Turkey often replicates the very power structures it aims to resist (Chatterjee 1986). Chatterjee argues that postcolonial nationalism tends to create internal hierarchies, marginalizing certain ethnic and cultural groups in much the same way that colonial powers did (Chatterjee 1986). In the Turkish context, this means that the project of nation-building—centered around Turkishness—has led to the exclusion of groups such as Syrian refugees, who are perceived as cultural outsiders despite shared religious ties. Syrian refugees, much like other marginalized groups, are

placed in a subordinate position in the national hierarchy, revealing how Turkish nationalism has internalized and perpetuated colonial modes of exclusion.

The homogenization process negatively impacts the evaluation of cultural diversity and differences, viewing these differences as sources of social discord and conflict. Conversely, the coexistence of different cultural groups requires mutual tolerance and understanding (Walzer 1997). The homogenizing tendencies of Turkishness diminish the capacity to tolerate social diversity and differences, thereby paving the way for divisions and conflicts within society.

One of the most visible places where racist attitudes are observable is in neighborhood relations. In Turkey, the concept of neighborliness is romanticized and serves an important social function (Hatipoğlu and Alsavada 2022). In this context, neighborhood relations among different social groups are also crucial. However, this socially important structure is ineffective in intergroup relations. According to research findings, the local Turkish community's willingness to live next to Syrian refugees is quite low (Saraçoğlu and Belanger 2021). Most of the individuals I interviewed also did not have a favorable view of such neighborliness. "I wouldn't want to live with them. Nobody would. They are uncultured," (LC21, Ümitköy, 60, Male) reflects the common attitude among the local community members I spoke with. This situation underscores the deeply ingrained prejudices against Syrians and how these prejudices lead to social exclusion. Bourdieu (1977) mentions that symbolic violence is a form of communication that legitimizes, naturalizes, and sustains social hierarchies and power imbalances. Labeling Syrians as "uncultured" is an example of symbolic violence, reinforcing their place in the social hierarchy. "We don't let them into our apartment. We decided collectively not to rent or sell to them. At the last meeting, we said neither to sell nor to rent," (LC11, Mamak, 41, Female) illustrates that social exclusion and discrimination are endorsed not just at the individual level but also by communities and institutions.

Another prominent aspect of the local Turkish community's view toward Syrian refugees is the notion of "superiority." "I don't see them as second or third class citizens but maybe it's subconscious, I don't know, we feel superior, there is something like that," (LC1, Altındağ, 38, Male). This statement represents a significant observation about the subconscious sense of superiority and ethnic hierarchies. The words of this participant highlight the complex nature of power dynamics, social hierarchies, and identities between ethnic groups. The explanation shows how relations among ethnic groups in society are shaped not only by overt acts of racism but also by more subtle, subconscious feelings of superiority. This situation also points back to the concept of "symbolic violence," where dominant groups maintain power and status in social structures through societal values and norms, indicative of how less powerful groups are oppressed (Bourdieu 1977).

The tendency to see oneself as superior naturally enhances the emphasis on assimilation as a method of integration. "I think they will integrate as they become like us, become Turkified. But according to us, it's also not acceptable for them to continue their own culture among themselves. Maybe over generations, integration could actually happen. Their culture will change, they will start to resemble us," (LC12, Mamak, 48, Female). This quote expresses a common view on the acceptance of ethnic and cultural diversity and the process of integration in a society, while also highlighting the tense relationship between assimilation and

multiculturalism. The participant believes that Syrian refugees need to develop cultural similarities to integrate into Turkish society, but acknowledges that this might conflict with the refugees maintaining their own cultural practices. This quote also points to tendencies toward homogenization in social integration processes; newcomers are expected to adopt the norms and values of the mainstream society and over time resemble “us.” However, this can imply a complete melting away of a culture and assimilation, which often opposes the ideals of interculturalism.

The above statement also sparks a discussion on how integration policies should be designed. It highlights the importance of intercultural approaches that allow for the preservation of minority cultures while promoting social harmony and mutual understanding. It also recalls criticisms of the effectiveness of multicultural policies in making concrete interventions and combating racism and discrimination. In this context, the statement reflects ongoing debates about the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey and how cultural diversity should be managed, showing that these debates are deeply connected not only to social policies but also to the fundamental ideological and cultural values of society.

Exclusion Created by Racism

“Do you know how they look at us? As if we’re at a lower level than their own,” (R2, Altındağ, 28, Male); “They look at me badly. They treat me very badly,” (R9, Mamak, 28, Female); “Sometimes you can just tell by the way people look at you,” (R8, Mamak, 30, Male) state participants who are more distressed by people’s stares than verbal and physical exclusion. Another participant, who doesn’t want to go outside their residential area, emphasizes the looks as the reason: “We don’t go out because they stare. They stare when we speak Arabic,” (R19, Altındağ, 33, Male). The exclusion and racism felt by migrants are not limited to explicit verbal or physical attacks but are also manifested through the stares and behaviors of community members. Goffman (1986) argues that stigmatization originates not only from overt discriminatory actions but also from more subtle, everyday social interactions. How individuals look at each other in a society can provide significant insights into the quality of social relations and the general attitude toward stigmatized groups.

“People get mad when we speak Arabic,” (R3, Altındağ, 42, Male) remarked one participant, reflecting how language becomes a marker of exclusion in Turkish society. Another participant, recalling experiences at work, noted, “the boss at work doesn’t want us to speak Arabic,” (R6, Altındağ, 30, Male), illustrating how even in professional settings, Arabic is stigmatized. The same individual recounted a violent incident: “They beat up my friend for speaking Arabic on the bus,” referencing the Altındağ Attacks² and how these events have led to fear, “after those incidents, I no longer speak Arabic on the bus or in crowded places” (R6, Altındağ, 30, Male). Another participant added: “When we speak Arabic on the bus, people shout at us, it happens every day. When we speak Arabic, they look at us as if we are swearing. We speak quietly, everyone speaks, but they tell us to be quiet, to stop talking,” (R1, Altındağ, 29, Male). These testimonies demonstrate how speaking Arabic has become a marker of racialized identity, interwoven with exclusionary and discriminatory practices in Turkish society.

The stigmatization of the Arabic language in everyday interactions reflects the broader racialization of Arab identity within Turkish social and cultural contexts. The use of Arabic is not only perceived as a linguistic difference but is deeply tied to ethnic hierarchies, where speaking Arabic signifies an “otherness” that is met with hostility and discrimination. These instances of exclusion, from public transportation to workplaces, reveal how Arabic speakers—predominantly Syrian refugees—are marginalized not solely based on nationality but through the racialized framing of their language and culture.

This racialization of the Arab identity extends beyond verbal or physical confrontations; it underscores a systemic issue wherein language becomes a visible marker of cultural inferiority, reinforcing the racial hierarchy that places Arab identity as subordinate to Turkishness. These daily interactions reveal how language functions as a site of power, where the ability to speak Arabic openly is curtailed by social norms that deem it unacceptable in public spaces. The exclusionary practices against Arabic speakers reflect not just personal prejudice but a broader societal framework that racializes Arab identity, posing substantial challenges to social cohesion and integration.

“In places like these, for instance, there are no Syrians; they just come here to beg. That’s why these are peaceful, clean places,” says the participant (LC21, Ümitköy, 60, Male). This participant’s stark comments about the areas inhabited by Syrian refugees can be seen as a typical representation of the local Turkish community. The description of these places as “clean” and “peaceful” suggests that the presence of Syrian refugees is coded as “dirty” and “disturbed,” thus perpetuating spatial segregation and exclusion.

These negative perceptions and attitudes are linked to the effects of the ideology of Turkishness. Particularly during Turkey’s modernization process and in the construction of national identity, Turkishness ideology has been used to reinforce the perception of the ethnic “other.” A historical perspective on the formation of the “us” and “them” dichotomy has developed during the construction of national identity, serving the practice of social discrimination and exclusion (Kurtiş Yalçınkaya, and Adams 2018). This dichotomy also plays a decisive role in the Turkish community’s perception of Syrian refugees and underlies the negative attitudes toward this group. Particularly in the perception of Syrian refugees, this concept of “the other” is often further reinforced through cultural characteristics associated with the Arab ethnic identity and the Islamic religion. The close association of Turkishness ideology with ethnic homogeneity and nationalism creates a continuity in negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees. This continuity manifests itself in political and social structures that aim to balance the preservation of Turkish identity and the exclusion of “the other.” This situation emphasizes that multiculturalism and integration policies need to develop more effective strategies not just to celebrate cultural diversity and differences, but also to combat the forms of racism and discrimination produced by ethnic and nationalist ideologies.

Conclusion

From the inception of the Republic of Turkey, ethnically homogenizing policies have continued to influence current attitudes and policies toward Syrian refugees.

The quest for ethnic homogeneity, fundamental to the Republic, has legitimized the preservation of the “Turkish” identity and efforts toward the assimilation of other ethnic groups. This pursuit has been decisive not only in shaping national policies but also in the underlying social structure and interpersonal relations. This historical and ideological context plays a critical role in explaining the origins of negative attitudes toward Syrian refugees today.

However, the primary conclusion of this study is that while the local Turkish community’s view of Syrian refugees stems from this historical continuity, the role of daily life practices and the current political climate in shaping these perceptions cannot be ignored. Ideological continuity from the founding of the Republic remains a significant factor, but it is crucial to recognize that the perceptions of Syrian refugees are also shaped by more immediate influences. Social interactions, economic factors, and political rhetoric have contributed to how Syrian refugees are regarded today. For instance, daily life challenges such as job competition, public services strain, and evolving media portrayals of Syrians exacerbate existing prejudices and reinforce discriminatory attitudes. Therefore, while ideological factors rooted in Turkish nationalism certainly play a central role, they should not be viewed as the sole explanation for the persistence of these views. This study, in contrast to previous literature, emphasizes that one of the underlying reasons for the current negative perceptions of Syrian refugees is the enduring influence of the “Turkishness” ideology, which has maintained its continuity since the founding of the Republic.

One of the most significant factors influencing the local community’s perspective on Syrian refugees is the historical continuity and the founding ideology of the Republic. Attitudes toward the refugees are typically influenced by the Turkish community’s ideological and social values, tightly linked to its ethnic and cultural identity. These values have provided a basis for legitimizing exclusionary and discriminatory behaviors toward refugees.

In modern Turkey, policies and attitudes toward Syrian refugees are shaped within a complex framework involving national security, economic factors, and social integration. While these policies are shaped under both internal and international pressures, they continue to be influenced by the pursuit of ethnic homogeneity and the ideology of “Turkishness.” This demonstrates that Turkey’s multiculturalism and integration policies are not sufficiently effective in combating ethnic discrimination. For example, negative stereotypes and prejudices about Syrian refugees widely established within the Turkish community contribute to the normalization of racism and discrimination, leading to the social exclusion of refugees.

Policies and societal attitudes toward Syrian refugees in Turkey have dramatically shifted with increasing economic difficulties and the growing number of refugees. The once prevalent atmosphere of tolerance has given way to alienation and discrimination. Interview data reveal that local community attitudes toward Syrian refugees are shaped not only by historical and ideological continuities but also by daily life practices and challenges encountered. Stereotypical racist remarks about cleanliness and eating habits, as well as perceptions of the economic impact of refugees in Turkey, highlight the practical difficulties faced in the social integration process.

The underlying racist and discriminatory inclinations toward Syrian refugees have also manifested their influence on Turkey's immigration policies. Throughout history, immigration policies based on ethnic identity have demonstrated the continuity of discrimination and homogenization efforts against perceived "others." Views such as "Turkmen are good, Arabs are different" exemplify the concrete manifestations of racist tendencies toward Syrian refugees, illustrating the daily life impact of prejudices based on ethnic similarities or differences. The claims of "superiority" by the Turkish society and the positive attributes attributed to the "us" group highlight how ethnic and racial identities are shaped in the social context and the influence of these dynamics on identity formation.

The "brotherhood in faith" rhetoric toward Syrian refugees has waned over time and has become an object of hate speech. Initially used as a key for acceptance, the Muslim identity has become insignificant over time due to the changes influenced by the ideology of Turkishness. Turkishness ideology has significantly influenced perceptions toward Syrian refugees, using the strengthening of the ethnic "other" perception and the legitimization of discrimination as a tool. An additional factor contributing to the negative perceptions of Syrian refugees within the local Turkish community is the historical and contemporary construction of Arab identity in opposition to Turkishness. Arab identity, often stigmatized and generalized with negative stereotypes, is frequently associated with cultural backwardness, as evidenced by interviewees' remarks regarding cleanliness, lifestyle, and values. This "othering" of Arabs is not only rooted in contemporary social and economic conditions but also reflects a deeper historical prejudice, dating back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the perception of Arab betrayal during World War I. This entrenched prejudice plays a significant role in shaping the current racist attitudes toward Syrian refugees, many of whom are homogenized under the Arab identity. This dynamic shows how both nationalistic ideology and internalized Orientalist views continue to shape the Turkish community's exclusionary stance toward Arabs. Thus, the racialization of Arab identity remains a crucial element in understanding the broader discrimination Syrian refugees face in Turkey.

The multicultural policies of Turkey, while addressing cultural diversity at the rhetorical level, have failed to match these statements in practice, intertwining with ethnic and nationalist ideologies. Turkey's immigration policies are built not only on national security and demographic structure but also on ideological foundations that significantly influence the local community's views toward Syrian refugees.

In this context, combating ethnic discrimination is crucial for achieving social integration. This process implies building a fairer and more inclusive society not only for Syrian refugees but for all ethnic and cultural groups in Turkey. In this regard, educational and awareness-raising programs can help reduce the prejudices of the Turkish community towards Syrian refugees.

A human rights-based approach should underpin policies toward refugees, necessitating their recognition not merely as individuals in need of protection but also as integral parts of society. This approach involves developing policies that facilitate refugees' access to work, education, and healthcare services, supporting their active participation within the community.

In conclusion, this study reveals how the continuity of Turkey's immigration policies and the ethnically homogenizing ideological approaches have shaped the

perceptions of local Turkish community members toward Syrian refugees and the ethnic and racial dimensions of intergroup relations. The attitudes and policies toward Syrian refugees in Turkey are a product of historical and ideological continuities, daily life practices, and the current political structure. Thus, fighting ethnic discrimination is crucial for achieving social integration and harmony, a process vital not only for Syrian refugees but for building a more equitable and inclusive society for all ethnic and cultural groups in Turkey. In this context, educational and awareness programs, principles of social justice and equality, human rights-based policies, and international cooperation and solidarity are crucial tools in combating ethnic discrimination.

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Notes

1 “Turkishness,” as conceptualized by Barış Ünlü (2020), transcends ethnic, national, or ideological categorizations, functioning as a form of social power that generates subjectivity. It operates as a deeply ingrained habitus, shaping how individuals perceive, feel, and interact with the world. Ünlü argues that “Turkishness” manifests in the everyday lives of many Turks, across different social classes and political beliefs, as a set of automatic behaviors and assumptions. These include seeing oneself as the rightful “owner” of the nation, preserving a sense of racial and cultural purity, and identifying as superior to the “other.” This sense of identity is reinforced through historical narratives, mythic references, and feelings of belonging, making Turkishness both a political and social framework that persists in Turkey’s national consciousness (Ünlü 2020).

2 On August 10, 2021, in the Altındağ district of Ankara, a severe fight between two groups resulted in the death of a person who was critically injured. Reports that the deceased was stabbed and killed by Syrians quickly spread in both mainstream media and social media groups of the local community. Following these reports, a three-day attack was carried out against the neighborhoods of Önder and Ulubey in Altındağ, where many Syrian refugees live. Attackers, whose numbers were reported to be between 15,000 and 20,000, vandalized and looted homes identified as inhabited by Syrians and nearly all businesses with Arabic signage (Euronews 2021).

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