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Syrian refugees as the victims of urban regeneration: A case study of Ankara, Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods

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Abstract

The Syrian Civil War compelled vast numbers of Syrians to leave their homeland, and taking advantage of Turkey's Open Door Policy, millions of Syrians crossed the shared border between 2011 and 2015 in search of refuge. The temporary protection nature of Turkey's Policy for Syrians prevented the formation of comprehensive socio-spatial policies related to the provision of human rights. Regarding to the right to housing, the lack of government accommodation for refugees meant that the Syrian refugees became a part of Turkey's existing housing problems, such as squatting and failed urban regeneration projects. The present study reveals different dimensions of housing problems that Syrian refugees encountered such as poor housing conditions, socio-spatial isolation, unaffordability, and forced mobility through the Ankara case. It is argued that living in an area in the process of urban regeneration has exacerbated these multiple housing problems. The research is based on a mixed-method including the analysis of quantitative data, questionnaire with Syrian refugees, semi-structured in-depth interviews with both Syrian refugees and key actors, and participant observations. Field study of the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods was conducted between 2017 and 2019. The paper concludes with an evaluation of the findings, and an explanation of their potential for use in the future in urban policymaking and planning processes.

Highlights

- The research reveals different dimensions of housing problems that Syrian refugees encountered in the case of Ankara.
- Living in an ongoing urban regeneration area has exacerbated the housing problems of Syrian refugees joint with refugees worldwide.
- Syrian Refugees confront with several housing challenges such as poor housing conditions, socio-spatial isolation, unaffordability, and forced mobility.

Keywords

Urban Regeneration; Syrian Refugees; Urban Refugees; Right to Housing, Ankara

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INTRODUCTION

Forced migration and asylum-seeking are today internationally recognized issues with links to human rights, laws, and policy implementations, having first emerged as an issue in World War II. One of the most important rights claimed by refugees is access to housing in their host countries, in which inequality, deprivation and violations of rights are common. In academic debate, socio-spatial isolation and exclusion, poor living conditions, unaffordable house prices, forced mobility and homelessness have been identified as the leading problems encountered by refugees worldwide in their access to housing (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988; Andersson, 1998; Rajaee, 2000; Beer and Foley, 2003; Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007; Phillips, 2006; Carter and Osborne, 2009; Poppe, 2013). Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, over 6.5 million Syrian citizens have sought asylum, the majority of which fled to neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2020). A large proportion of these refugees are now residing in Turkey, where taking advantage of their right to housing is proving to be one of the greatest hurdles they encounter in Turkish cities. According to Ministry of Interior data, registered Syrians in Turkey now number over 3.5 million, which accounts for 68% of all Syrian refugees[1]. Refugee camps were established at first to deal with the acute housing problem, but as the refugees have moved to the cities, Turkey closed the camps. Refugees are dispersed almost all cities of Turkey without a settlement policy.

This study focuses on different dimensions of housing problems that Syrian refugees[1] face in their settlement process. The lack of a governmental refugee housing policy and the shortfalls in the provision of support from other institutions and NGOs have forced Syrian Refugees to use their own means to resolve their housing issues. As would be expected, they have turned to the cheapest and most accessible locations for settlement, which, in the case of Turkey, are primarily the previously constructed *gecekondu*[2] areas that are currently the target of urban regeneration processes (Altıntaş, 2016; Sönmez, 2016). Through the Ankara case, I argue that living in areas that are witnessing ongoing urban regeneration efforts serves to deepen the housing problems encountered by Syrian refugees. The mixed method of the study made use of respectively the analysis of quantitative data, a survey with Syrian refugees, and semi-structured in-depth interviews with both

[1] As Turkey signed the Geneva International Refugee Convention with a geographical restriction, it does not grant refugee status to asylum seekers from outside Europe. "The Law on Foreigners and International Protection" defines a new status called "Temporary Protection", applied to asylum seekers who cross the Turkey-Syrian border. This law caused Turkey to disregard a human rights-based approach. In this article I purposely use "Syrian refugees", although the term is not recognized in domestic law.

[2] A term that corresponds "slum/squatter housing" in the case of Turkish cities.

Syrian refugees and key actors. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used successively. Field study of the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods was conducted between 2017 and 2019.

Access to housing has been a significant socio-spatial problem since the establishment of the Republic of Turkey as a result of the applied urban development policies, with the rise of squatter developments followed by urban regeneration being the main characteristic of the issue. In time, the old *gecekondu* areas emerged as prime targets for the implementation of a "neoliberal" urban regeneration strategy by both the government and private investors (Unsal, 2015). Urban regeneration is primarily a state-led instrument (Kuyucu, 2018) for the maximization of urban land rents (Türkün, 2011), and many such projects have resulted in the dispossession, eviction and displacement of the poor, migrant and most vulnerable social groups (Uysal, 2012).

There have been many studies to date of projects that have been completed or that are under construction, although there are also some "invisible" former *gecekondu* areas that are earmarked for government regeneration projects, but are on hold for different reasons, and these areas are now considered as affordable housing options for Syrian and other refugee groups (Altıntaş, 2016; Sönmez, 2016). In contrast, there have been few studies investigating the accessibility of Syrian refugees to housing and the problems they face in these former *gecekondus*, and so the depth of the problem remains, on the whole, unknown. The present study addresses this issue and seeks answers to the following key research questions by analyzing Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods of Ankara as the case study:

- How the Syrian refugees' access to housing have been shaped and what are the actual problems influencing this process?
- To what extent have Syrian refugees living in the case study area been influenced by poor living conditions, socio-spatial isolation, unaffordability and forced mobility, which have been identified as the leading housing problems encountered by refugees worldwide in literature?

Studies investigating the housing conditions of Syrian refugees in Turkish cities are still limited. The significance of this research is not only revealing different dimensions of the housing problems of refugees through the case of Ankara but also connecting these issues with the urban transformation processes that exacerbates them. The following section presents a comprehensive and multi-dimensional review of literature on the diverse housing issues faced by asylum seekers and refugees, highlighting the analytical perspective of the case study. The third section provides a brief explanation of the rise in squatter housing development and urban regeneration from a historical perspective with reference to the socio-political dimensions in Turkey, and more specifically, Ankara. The key findings of the case study are presented in part 5, and these are then discussed in the concluding section.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON THE HOUSING OF REFUGEES

Refugee policies have long focused only on emergency situations at both global and national scales (Betts and Collier, 2017), under which, in times of crisis, governments establish densely populated

refugee camps that are distinctly isolated from city centers and separated from the host communities (Diken, 2004). Today, however, the refugees living in metropolitan cities, referred to as "urban refugees", outnumber those living in refugee camps[3]. Among the main problems encountered by refugees is their ability to exercise their right to housing. Article 21 of Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees guarantees the right to housing of refugees with the following statements: *"As regards housing, the Contracting States, in so far as the matter is regulated by laws or regulations or is subject to the control of public authorities, shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory treatment as favourable as possible and, in any event, not less favourable than that accorded to aliens generally in the same circumstances"*. But housing issues differ between the countries of first asylum and the resettlement countries[4], and so an analysis of studies of both country groups would provide a better understanding of the topic.

In the United Kingdom, the rights of asylum seekers to social housing were restricted by a series of new laws enacted after the 1990s, under which the UK government sought to settle refugees in social housing complexes in 12 specific locations across the country. Phillips (2006) argues that this strict housing strategy led to isolation and the emergence of problematic social housing settlements, as well as poor living conditions for the urban refugees who must be ready to move at a moment's notice due to the constant risk of homelessness (Phillips, 2006). Beer and Foley (2003) list the housing problems experienced by refugees in Australia as high rents, forced mobility, inconvenient settlement location and overcrowding. In contrast, Carter and Osborne (2009) reveal the main housing problems of refugees in Canada to be discrimination, overcrowding, multiple factors hindering the search for housing and difficulties in paying rent. In Sweden, refugees have been settled in diverse locations around the country and are obliged to stay in the provided social housing units for a minimum of 18 months if they are to retain their rights, although most have chosen to leave these units due to segregation and spatial stigmatization (Andersson, 1998).

There are also studies that examine housing issues encountered by refugees in their first asylum countries. For instance, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, millions of Afghan citizens fled to Pakistan and Iran. In Pakistan, the Afghan refugees were offered sites on state-owned desert lands for settlement, although the conditions in the small villages they created were poor, aside from being isolated from the cities and the local population. Over the years, the refugees came to abandon these settlements and return to the cities at the cost of government support (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont, 1988). In the same period, 2.6 million Afghan migrants took up refuge in Iran, where financial support was provided to enable the Afghan refugees to establish their own settlements, including housing and factories (Rajaee, 2000). International reports, however, told stories of deepening poverty, malnutrition, and serious health problems in several of the settlements (Adelkhah and Olszewska, 2007).

[3] According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees data, 55% of the global refugee population lives in in cities.

[4] According to UNHCR, most host countries are neighboring countries (73%) and developing countries (85%), and have limitations in terms of policy, legislation and institutional capacity affecting their ability to absorb massive migration flows.

Alhusban et all (2019) research the impacts of urban Syrian refugees on the residential urban fabric of Al Mafraq city of Jordan. They determine housing issues such as overcrowding, deterioration in the amount and level of services, a deficit in the amount of affordable housing supply compared to the high demand and rising rental prices. The lack of adequate and affordable housing has forced the majority of Syrian refugees to seek other alternatives like living in unfinished houses or storage and retail spaces. In their region-level study Balkan et all (2018) document that the settlement of Syrian refugees in Turkey increased rents at high-rent or high-quality units and deepened residential segregation. Because the refugee influx increased the demand for native-dominant neighborhoods with higher-quality amenities among natives. Haliloğlu Kahraman (2021) lists housing issues of Syrian refugees in Ankara as the share of rent in the family budget, the existence of unofficial realtors and lack of regulation in the housing market, security problems, deteriorations in dwellings, and the risk of demolition from the renewal process of the neighborhood.

Exercising their right to housing is one of the most challenging issues faced by refugees in cities. Studies have shown that the refugee housing policies enacted by governments often lead to the establishment of isolated residential sites that are separated and disconnected from the city centers. In addition, refugees face such profound housing problems as poor living conditions, rising rents (affordability problem) and the constant risk of homelessness, the threat of which means they must be ready to move with very little notice (Figure 1).

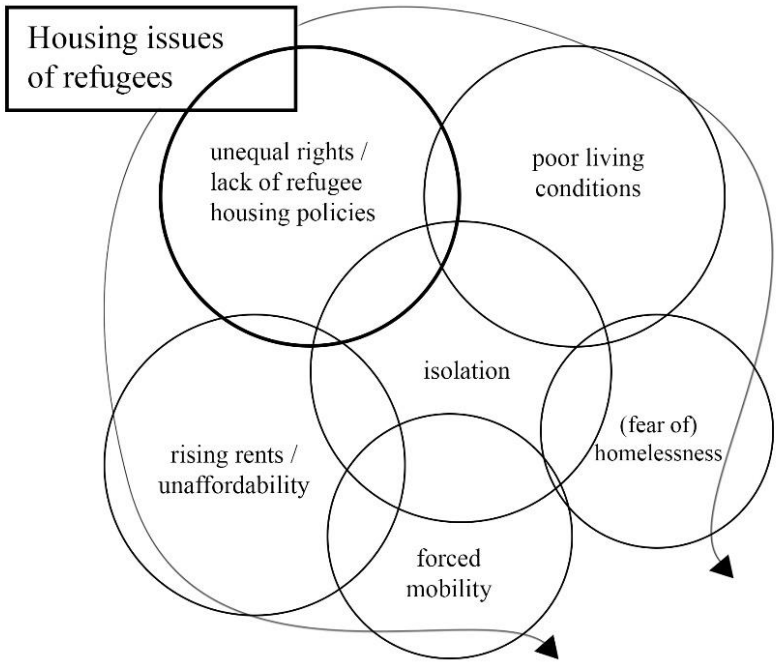

Figure 1 - The most common housing issues experienced by refugees based on literature review above (prepared by the author).

According to Turkey's Law on Foreigners and International Protection, there are different statuses of international protection: Refugees, conditional refugees, subsidiary protection, and temporary protection. Since they have been protected under temporary protection, no robust or adequate social housing policy has yet been established to deal with the Syrians in Turkey. Between 2011 and 2015, refugee camps were established in many locations in the country's southern regions to deal with the acute housing problem. But aim of this initial approach was only providing urgent sheltering need and can't be evaluate as housing policy. Later on, as the refugees have moved from the camps to the cities, the number of camp settlements has decreased over time. While there were 24 camps in 2017, only seven remained by 2022. According to Ministry of Interior data, 98 percent of the Syrian refugees in Turkey were living in cities in 2022, where they are required to make their own housing arrangements[5].

In parallel with the findings of the above studies, an initial study of Turkish cities also revealed a prevalence of poor housing among Syrian refugees. Their options are restricted to declining urban neighborhoods where the rents are cheap, and *gecekondu* areas that are under serious pressure from urban regeneration. For example, a group of Syrian refugees settled in the Küçükpazar district of Istanbul, moving into dilapidated buildings that are earmarked for demolition as part of an urban regeneration project (Altıntaş, 2016), while Sönmez (2016) reported that Syrian refugees in the city of Gaziantep had settled in the city's former *gecekondu* settlements. Yıldız and Uzgören (2016) stated that all respondents of their interviews held within İzmir case study were living in unsanitary and damp *gecekondu* units having desperate housing conditions. Before drawing upon the original research findings of the present study, it is necessary to touch upon the history of squatter housing in Turkey and the subsequent urban regeneration efforts, as Syrian refugees have become the latest victims of this successive urban decline/decay and regeneration process.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF *"GECEKONDUS"* AND URBAN REGENERATION IN TURKEY AND ANKARA

The Turkish *gecekondu* phenomenon has featured large in the nation's urbanization history. Keleş (2017) contextualizes the history of *gecekondu* over four main periods. The political and institutional approaches to these *gecekondu* settlements have changed throughout these periods. At the first period between 1950 and 1960, agricultural mechanization and industrial development led to mass domestic migration from the rural to urban. The shortage of sufficient housing stock to meet the housing demand of the migrants in those years (Uzun, 2005) led the migrants to construct illegal *gecekondu* units as an informal solution to their accommodation issues. To begin with, governmental institutions proposed the demolition of the *gecekondu* units (Dündar, 2001), although this reactive attitude was never adopted as a strategy. *Gecekondus* were a bottom-up solution to the housing problem (Lovering and Türkmen, 2011) – having been built as part of efforts to survive under the challenging conditions of capitalism (Uzun and Celik Simsek, 2015).

In a change of strategy, governmental institutions started to provide the *gecekondu* areas with infrastructure and enacted some key amnesty laws that legalized the settlements beginning with the

[5] https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638

1960s (Ataöv and Osmay, 2007). At this second period, the occupants were thus encouraged to enlarge their small *gecekondu* units, increasing both the number of floors and the residential units. This spatial expansion turned the units into significant economic assets due to the rising land rents and the rapid urbanization being witnessed in the country (Dündar, 2001), and at the third period between 1970 and 1980, *gecekondus* became profitable commodities (Keleş, 2017; Elicin, 2014).

In the 1980s, high-rise apartment blocks started to replace the once owner-occupied and owner-built *gecekondu* units in most of the nation's metropolitan cities (Erman, 2001), and as a consequence, government agencies and construction companies both started to recognize the potential of *gecekondus* as assets that could not be left to "unwelcomed occupiers". As a result, another widely-used concept relating to the transformation of *gecekondu* areas entered the lexicon of Turkish urbanization literature: Urban Regeneration. This phenomenon is also the main characteristic of the last period of *gecekondu*, after 2000's.

To begin with, a "build and sell" model was applied to encourage the regeneration of some *gecekondu* areas by means of improvement and reclamation plans (Türker-Devecigil, 2005), although regeneration on a much larger scale occurred through the interventions of such key state institutions as the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization and the Housing Development Administration (HDA) in cooperation with municipalities. To sustain the state-led urban regeneration, central government institutions were empowered in the 2000s, and in time, the HDA gained the authority to expropriate properties, to prepare and approve urban development plans and to implement projects (Batuman, 2013).

Most academicians and professional chambers criticize and even oppose the urban regeneration projects of the HDA, referring to the lack of regard paid to the residents' opinions and demands (Batuman, 2013), the displacement of the existing population, and the transfer of economic and social problems to other parts of the city (Dündar, 2001), the design of the land parcel marketing strategy to benefit high-income groups (Güzey, 2016), and the resulting damage to the characteristics and the general socio-spatial and visual aspects of cities. In response to such criticisms and to legitimize their projects, government authorities started to refer to the "deprivation of the *gecekondu* areas and populations", the "increasing crime rates" and the "disaster risks" to legitimize their urban regeneration projects (Güzey, 2016).

Especially after 2010, the dominant discourse in *gecekondu* transformation has become to avoid disaster risk. Laws enacted in a top-down manner provided the legal base for such discourse, with, for example, the Urban Transformation Act making direct reference to disaster risk. The Urban Transformation Act for the Areas under Disaster Risk was enacted on 16 May 2012. This Act is also one of the legal interventions destined to centralize urban planning (Elicin, 2014). Thanks to the aggressive survival strategies adopted by the urban poor in Turkey, such as gecekondu settlements, migrant groups had a chance of upward mobility. Former migrants exploit the opportunities of informal housing and then transfer their poverty conditions to newcomers (Pınarcioglu and Işık, 2008). After this general summary of urban regeneration policy, we can take a closer look at the city of Ankara and the selected case study area.

In the 1930s, Ankara was a compact city with a single dominant urban core – Ulus – in the Altındağ district (Uzun, 2005). In the 1950s, Kızılay has emerged as the new modern central business district (Figure 2), and in time the central functions shifted from Ulus to Kızılay (Batuman, 2013). Although it lost its old-traditional meaning, Ulus remained in part as a commercial zone. When the rural-to-urban migration began, the newcomers to Ankara started constructing *gecekondu* units around the old city center.

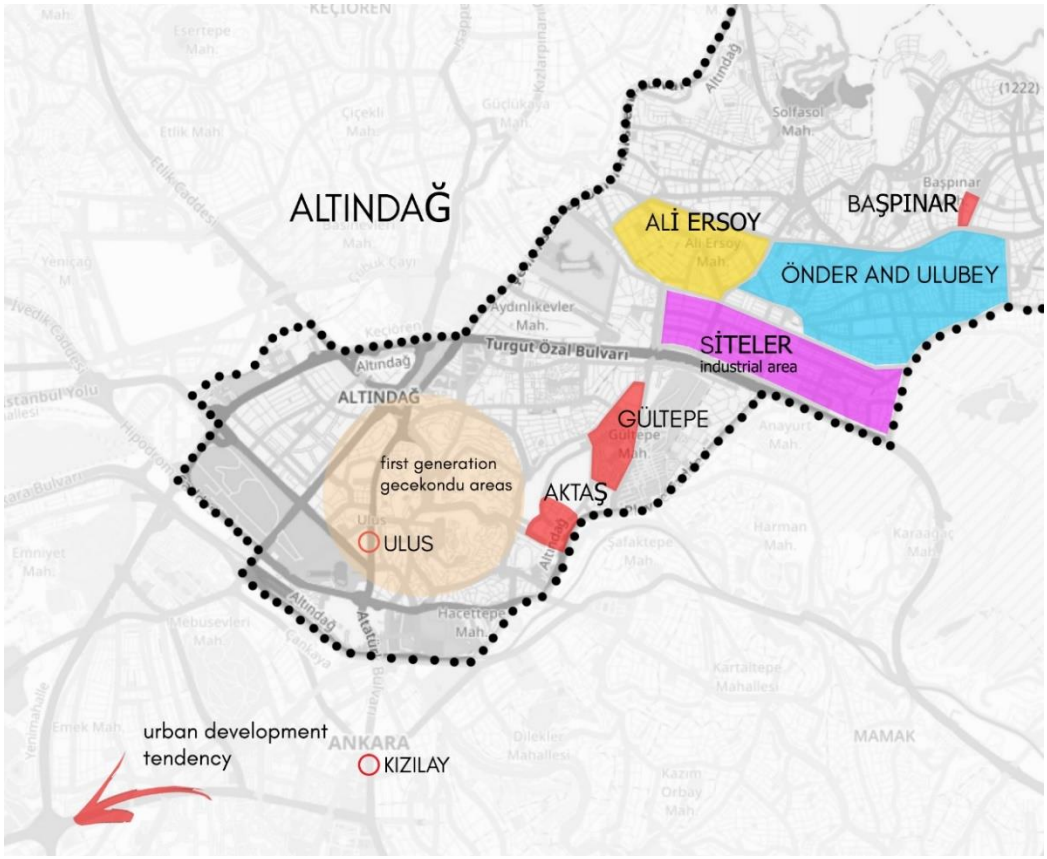

Figure 2 - Old gecekondu neighborhoods of Altındağ District, diagrammed on Satellite Map.

After the first *gecekondu* sites emerged in the Altındağ district, further sites started to spread to the north. They also spread to other central locations of the city including Çankaya. In the late 1960s an industrial zone named "Siteler" that was specialized in furniture manufacturing was established nearby (Figure 2), providing considerable employment opportunities to the rural-to-urban migrants. The labor-intensive workers of Siteler, working in low-paid jobs, constructed second-generation *gecekondu* settlements to the north of the industrial district (Ali Ersoy, Hacılar, Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods) in the 1970s. For a long time, the majority of the *gecekondu* stock of Ankara remained without transformation. After the 2000s, the effects of the changing urban transformation policy of Turkey began to be seen in Ankara as well. For example, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and Ankara Metropolitan Municipality implemented several urban regeneration projects in the *gecekondu* areas near Ulus. Moreover, 3 other projects were completed in cooperation with Altındağ Municipality and the HAD in Gültepe, Aktaş, and Başpınar neighborhoods located north of the Siteler.

To legitimate these projects, governmental and market forces mobilized dominant political discourses such as "eliminating disorder", and "minimizing crime and danger" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The main reason for regeneration projects, implemented in and around Ulus, was actually to create touristic attractions and the project included many hotels, restaurants, cafes, and local shops in addition to new housing units. In Gültepe and Aktaş neighborhoods, low-rise *gecekondu* units with gardens replaced by high-rise mass housing blocks. The scholars who conducted research in those neighborhoods reveal that there has been a state coordinated gentrification process (Kocak, 2019) which prevent Gecekondu residents to participate in the regeneration projects (Gümüşboğa, 2009) and there were serious violations of the housing rights (Danişan, 2012). After 2010, instead of regenerating an entire neighborhood through the massive projects of HDA, local governments supported and mobilized some individual small-scale contractors/investors to implement a parcel-based piecemeal urban regeneration scheme like in Ali Ersoy neighborhood (Türker-Devecigil, 2005).

Today, the regeneration of these *gecekondu* areas has mostly been completed, with only the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods being left. The regeneration efforts have, however, intersected with the intense wave of immigration from Syria to Turkey and the settlement of Syrian refugees in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods. While the spatial structure remains the same, the resident profile has changed over the last 40–50 years, with the latest arrivals being predominantly Syrian immigrants over the last 10 years.

RESEARCH METHOD AND THE CASE STUDY AREA

The research is based on the findings of a field research conducted by the author in Ankara of the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods between 2017 and 2019. The study made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods and took the historical dimension into consideration. For the quantitative aspect, numerical data was obtained and spatialized at provincial level in Ankara and neighborhood-level in Altındağ. Quantitative data uncovered the unknown spatial distribution of Syrian Refugees and used as a ground of site selection of the case study. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used in a successive manner.

The survey was applied to 130 Syrian families with respondents identified through a simple random sampling method. The approval by the Ethics Committee was given to the survey by Gazi University on 09.10.2018 (Research Code: 2018-397). The survey contained both open and closed-ended questions, and the findings were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 20.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.). Questions of the survey were formulated to provide basic information on housing such as duration of resident, rental method, rental value, size and the facilities of houses and main housing problems. I presented survey results as frequencies (percent) in the paper.

For the qualitative aspect, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out and participant observations were made to allow a deeper understanding of the causes and effects of the socio-spatial change. With 24 Syrian refugee families semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to obtain a deeper understanding of the mentioned issues in the survey after completing the application and obtaining the first findings of the survey. Of the 40 people interviewed, other 16

were key actors such as experts, Turkish neighborhood residents, Turkish shopkeepers, employers, etc. Settlement of Syrian refugees and the ongoing urban transformation in the case study area are interactive processes also including these other actors. I made all these interviews to analyze the process more accurately. The relevant remarks of interviewees were directly quoted in the paper to strengthen the narrative. Table 1 shows the features of respondents I quoted in this paper. I also indicated the respondent numbers after the quotations.

Table 1 - Features of Interview Respondents.

Respondent Number	Gender	Age	Occupation	Marital Status	Number of Children
R-1	Female	60	Housewife	Widow	8
R-2	Male	36	Shopkeeper	Married	3
R-3	Female	29	Housewife	Married	3
	Definition			**Interview Date**	
R-4	City Planner at Altındağ Municipality			26/11/2018	
R-5	Gecekondu owner at Önder Neighborhood			25/10/2018	
R-6	Gecekondu owner at Ulubey Neighborhood			11/05/2019	

The in-depth interviews lasted 40–60 minutes and were recorded for audio. After completing the interviews, the recordings were transcribed, the interview transcripts were categorized, and key quotes were selected for the study. To analyze the raw data collected from the interviews, I used Layder's (2005) pre-coding method[6]. Interviews helped to categorize housing problems as poor conditions, socio-spatial isolation, unaffordability and forced mobility. The survey and interviews were both conducted with the assistance of a bilingual Arabic-Turkish translator.

While obtaining basic quantitative datasets may seem easy at first glance, it was a significantly challenging process. The Directorate General of Migration Management of the Ministry of Interior shares numbers about Syrian refugees only at a provincial level, and it has been a long time since more detailed and comprehensive data sets have been made available to academicians. At the culmination of 6 months of official initiatives in 2017, district-level data on Syrians living in Ankara was obtained, revealing the highest density of Syrian refugees to be in Altındağ, which was consequently made the focus of the study. In 2017, 75,000[7] refugees were residing in Ankara, around 55 percent of which were living in the Altındağ district, the old city center of Ankara (Figure 3).

[6] Pre-coding involves categorizing the data. Pre-coding devices are underlining parts of the text or putting an asterisk on certain sections of text to highlight their importance or relevance. Codes designate units of information that can be cataloged, thus allowing to develop early concepts or themes (Layder, 2005).

[7] This number reached approximately 100,000 in 2021, according to Directorate General of Migration Management of the Ministry of Interior.

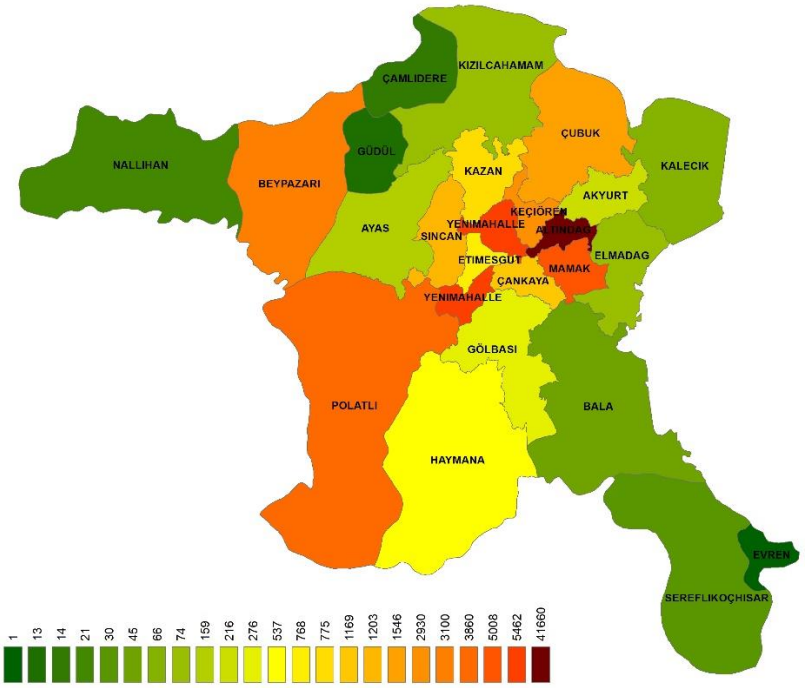

Figure 3 - Number of Syrian Refugees living in Ankara, 2017 by district, (Author, 2019).

It was not possible to obtain neighborhood-level data about the Syrian refugees living in Altındağ district from central government institutions, and so this data had to be obtained through interviews with mukhtars and key representatives of non-governmental organizations in 38 neighborhoods (Figure 4).

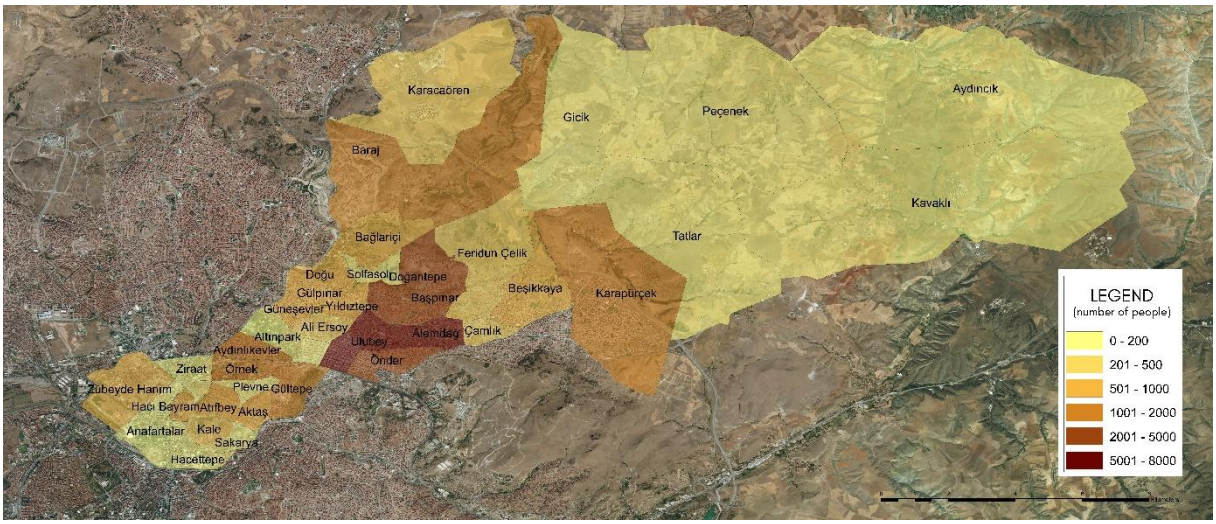

Figure 4 - Number of Syrian Refugees living in Altındağ District, 2017 by neighborhood, (Author, 2019).

An analysis of the Altındağ district clearly reveals the prevalence of Syrians in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods, being home to approximately 12,000 Syrian refugees in 2018.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

According to the survey results, most of the respondent Syrian families had four children, and most had lived in Aleppo at the outbreak of the civil war. They have a low socio-economic status and had arrived in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods through network migration. As stated earlier, *gecekondu* areas are the cheapest and easiest options for Syrian refugees as landlords generally refuse to rent to Syrian refugees in other parts of the city. Some of the interviewees stated that they had chosen not to disclose their nationality to ease their search for a home, but without success. One of the most popular reasons for settling in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods for refugees was their proximity to the Siteler industrial area and the associated access to employment, treading the same path taken by the rural-to-urban migrants 40–50 years earlier. The main findings of the study will be elaborated upon and discussed in detail in the following parts.

Poor Conditions: Living next to Debris

As one of the older *gecekondu* areas, the building stock in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods is somewhat dilapidated. The *gecekondu* units were initially built as one-story houses, but most were later expanded with the addition of second or third storys (Figure 5) resulting in a high population density per block. Coming to the present day, the ongoing urban regeneration process has had a further detrimental impact on housing in the district and the living conditions of Syrian refugees, as explained below.

Figure 5 - Examples of building stock, Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods, (Author's archive, 2019).

Since the Altındağ Municipality opted to facilitate the application of block-based projects by private contractors, the process naturally went slower than regenerating Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods with a holistic approach, as all property owners and shareholders had to agree on a contract

prepared separately for each block. This is not as easy as it sounds, however, and the process was made even more complicated after the waves of Syrian immigration began.

There were a few agreements and contracts between investors and property owners for some blocks in the neighborhood where the *gecekondu* units had been demolished and new constructions had started before the arrival of the Syrian refugees. However, after the Syrian immigration started, more and more property owners opted to rent their houses to Syrians rather than dealing with contractors, as in the long-term the contractors were offering less than the rents paid by the Syrians. In other words, the Syrian refugees were willing to rent the *gecekondu* units that would normally remain empty, being unable to afford accommodation anywhere else in the city. These interrelated facts led to a so-called "crisis" in the urban regeneration process in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods, with demolitions and new builds coming to a standstill.

In response to this "crisis" in the relationships between the contractors, *gecekondu*-owners and refugee tenants, Altındağ Municipality decided to relaunch the urban regeneration process, and in 2013, two areas in the Önder (16 hectares) and Ulubey (5 hectares) neighborhoods were determined as "disaster risk zones" under the Urban Transformation Act. As a result, all of the *gecekondu* units within the designated areas were demolished between 2016 and 2017 (Figure 6), but as stated by an urban planner from Altındağ Municipality: *"The boundaries of the zones earmarked for demolition were not determined according to any criteria. We simply chose areas in a central location and close to the main roads in both neighborhoods. We wanted the area to be as large as possible. In fact, the main purpose of demolitions was to ensure the retriggering of the regeneration process in the area." (R-4)*

Figure 6 - Area earmarked for demolition in the Önder neighborhood, and a new structure (Altındağ Municipality archive).

Since the demolitions, a number of new constructions have been started on the empty lots. In 2018, a total of eight new construction permits were obtained from Altındağ Municipality, and in the same year the Municipality deferred the obligatory fee payments related to construction to ease the building process. The *gecekondu* demolitions continued, and although they were on a smaller scale, the refugee families living in the area were again affected, by the reduction of housing and the poor environmental conditions. As stated by one respondent: *"After the buildings were demolished, it took a long time for the rubble to be cleared. There is building rubble everywhere, and it spreads all over the place. We've been living next to debris for months. It is both messy and dangerous." (R-5)*

It was observed that the families also struggled to improve the conditions inside their rental houses, given the lack of support from public institutions and the lack of incentive, since the property could be demolished at any time as part of the regeneration efforts. Furthermore, it was noted that they were reluctant to acquire much furniture, in recognition of the fact that they could be required to vacate the property at a moment's notice.

Socio-spatial Isolation: "Little Aleppo" of Ankara

It is common all over the world for asylum seekers and refugees to accumulate in isolated ghetto-like settlements, although living in ethnic urban enclaves has both positive and negative sides (Peach, 1996). Among the advantages, they are able to preserve their cultural characteristics within their communities, they can communicate in their mother tongue, and they can easily cooperate and act in solidarity, etc. As for the disadvantages, they are segregated, both socially and spatially, and have access to fewer opportunities than other social groups. The field research uncovered several factors underlining the socio-spatial isolation of the Syrian refugees living in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods. Evidence from the collected data is presented below.

Before the urban regeneration, *gecekondu* neighborhoods were common in the Altındağ district. In the gradual regeneration of different neighborhoods in Altındağ, the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods were left behind as *gecekondu* settlements, leading to their spatial disconnection from the rest of the city. This spatial stigmatization increased with the settlement of Syrian migrants, and the two neighborhoods have thus come to be known among the Turkish population as *"Little Aleppo"*[8]. During the in-depth interviews with local (Turkish) people, many complaints were made about the Syrians in the area and there was a general reluctance at having to share the same neighborhood, public spaces, hospitals, and schools with them. Among the last few Turkish families remaining in the neighborhood, some have chosen to make a spatial statement by hanging Turkish flags from their homes and shops. A small number of families, on the other hand, have a positive view of Syrian refugees, whom they approach with a "host" reflex based mostly on their common religious affiliation. When the refugees were asked about the most significant problems they face in their everyday lives, the majority (52%) emphasized such social issues as conflict, exclusion, and discrimination rather than the physical problems and demolitions in the neighborhood. It can be said, however, that social and spatial aspects of isolation constantly reproduce each other.

As a result of spatial isolation, the lives of most refugees are limited to their neighborhoods of residence. One of the interviewees stated: *"I have only been in this neighborhood in Ankara. I can't go anywhere else; my life passes in a very narrow environment" (R-1)*. Many other refugees concur, saying that they have never left the neighborhood or been to the city center. When asked whether they had ever been to Kızılay, the city center, almost 60 percent of the respondents said they had not. Isolation is both social and spatial in Little Aleppo, and the two structures constantly reproduce each other.

[8] Moreover, in the author's previous papers, it has been scientifically demonstrated that the case study area is an urban enclave that is separated from the rest of the city by using the Index of Dissimilarity (ID). For further information please also see: (Reference)

The limited social interactions between the Syrian and Turkish populations contribute to the lack of spatial mobility and interaction, leading inevitably in time to spatial immobility and isolation. According to the survey results, while 64 percent of the Syrian refugees stated that they had established social relations with other Syrian families, this figure was only 37 percent when it came to forming relationships with Turkish families. One of the interviewees stated that there was actually a desire to remain isolated: *"When I have a problem, I usually turn to my family and relatives for help. We do not want to be in contact with too many people because we are afraid; there may be people with bad intentions" (R-2).* The spatial and social barriers between different populations lead to vicious circles in everyday life, and the establishment of greater barriers and further isolation.

Affordability: Let's Make Altındağ Profitable Again!

A spatial expansion of Ankara has occurred toward the southwest of the city over the last 30 years, during which time Altındağ came to be surrounded by *gecekondu* areas, leading to considerable decline and a growing reputation for "crime", an "informal economy" and "marginality". The most attractive locations in the rental market are in the southwest of the city, while Altındağ has low rent production capacity, and so is not a priority for urban regeneration. To attract investments and to make the district economically attractive for speculative construction, Altındağ first had to rid itself of its "bad labels", which the local government insisted would also be possible through urban regeneration. Veysel Tiryaki, who was mayor of Altındağ between 2004 and 2019, said: *"Altındağ contains the most problematic areas in Ankara. Over time, crime, an informal economy, and marginality have prevailed in these areas"* (Sadioğlu, et al., 2016).

Altındağ Municipality sought to transform only the physical aspects of the old *gecekondu* neighborhoods, but the social structure also changed as the regeneration projects were completed. Consequently, many of the former residents were either unable to afford housing in the new blocks or were negatively affected by the physical transformation. The attempts to resolve social problems through physical interventions once again failed, as the "problems" were merely relocated. As the mayor said: *"Altındağ has changed a lot, it is not the old Altındağ anymore"*, in that as the old *gecekondus* were demolished and the "marginal" groups left, Altındağ became more attractive for the middle-upper classes. Following these interventions, the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods have become more profitable in the eyes of governmental and market forces, placing even more pressure on the Syrian refugees living in the area.

It was an expected outcome that the *gecekondu* owners would not be able to afford properties in the new buildings after regeneration, and it can thus be argued that both the *gecekondu* owners and the refugees suffered violations of their right to housing. That said, owing to their property rights, they maintained some power to negotiate as crucial actors in the urban regeneration process. For the *gecekondu* owners, the use value of their old houses came to be overshadowed by their exchange value. Although they had certain rights and desires, they faced pressure of displacement under the accelerated regeneration efforts. Refugees, on the other hand, were merely in search of a "place to live" and took over the use-value of the *gecekondus*. Since they were excluded from other parts of the city, they were willing to rent the *gecekondu* at a price higher than their use-value. In short, the rents were high enough to support the *gecekondu* owners, and low enough to be afforded by the refugees.

According to the results of the survey, the average size of a *gecekondu* in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods is 100 square meters, and rents are in the 250–400 TL /monthly range. A comparison of this value with that of other districts in Ankara was made based on the prices on Turkey's most popular real estate website[9]. At the time of the survey, the average rental price per square meter in the Altındağ district was approximately 8 TL, meaning an average rent for a 100 square-meter flat of 800 TL. This was considerably higher, and sometimes even double the rents paid in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods, with even greater differences in other parts of Ankara. Rental values are also very cheap for Turkish tenants. However, this area is not preferred by them for reasons such as poor housing conditions, demolitions, and the presence of Syrians in neighborhoods. While it is clear that rents are much more affordable in these neighborhoods, the constant threat of demolition and displacement endured by Syrian refugees paints a very dark future for them.

Forced Mobility: Never-ending Displacement

Lefebvre (2006) argues that to grasp the very essence of everyday life, one needs to analyze mobility. It was observed in the present study that the lives of Syrian refugees are conducted within a very limited spatial framework, and they suffer from severe spatial immobility that, unfortunately, becomes a matter of choice in time. As observed in the studied neighborhoods, the predominant tendencies include self-isolation, avoidance of the city center and the limitation of their social interactions to the neighborhoods in which they live. Social and spatial exclusion deepens isolation and immobility. The present study identified a further form of mobility in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods related to the ongoing urban regeneration process – after agreements were reached between the *gecekondu*-owners and contractors, the demolition of the old *gecekondu* sites began, which placed Syrian refugees under a constant threat of displacement. Of the Syrian families who took part in the study, 70 percent had been forced to move due to the imminent demolition of their places of residence.

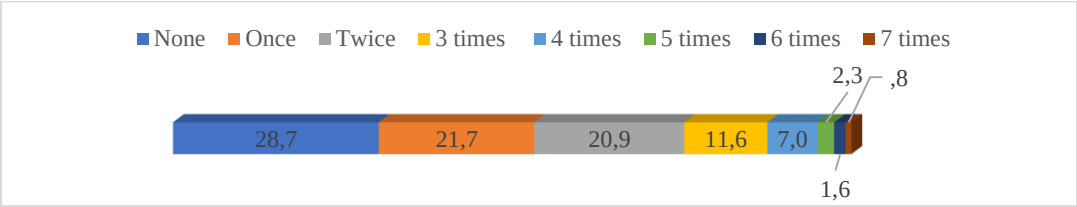

Figure 7 - Number of moves of Syrian respondents (%).

Describing their experience with displacements, one of the respondents said: *"We have moved house four times since arriving in Ankara, and our current house will probably be demolished soon. They give us just one month's notice before demolition, which is not enough time to find a new house and move. People (Syrian refugees) often have to move to much worse houses as they have no other options. It is very difficult and tiring, constantly having to move and establish new social relationships each time" (R-3).* Such frequent movements prevent the establishment of a sense of permanence and a reluctance to accumulate belongings, with access to

[9] https://www.sahibinden.com/emlak360/emlak-endeksi

urban services, transportation, workplace-residential connections, and interactions with other social groups also being affected. For the refugees living in larger areas earmarked for demolition by the municipality, the situation is even more difficult, as the result is a large number of families searching for homes at the same time.

Syrian refugees want to continue living in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods as they consider it to be a safe place to live (80%) and believe they have no other choice. While they may have to move frequently due to the demolitions, they tend to choose to settle in another *gecekondu* in the same "Önder-Ulubey enclave". According to one respondent: *"I don't think I can live anywhere other than this neighborhood. Outside this area, the rents are very expensive and even if we could find something affordable, the owners do not want to rent to us" (R-1).* Supporting this finding, the majority (71%) of respondents believe they will continue to live in this neighborhood in the future. One *gecekondu* owner – a former resident of the area – said: *"I think all of this will be demolished soon. The process is continuing slowly, but the future of the neighborhood is clear, as new constructions have started on the main streets. Syrians must find new places to live. Of course, they cannot afford houses in the other neighborhoods, so maybe some will go to Istanbul or return to Syria" (R-6).*

As the *gecekondu*-owner said, one day, the whole area will be demolished and the *gecekondu*/old *gecekondu* units will be replaced with new high-rise apartment blocks. All Syrian families living in the area must be ready to move at any time due to the urban regeneration process. As mentioned by one of the respondents: *"We have been living in fear for a long time as all of the houses around our unit have been demolished. We keep an eye on advertisements for rental houses so that we can be ready to move" (R-2).* In the case of the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods, the issue of displacement is actually one of "displaceability" (Yiftachel, 2020). During my fieldwork, Syrian refugees were moving from the Önder neighborhood, where more *gecekondu* units were destroyed, to the Ulubey neighborhood. However, this mobility was still taking place within the borders of "Little Aleppo" since there was still enough room for the population. It was yet unknown to which parts of the city would Syrian families move to, after the transformation is completed. Future studies would shed light on this issue.

CONCLUSION

In the event of a deep political and/or social crisis in a particular territory (such as war or mass violations of human rights) people start to look for a more secure living environment and a peaceful habitat where they can restore their way of life. This is both a basic instinct and a human right, although the key question is: How many refugees can live in a safe, peaceful, and healthy environment in a host country? This is one of the most tragic questions of our age. Refugees can easily contribute to the existing problems in their host country in terms of politics, human rights, social life, etc., and their capacity to cope with such problems may be low due to their temporary, ambiguous, and fragile status.

Historically, the legal framework in Turkey as regards to asylum seekers and refugees has developed in reaction to specific refugee movements, and so has been directly affected by such dynamics as the political and social conditions in the country and the magnitude of the immigration. Despite it

being 30 years since the signing of the Geneva Convention, the national legislation related to refugees has not yet been fully adapted to the convention. The current legislation defines a service-based approach rather than prioritizing refugee rights and assumes that Syrian refugees will return to Syria in the 10th year of the humanitarian crisis. According to the results of the present study, however, when asked, *"Are you thinking of going back to Syria?"*, 62 percent replied in the negative. The assumption that Syrians will one day return home, referred to as the "temporariness" approach, leads to violations of rights and ambiguities, as no long-term social integration policies are developed, and the refugees are thus forced to live in conditions of uncertainty.

Turkey's *gecekondu* areas have been recognized as an urban issue in Turkey since the 1950s, although it was only in the 2000s that the regeneration of these areas came to the agenda, and there have since been numerous academic studies of the socio-spatial effects of the urban regeneration projects concluded to date. Some of the former *gecekondu* areas that have been abandoned and left to decline have become settlements for Syrian refugees. The temporary perspective of Turkey's refugee policy and the lack of comprehensive social housing policies (for refugees) exacerbates the social and spatial problems of urban areas. With no other choice, Syrian refugee groups tend to settle in former *gecekondu* areas.

While the formation of a Syrian settlement in the Önder and Ulubey neighborhoods has slowed the ongoing urban regeneration process, it has not ended it completely. Living in an area subjected to ongoing urban regeneration has deepened the common housing problems of urban refugees by worsening their living conditions and exacerbating their displacement and sense of exclusion. In other words, the urban regeneration in the study area brings a complexity of housing problems to Syrian refugees, increasing their isolation, and hindering the improvement of their living conditions and their everyday life. Refugees live under the constant threat of eviction, thus forcing them to be mobile.

Research findings pointed out some specific issues regarding the housing of Syrian refugees. First, they settled into gecekondu units that would normally remain empty, being unable to afford accommodation anywhere else in the city. As more Syrian families came, state agencies have made interventions to ease the transformation process in the area. Second, in parallel with the deepening segregation, Syrian refugees living in "Little Aleppo" have become more isolated socially and spatially. The limited social interactions and negative attitudes of natives also triggered the self-isolation of the refugees. Third, by maintaining some power the former Turkish gecekondu dwellers transferred urban poverty to the Syrian refugees. And fourth, Syrian refugees are stuck in a forced mobility loop because of the demolitions resulting in moves several times.

Syrian refugees living in Altındağ are in a state of constant apprehension, as their future is full of ambiguities. In the case study area, it is obvious that the Syrian refugees have far from found a permanent and inclusive solution to their housing problem. Rather than the Temporary Protection approach, inclusive and long-term social and spatial policies should be adopted that consider the problems of those with this status, as a matter of urgency. Through the development of inclusive urban policies and comprehensive social housing programs by the government, the integration and participation of refugees in urban life will be improved.

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A. Fikir / Idea, Concept	B. Çalışma Tasarısı, Yöntemi / Study Design, Methodology	C. Literatür Taraması / Literature Review
D. Danışmanlık / Supervision	E. Malzeme, Kaynak Sağlama / Material, Resource Supply	F. Veri Toplama, İşleme / Data Collection, Processing
G. Analiz, Yorum / Analyses, Interpretation	H. Metin Yazma / Writing Text	I. Eleştirel İnceleme / Critical Review

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