



## ÜNİVERSİTE ÖĞRENCİLERİNDE SURİYELİ ALGISI: KOCAELİ ÖRNEĞİ

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### HOW DO TURKISH STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PERCEIVE SYRIANS: THE CASE OF KOCAELI

**ÖZ** Dış politika ve sığınma politikalarının bir sonucu olarak Türkiye, dünyada en fazla sığınmacı kabul eden ülke konumundadır. Türkiye'deki Suriyelilerin sayısı 3,6 milyonu geçmiştir; bunların yüzde doksansekizi geçici barınma merkezlerinin dışında barınmaktadır. Son yapılan çalışmalar Türkiye kamuoyunda Suriyelilere karşı yüksek oranda bir hoşnutsuzluğu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, Kocaeli Üniversitesi'ndeki 396 üniversite öğrencisiyle anket çalışması yaparak Türkiyeli üniversite öğrencilerinin Suriyelilere bakış açısını anlamaktır. Bu çerçevede, cinsiyet, sınıf ve yerleşim yeri gibi bağımsız değişkenlerin etkileri incelenmiştir. Toplanan verinin güvenilirliği ve geçerliliği güven analizi ve faktör analizi ile tespit edilmiştir. Çalışmamız çerçevesinde elde ettiğimiz bulgulara göre, her ne kadar üniversite öğrencileri kamuoyunda Suriyelilere karşı oluşan hoşnutsuzluğu paylaşıyor da, üçüncü ve dördüncü sınıf öğrencileri birinci ve ikinci sınıflara oranla daha pozitif tavır göstermektedirler ve istatistiksel olarak anlamlı bir fark ifade eden tek bağımsız değişken de sınıftır..

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Göç, mülteci, Suriye krizi, kamuoyu, uyum

**ABSTRACT** As a result of its foreign and asylum policies, Turkey is now the world's largest recipient of refugees. The number of Syrians in Turkey reached over 3.6 million, 98 percent of whom lives outside temporary shelter settings. Recent studies have demonstrated a high-level of public disfavor in the Turkish host society toward Syrians. The aim of this study is to explore Turkish university students' perceptions of Syrians by conducting surveys with 396 university students at Kocaeli University. The impacts of independent variables such as gender, grade, and place of residence are evaluated. The reliability and validity of collected data are determined by using reliability analysis and factor analysis. Based on our findings, we argue that although university students share public disfavor toward Syrians, third and fourth graders have a less negative attitude compared to first and second graders, and the only independent variable, which makes a statistically significant difference, is grade.

**Keywords:** Migration, refugee, Syrian crisis, public perception, integration



## INTRODUCTION

The World is facing the highest levels of displacement on record, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2020a). As of September 2020, 3,616,735 Syrians were registered and issued a temporary biometric ID by the General Directorate of Migration Management, operating under the Turkish Ministry of the Interior (UNHCR, 2020b). As a result of hosting 65 percent of Syrians fleeing their home and Iraqis, Afghans, Iranians, Somalis and other nationalities under international protection status in Turkey, Turkey has become home to the world's largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR, 2019). Currently Syrians make up 4.36 percent of Turkey's population and two communities have been living side by side for almost ten years (DGMM, 2020). In a brief period, Syrian neighborhoods have emerged not only in border regions but also in larger cities like Istanbul. While it is called "Küçük Suriye" meaning "Little Syria" in Fatih district in Istanbul, other Syrian neighbors are emerging like "Little Lazkiye" in the city of Mersin or "Little Aleppo" in Ankara (Koru and Kadkoy, 2017: 115). Nevertheless, the social reality of living togetherness has not caused social cohesion and social acceptance. Recent studies demonstrated the welcoming attitude towards refugees has turned into a 'reluctant acceptance' (Erdoğan, 2017). According to Syrian Barometer 2019, 87.2 percent of Turkish society does not embrace living together with Syrians (Erdoğan, 2020: 97). While 11.5 percent of the respondents think that Syrians should definitely be sent back in 2017, this rate increased to 25 percent in 2019 (Erdoğan, 2020: 97). The increase in the number of people thinking Syrians should be sent back to ongoing war zone is worrisome since it demonstrates that social acceptance level is deteriorating. This study aims to analyze Turkish university students' perceptions of Syrians by conducting surveys with university students at Kocaeli University as a sample model. Our study aims to make a significant contribution as there is a great need to gather fieldwork data and thereby widen our understanding of the Turkish host society's perception toward Syrians. This study will help identify potential sources of social tensions that can quickly turn into daily discriminatory practices, xenophobic attitudes, and attacks. By conducting research involving quantitative methods such as surveys, this study aims to assess the breadth and depth of the perceptions of Turkish university students toward Syrians living in Turkey. The intention is to examine whether the features of survey participants such as gender, family background or home city have an impact on their perception. Our study tries to shed light on the link between the level of awareness and the level of social acceptance. Based on our findings, we argue that as the university students' level of knowledge about the Syrian Civil War, Syrian Refugee Crisis and current challenges being faced by Syrians in Turkey Syrian issue rises, they become more aware of the challenges and discrimination that Syrians experience in their daily lives in Turkey, and consequently adopt a less negative attitude toward them.

In the following part the transition of Turkey into largest refugee recipient country will be explained. In the second part, literature review, research methodology and approach will be introduced. The last part will examine the perceptions of university students toward Syrians by analyzing their responses to

knowledge questions, discussing their threat constructions about Syrians and questioning their perceived social distance against Syrians.

### **TURKEY'S TRANSITION TO THE LARGEST REFUGEE RECIPIENT COUNTRY**

Anti-regime protests started in the southern Syrian city of Dar'a and in several other cities and villages in the north of Syria on March 18, 2011. The fact that the protests spread very fast from peripheral areas to all over the country signaled that "Arab Spring" has come to Syria like the way it happened in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Since the Syrian authorities have responded to peaceful anti-government demonstrations against the regime of Bashar-al Assad with overwhelming military force, 9000 people were killed by security forces (BBC, 2012). The protestors called for democracy and greater freedom at the beginning, but once security forces opened fire on peaceful demonstrators, Assad's resignation became the sole aim of the uprising. In a very short period, the struggle gained an ethnic and then religious character with the arrival of Islamic groups flowing from all over the Arab and Muslim world in order to fight so called holy war against the Shiite camp composed of Syria, Iran and the Hezbollah organization in Lebanon (Zisser, 2017: 547). The bloody civil war turned into one of the most protracted conflicts of our time with the involvement of the superpowers, primarily the U.S.A. and Russia, regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Iran. As a result of the war millions of Syrians had to leave their homes and risk their lives to find refuge in other countries.

At the beginning of the crisis, Turkey tried to convince the Syrian regime for power transition through diplomacy; however, diplomatic efforts of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu failed. In an intergroup meeting, Ahmet Davutoglu said that he had paid 61 visits to Damascus to convince Assad but since Assad rejected, Davutoğlu argued, the only option left was to support the alternative formations such as the Syrian National Council, an umbrella organization aiming to unite the Syrian opposition (Bıçakçı, 2019: 108). In November 2011, Prime Minister Erdoğan made a televised statement at his party meeting asking Assad to leave the post (Arsu, 2011). This was a significant rupture in Turkish foreign policy in general and in terms of its relations with Syria in particular. The rapprochement period between two countries which started after AK Party came to power in 2002 and materialized by soft policy instruments such as the Free Trade Agreement in 2007 and Visa Exemption Agreement in 2009 came to an end with this declaration (Gökalp Aras and Şahin Mencütek, 2015: 200). Diplomatic representations (Reuters, 2012) were withdrawn, and free trade agreement (Sezer, 2011) was adjourned. Turkey left its passive, Western-oriented foreign policy and adopted an assertive foreign policy by taking a side in a regional conflict, declaring open support to opposition for regime change in a neighbor country and asking for international intervention (Oktay and Çelikaksoy, 2015: 409). Expecting the Assad regime would fall soon, Turkey rejected international assistance for handling the refugee flow to prove it was powerful enough to deal with a regional conflict. However, as opposed to Turkey's expectations Assad regime did not fall, the number of Syrians crossing the border rose dramatically to 500,000 by the end of 2012 and 2.3 million by the end of 2013 (UNHCR, 2017).



The conflict in Syria turned into one of the most challenging foreign policy issues for Turkey since Turkish citizens started to become targets of deadly bombings and attacks from regime forces and DAESH (Dawlat al-Islamiyya fi Iraq vash Sham). In February 2013, the bombing at the Cilvegözü border crossing-point killed 24 Turkish citizens, and in May 2013, 53 people were killed due to car explosions in the border town, Reyhanlı (Mazer, 2013). Turkey urged the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to authorize the establishment of a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border and asked for the support of the international society in the burden-sharing of hosting such a large number of displaced Syrians within Turkish borders. The change in foreign policy is described as "the transition from the full self-confidence" to "seeking for burden-sharing", and the change in the refugee regime is noted as from "open door policy" to "non-arrival policy" (Gökalp Aras and Şahin Mencütek, 2015: 205).

European Union had to respond to Turkey's call for burden-sharing since it was faced with the biggest "Refugee Crisis" since World War II. Turkey and its Aegean coast have been a natural migration route to Europe through "Eastern Mediterranean Route", and eventually the country has become unofficial outer frontier of EU. The number of Syrians trying to find refuge in Europe reached its vertex in the last four months of 2015. This was an unexpected demand for Europe facing at its door; a demand Turkey has been meeting since 2011. Cultural differences with these new "guests", the economic crisis the world has been going through for a while have multiplied with the ever-growing threat of radical terrorism. Security concerns and financial bottleneck divided Europe over the possible solution of the humanitarian crisis of the century. Almost unanimously agreed, the meetings started between the European Council and Turkey in November 2015. By the time EU- Turkey Statement signed, Turkey was already hosting nearly 3 million Syrians, including unregistered individuals, most of them living in urban areas not residing in temporary shelter centers which mostly referred to as "camps". When European states came with the solution asking for an unprecedented part from Turkey to play, the country was already exhausted with the multi-facets of humanitarian crisis and the challenges of hosting such an enormous refugee population. The document has been structured to bind for more.

Together with national legislation on third-country nationals/ foreigners, like many other countries, Turkey's handling of refugees or asylum seekers are subject to several international legal documents. Historically, obligations of Turkey under international law have shifted from generally regulating rules of the 1951 Convention Relating the Status of Refugees (Geneva Convention) to strict commitments according to the European Convention on Human Rights. Finally, the EU-Turkey Statement of 2016 aims to target this particular crisis with a limited prospect. Consequently, in time, the terms used for people forced to flee have multiplied with conceptual differences. The EU-Turkey Statement to limit the refugee flow has been finalized in March 2016, which moves the argument to a different level. According to the statement, Turkey was supposed to receive financial aid and some privileges, most notably free travel for Turkish citizens within EU borders, in return for controlling its frontiers and preventing refugees from crossing Turkish borders. In other words, the EU has planned to secure its borders from the "others" by the unprecedented help of Turkey.

## LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

Erdoğan has been conducting a longitudinal study on perception of Turkish society and Syrians towards each other (Erdoğan, 2014; 2018; 2020). Syrian Barometers demonstrated the high level of social distance felt by Turkish society towards Syrians. Erdoğan and Semerci's (2018) survey revealed that the majority of Turkish public perceive Syrians as a threat to Turkey's economy, security, moral values and traditions and Turkish people's health. While there were many studies on how Turkish public perceive Syrians, there are few studies exploring Turkish university student's perceptions towards Syrians. Ergin (2016) explored the perceptions of Turkish university students towards their Syrian classmates by conducting interviews with 10 students. He demonstrated that Turkish students have a positive attitude towards Syrian students since they thought that Syrian's presence in the campus contribute to cultural diversity and internationalization of higher education. The study also revealed that although Turkish students have concerns about Syrians being advantageous in university entrance, they approached Syrian's access to university education as a human right. Yelpeze and Güler (2018) conducted surveys with 340 university students and they found a positive correlation between the level of sensibility of student and positive attitude he or she display towards Syrians. Conducting surveys with 247 university students, Kabaklı Çimen and Ersoy Quadir (2018) found out a negative correlation between level of religiosity and positive attitude on Syrians. The authors explained this interesting finding as a reflection of student's threat construction about Syrians.

This study investigates Turkish university students' perceptions of Syrians. To this end, we asked 396 university students at Kocaeli University from four different grades to survey 46 questions. We conducted the surveys during May 2019. 157 male and 239 female students participated in our survey. Of the participating students, 226 are in 1st and 2nd grade, and 170 are in 3rd and 4th grade. 210 of the students live in an area with a low Syrian population. 186 of them live in an area with a high Syrian population. Finally, 161 of the students participated in educational or informative activities from the authorities and official authorities on the refugee crisis, while 235 of them did not participate in any activity. The reliability and validity of collected data are determined by using reliability analysis and factor analysis. Afterwards, we analyzed the relationships between variables using independent samples t - test and ANOVA analysis. We made the analysis with IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0 program. The survey technique is five scales Likert, and we evaluated the confidence level is with Cronbach Alpha value, which is expected to be over 0.7, and our study gives 0.848.

### The Effect of Independent Variables and Factor Analysis

Factor analysis is the method used to transform interrelated data structures into independent and fewer new data structures, to reveal common factors by grouping variables that are supposed to explain an event or events and to group variables that affect an event (Özdamar, 2002: 235). In other words, it is a multivariate analysis type that provides a more meaningful and brief presentation of the data based on the relationships between many variables (Patır, 2009: 70). Accordingly, we selected a group of independent variables and also grouped questions according to common theme factors. Independent

variables were gender (I1), grade (I2) (1, 2, 3, and 4), the region of residence (I3) (before university education) and having educational or informative activities on the refugee crisis from competent and official authorities (I4), mother's educational level (I5) and father's academic level (I6). The suitability of the data for factor analysis was examined using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) coefficient and Bartlett Sphericity test. Its KMO value is 0.904. Bartlett Sphericity test results are also significant ( $\chi^2 = 3714.052$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Considering the results of both tests, it was seen that it would be appropriate to perform factor analysis on the data. As a result of factor analysis, five factors with eigenvalues greater than one were determined. Five factors explain 60.942 percent of the total variance.

Factors and grouped questions/ suggestions under them were structured as follow:

Factor 1: Perspective on Social Relations with Syrians

Q3. Where should Syrians live in Turkey?

Q33. I can have a relation with a Syrian.

Q34. I can marry a Syrian.

Q35. I would like to have a Syrian neighbor.

Q36. I would do trade with a Syrian.

Q37. I would hire a Syrian.

Q38. I would like my kid to be friends with a Syrian.

Factor 2: Perception of the Role of International Actors in the Crisis Solution

Q44. European Union manages the issues regarding Syrians very well.

Q45. United Nations manages the issues regarding Syrians very well.

Q46. International society responds Syrian crisis appropriately.

Factor 3: Perception of the Rights and Opportunities Turkey Offers to Syrians

Q1. Accepting Syrian refugees in our country is our humanitarian duty.

Q2. Syrian refugee issue is not our country's problem; it imposes a burden.

Q12. Syrians should be allowed to benefit from public schools and hospitals in Turkey.

Q15. I am pleased to have education with Syrians.

Q21. Government/ state should help Syrians living in Turkey to provide their basic needs.

Factor 4: Perception of Healthcare Services Provided for Syrians in Turkey

Q10. Syrians can easily access healthcare services in Turkey.

Q11. Syrians in Turkey can access healthcare services easier than Turkish citizens.



Factor 5: Perception of Syrians Presence and Integration in Turkey

Q5. Syrians' ratio in the population of Turkey is intimidating.

Q41. If Syrians stay in our country, they will integrate into our society easily in the upcoming years.

Q42. How well integrated do you think the Syrians residing in Turkey?

Q43. The Republic of Turkey manages the issues regarding Syrians very well.

After the factor analysis, it was measured whether the data were suitable for normal distribution. Since the sample size was higher than 35, Kolmogorov Smirnov test was performed and it was determined that the data fit the normal distribution (for factor 1 sig.=0.071, for factor 2 sig.=0.139, for factor 3 sig.=0.098, for factor 4 sig.=0.153, for factor 5 sig.=0.117). Parametric analysis can be applied according to normality test (Demir et. al., 2016: 134).

The hypotheses structured on independent variables such as gender, grade, participation in education or activities about the Syrian crisis, the region of residence before university education are analyzed with t-test for the independent sample. Hypotheses structured for other independent variables such as maternal education level and paternal education level are analyzed with One- way ANOVA. All assumptions are tested at the 0.05 significance level. The five factors determined by factor analysis are evaluated as dependent variables.

Within this structure, we aimed to analyze the effect of independent variables on factors. Regarding our first independent variable, gender, at the 0.05 significance level, gender did not make a statistically significant difference in the students' perspective (sig.>0.05).

**Table 1: Independent Sample t- Test for Gender**

Dependent variable	Gender	N	$\bar{X}$	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1	Male	157	2.7645	.998	.319
	Female	239	2.6775		
Factor 2	Male	157	1.8747	-1.628	.105
	Female	239	2.0185		
Factor 3	Male	157	3.3182	-.286	.775
	Female	239	3.3397		
Factor 4	Male	157	3.6497	-.565	.572
	Female	239	3.6975		
Factor 5	Male	157	2.1683	-.850	.396
	Female	239	2.2364		

The second independent variable was the grade. Data shows closer to graduation; students are more "inclusive" to Syrians, and awareness levels are also high in this group. Considering factors, at the 0.05 level of significance, the perspective on establishing social relations with the Syrians, (Factor 1) and stance

on the rights conferred to Syrians (Factor 3) grade makes a significant difference (sig=0.037 and 0.015). On average, 3rd and 4th graders have more positive attitude comparing to 1st and 2nd graders (2.82>2.64 and 3.43>3.25).

**Table 2: Independent Sample t- Test for Grade**

Dependent variable	Grade	N	$\bar{X}$	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1	1st or 2nd	226	2.6451	-2.091	.037
	3rd or 4th	170	2.8288		
Factor 2	1st or 2nd	226	2.0313	1.677	.095
	3rd or 4th	170	1.8847		
Factor 3	1st or 2nd	226	3.2520	-2.433	.015
	3rd or 4th	170	3.4330		
Factor 4	1st or 2nd	226	3.7341	1.604	.109
	3rd or 4th	170	3.6000		
Factor 5	1st or 2nd	226	2.2133	0.098	.922
	3rd or 4th	170	2.2053		

The third independent variable is the region of residence and it only made statistically difference under Factor 1 (sig=0.022). For example, under Factor 1, for the question "Where should Syrians live in Turkey?" 64.48 percent of participants living in a region with more crowded Syrian population replied "they should be settled in special built-up areas for them". This ratio is relatively low with 53.58 percent among the students living in a region with less Syrians.

**Table 3: Independent Sample t- Test for Region**

Dependent variable	Region	N	$\bar{X}$	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1	low Syrian population	210	2.7324	1.782	.022
	high Syrian population	186	2.1775		
Factor 2	low Syrian population	210	1.9285	-.796	.426
	high Syrian population	186	1.9954		
Factor 3	low Syrian population	210	3.3326	.262	.793
	high Syrian population	186	3.3132		
Factor 4	low Syrian population	210	3.6268	-1.480	.140
	high Syrian population	186	3.7486		
Factor 5	low Syrian population	210	2.2321	.693	.489
	high Syrian population	186	2.1779		

"Having educational or informative activities on the refugee crisis from competent and official authorities" is the fourth independent variable in this study. It makes statistically significant difference in perception of the Rights and Opportunities Turkey Offers to Syrians (factor 3) and Perception of healthcare Services



Provided for Syrians in Turkey (factor 4) (sig.=0.039 and sig.=0.015). Considering the mean values, it can be said that students who participate in educational or informative activities about the refugee crisis have more positive perspectives on factor 3 and factor 4 (3.40>3.16 and 3.69>3.18).

**Table 4: Independent Sample t- Test for Activity**

Dependent variable	Educational or Informative Activity	N	$\bar{X}$	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1	yes	161	2.7885	1.548	.123
	no	235	2.6543		
Factor 2	yes	161	1.8896	-1.312	.191
	no	235	2.0021		
Factor 3	yes	161	3.4014	1.882	.039
	no	235	3.1620		
Factor 4	yes	161	3.6933	1.977	.015
	no	235	3.1843		
Factor 5	yes	161	2.2188	.376	.707
	no	235	2.1885		

Since the independent variables of mother's education level and father's education level have more than two categories, they were analyzed with the One-way Anova test. Actually, the mother's education level was divided into six as "none, primary school, secondary school, high school, undergraduate and graduate". However, we measured their frequencies as 12, 142, 84, 116, 35 and 7 respectively and found that there was a big difference between the groups. We excluded the "none", "undergraduate" and "graduate" categories, which have statistically very low frequencies, and therefore we analyzed 342 students. As a result, no statistically significant difference was found between categories in terms of dependent variables according to Table 5 (sig>0.05).

**Table 5: One-Way ANOVA Test for Mother's Education Level**

Dependent variable	Mother's Education Level	N	$(\bar{X})$	F	Sig.
Factor 1	Primary school	142	2.7838	1.202	0.302
	Secondary school	84	2.6148		
	High school	116	2.6727		
Factor 2	Primary school	142	1.8672	0.461	0.631
	Secondary school	84	1.9693		
	High school	116	1.9364		
Factor 3	Primary school	142	3.3887	1.928	0.147
	Secondary school	84	3.3069		
	High school	116	3.3077		
Factor 4	Primary school	142	3.6631	0.985	0.374
	Secondary school	84	3.8095		
	High school	116	3.7586		
Factor 5	Primary school	142	2.2835	1.674	0.189
	Secondary school	84	2.1071		
	High school	116	2.1494		

For similar reasons, we evaluated the father's education level in four categories: "primary school, secondary school, high school and undergraduate". According to Table 6, we found a statistically significant relationship between categories only for factor 4 ( $\text{sig}<0.05$ ). The ANOVA test allows us to analyze whether there is a significant difference between categories, however, it does not indicate between which categories the difference. For this, we did the Scheffe test from Post-Hoc tests. The reason for choosing the Scheffe test is that it provides the assumption of homogeneity of variances according to the Levene test (for factor 1  $\text{sig.}=0.206$ , for factor 2  $\text{sig.}=0.863$ , for factor 3  $\text{sig.}=0.877$ , for factor 4  $\text{sig.}=0.783$ , for factor 5  $\text{sig.}=0.465$ ). According to the Scheffe test, the difference is due to the comparison of "high school-undergraduate" categories. According to the average  $(\bar{X})$ , students, whose fathers' education level is a high school diploma, have a more positive view of factor 4 than students, whose fathers' education level is an undergraduate diploma ( $3.81>3.45$ ).

**Table 6: One-way ANOVA test for father's education level**

Dependent variable	Father's Education Level	N	$\bar{X}$	F	Sig.	Categories with Significant Difference
Factor 1	Primary school	87	2.7791	0.620	0.602	-
	Secondary school	87	2.6088			
	High school	140	2.6919			
	Undergraduate	65	2.7300			
Factor 2	Primary school	87	1.9269	0.884	0.450	-
	Secondary school	87	2.0590			
	High school	140	1.8816			
	Undergraduate	65	1.9218			
Factor 3	Primary school	87	3.4287	1.202	0.309	-
	Secondary school	87	3.3137			
	High school	140	3.2441			
	Undergraduate	65	3.3538			
Factor 4	Primary school	87	3.5581	4.278	0.005	high school-undergraduate
	Secondary school	87	3.7988			
	High school	140	3.8178			
	Undergraduate	65	3.4538			
Factor 5	Primary school	87	2.3610	2.190	0.089	-
	Secondary school	87	2.2097			
	High school	140	2.1012			
	Undergraduate	65	2.1423			

## PERCEPTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS

### Facts and Misinformation

To evaluate the knowledge/ awareness on the Syrian Refugee Crisis and the conditions of Syrians in Turkey, students were asked questions about population rate of Syrians in Turkey (Q4), the legal status of Syrians in Turkey (Q6), the naturalization rate and access to citizenship (Q7), access to healthcare (Q10), convenience in accessing to healthcare compared to Turkish citizens (Q11), means of access to higher education (Q13), the means of livelihood (Q16) and also questions regarding the convenience in having state aid compared to low-income Turkish citizens (Q20) and the source of cash aid (Q22). With these fundamental questions with concrete answers, we aimed to demonstrate whether students are (well) informed about the extent of the humanitarian crisis ongoing during the last nine years. Most of the students are aware of the fact that Turkey is the biggest recipient of Syrians; nearly 64 percent of respondents affirmed it. Our second knowledge question was about the legal status of the Syrian population in Turkey. 44.36 percent marked the correct answer "temporary protection" which is quite surprising since there has been complexities and controversies concerning the legal status of Syrians. The fact that a significant number of students knew the right answer demonstrates that university students

have prior knowledge about the issue. 23.56 percent responded as refugees, whereas 20.55 percent think that Syrians are asylum seekers. Half of the respondents have mixed ideas about the legal status, which is understandable due to the complicated nature of Turkey's migration regime. Turkey adopted an open-door policy at the beginning of the Syrian crisis in 2011 by protecting all Syrians crossing its borders regardless of their ethnic or political affiliations. Syrians could not be given refugee status in Turkey due to "geographical limitation" of the Geneva Convention, which enables only asylum seekers from Europe to gain refugee status in Turkey. State authorities described Syrians as "guests" at the beginning of the crisis; however, it was not a legal status. Syrians finally gained a legal status after they were registered under a "temporary protection" regime in line with the new Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection of 2013 (Republic of Turkey, 2013). The detailed implementation of the Law is regulated by Temporary Protection Regulation of 2014 (Republic of Turkey, 2014).

Although it was a significant development for Syrians to gain legal status under temporary protection regime, this regime has some limitations such as leaving the provision of social services to the local governorships (Amnesty International, 2014), absence of time limit for temporary protection (Yıldız and Uzgören, 2016: 207), providing an indefinite temporary residency without a promise of long-term residency or citizenship (Rygiel et al., 2016: 317), preventing Syrians from claiming international protection in third countries since they were not believed to be in immediate danger (Ciğer, 2015: 29). According to the 2014 Regulation, under temporary protection regime, individuals can benefit from health care, education, employment and other social assistance as 'services' (Republic of Turkey, 2014, Art. 26) which is problematic since these are actually fundamental human rights according to the European Convention of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 1950), which Turkey is a party. Accordingly, the Regulation gives the Turkish state a wide margin to decide to whom and how to grant these 'rights' under the formulation of 'services'.

One of the critical challenges associated with "service-based approach" is leaving social assistance to the "arbitrary mercy of political authority" (Yıldız and Uzgören, 2016: 207). By adopting such approach, provision of services becomes dependent on the political calculations and motivations of the political authority. This creates problems with the continuity and sustainability of social assistance. For instance, if anti-migrant sentiments are on the rise or conditions of the economy is getting worse, the amount of social service provided to refugees may turn into a political liability, and it might be reduced or ended. We observed a similar approach among students about Syrians' access to healthcare, education and decent work. Instead of approaching them as legally guaranteed social and economic rights, students tend to see them as social assistance provided by the state.

To understand the student's perception about the living conditions of Syrians in Turkey, we asked questions about the students' thought on Syrian's access to healthcare, higher education, employment, and cash aids in comparison with Turkish citizens. All of these questions are also questions of knowledge like the ones above, which means that they can have only one correct answer. This question group enabled us to investigate students' awareness about the living conditions of Syrians.



Nearly 80 percent of the participants think that Syrians can easily access a healthcare service, what is at least very optimistic. Though Syrians themselves mention their contentment for health care services in Turkey (Erdoğan, 2020: 199) the language barrier constitutes a serious problem (Mardin, 2017: 5). Registration, procedures, and navigating through the system can be listed as other challenges (Bilecen and Yurtseven, 2018: 113), and these are also directly linked to the language barrier. Nevertheless, 40 percent of our participants think that Syrians have easier access to healthcare than Turkish citizens. It can be said that, regarding healthcare, students reflect a significant bias and misperception.

Enrollment in university education was another source of confusion. Syrians are subject to rules and regulations applied to all international students. Each university determines its admission criteria for international students and according to these criteria international students apply at universities individually. In order to apply to a university, international students have to submit a valid high school diploma, a transcript and an equivalency certificate obtained by the Ministry of National Education or Turkish embassy or consulate. International students should also take other examinations such as the SAT or Foreign Students Exam (YÖS, Yabancı Uyruklu Öğrenci Sınavı) prepared by universities. The only difference of Syrians from other international students concerning their entrance into university is that since 2013/ 14 academic year Syrians do not have to pay tuition fees at state universities as a result of the temporary protection regime (Hohberger, 2018: 17).

When asked whether they have any knowledge about the enrollment process of Syrians in higher education in Turkey, 41.94 percent of respondents argue that they have to take Foreign Students Exam to enter university. Almost 25 percent think that they can be enrolled in university without any examination and around 30 percent have no idea about the process. The finding that majority of university students is either unaware of the system or misinformed about the university enrollment process of Syrians gives clues about the low level of interaction between Syrians and Turkish citizens and the low number of Syrians in universities. University students who have been through a challenging enrollment process would be more informed about Syrians' access to higher education if there were more Syrian university students who could share their experiences with Turkish friends or if there was more interaction between the two communities in their hometowns. In the 2016/ 17 academic year, while there were approximately 7.2 million Turkish students enrolled in universities, the number of Syrians was only 15,000 representing less than three percent of Syrians aged 18-25 (Hohberger, 2018: 15).

After the questions about healthcare and education, we asked students how the Syrians make their living. Only 23.75 percent marked "by working". 23.82 percent of the participants think Syrians make their livelihood through begging; 52.42 percent considers they live on cash aid. Based on this misconception, 53 percent of the participants think that as a result of state aids Syrians are in better conditions compared to low-income Turkish citizens. The reality is far from what students think. According to International Labour Organization's findings, Syrian workers earn lower wages and work longer hours than local workers (ILO, 2020). They often are not paid on time or not paid at all and they are hired for jobs in the informal sector under their qualifications (Şenses, 2016: 981). Most of the time, these jobs have such



harsh working conditions that are not preferred by the locals (Orhan and Şenyücel Gündoğar, 2015: 8). Child labour is also common among Syrians since secure jobs in formal sector are not available to them (Yalçın, 2016: 92).

One primary source of the precarity of Syrian workers is the informality which excludes Syrians from any social security system and makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Syrians under temporary protection have been allowed to get working permit since 2016. The temporary protection regulation stipulates that Syrians are entitled to receive employment permits if they fulfil certain conditions; however, the number of issued work permits for Syrians still remained low; in 2018 it was 34,573 according to the Ministry of Labor and Social Security (Özdemir, 2020). The employers refrain from applying for work permits because of the complexity and difficulties of the application process and the profit they would make by informal employment of Syrians (Toksöz et. al., 2012: 61).

When students are asked their opinions about the employment of Syrians, 3.28 percent think that they should never be given a working permit, 25.25 percent believes that the formal employment of Syrians increases overall unemployment, thus their hiring should not be encouraged. 31.31 percent supposes that they should only be given work permits for specific jobs, 34.34 percent assumes that they should be hired if they can find jobs themselves and 5.81 percent thinks that specific employment opportunities should be created just for Syrians. The finding that the number of students opposing granting working permits at all remained marginal is promising since it signals a low level of hatred toward Syrians. Nevertheless, the majority of students exhibit a negative opinion about the employment of Syrians. 59.06 percent disagrees to equal pay for the same job. It demonstrates that the majority of students does not approach work as a fundamental right protected by law but as a favour or aid granted by the state. It might be a reflection of the state's migration regime concerning Syrians.

The naturalization of Syrians is another hot topic in Turkey's public opinion. On July 3, 2016, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan stated that Syrian refugees living in Turkey could eventually be granted citizenship (Girit, 2016). This statement received an immense reaction from different circles which turned into a hate campaign against Syrians in the social media and newspapers. The hashtag #ÜlkemdeSuriyeliİstemiyorum (I don't want Syrians in my country) hit the worldwide list of trending topics on Twitter. A recent study analyzing those tweets demonstrated that the threat construction and otherization of Syrians is much sharper and more intense in Twitter as an online public space compared to print media discourses (Erdoğan Öztürk and Işık Güler, 2020: 1). Though the number of naturalizations is limited to 92,280 as of August 2019, the misperception regarding Syrians' access to Turkish citizenship manipulates the public (Makovsky, 2019). The same applies to our target group. Nearly half of the respondents (44.42 percent) thinks that Syrians in Turkey are easily acquiring citizenship. When we asked the preferences for Syrians acquiring citizenship. 35.25 percent of survey participants opposed Syrians' naturalization. Yet the majority, a total of 59 percent, found the acquisition of citizenship possible if certain criteria such as educational level or fluency in Turkish are met. A similar question in Syrian Barometer 2019 was responded negatively by over 75 percent, general public opinion about the naturalization of Syrians is far



from positive (Erdoğan, 2020: 118). On the other hand, our research shows that higher education students do not completely oppose Syrians' naturalization but yet evaluates this possibility on conditions and eligibility.

### **Social Distance and Threat Construction**

In addition to knowledge questions, participants were asked what we call "perception questions" to examine their perceived social distance and threat construction. Regarding the questions grouped under Factor 1 "Perspective on Social Relations with Syrians" students are generally reluctant to have direct social ties with Syrians. More than half of the respondents gave negative answers to the possibility of having a relationship with a Syrian, and 72 percent refused the idea of marrying a Syrian. When it comes to being neighbor, negative feedbacks slightly surpasses positives but what is most striking is the ratio of undecided by 37.47 percent. In Factor 1 questions, the average rate of uncertain is approximately 34 percent which can be linked to having low real-life interaction with the Syrian population. Indecisiveness is also apparent in assumptions such as "I would do trade with a Syrian" (35.44 percent) and "I would hire a Syrian" (39.49 percent). A similar ratio applies to the assumption "I would like my kid to be friends with a Syrian" (37.86 percent indecisiveness), yet here positive feedback surpasses negatives (39.17 percent to 22.97 percent). What is striking is the answer to the question asking, "Where should Syrians live in Turkey?" 58.60 percent of participants marked "they should be settled in special built-up areas for them" and 23.69 percent marked "they should only live in temporary reception centers". These results show that our participants understand the basic needs of displaced people like education and working yet they do not want to socialize with Syrians in social life. Considering 55.89 percent of our respondents have no interaction with Syrians to date, reluctance and indecisiveness can be explained with a lack of acquaintance and familiarity.

Under Factor 2, we aimed to analyze participants' perception of the role of the Turkish state and international actors in the crisis solution. Accordingly, we tested the assumptions "... has been managing the issues very well" by filling the blank with Turkey, EU, the UN, and international society. While 61.64 percent of the participants thinks the Republic of Turkey has not been managing the issue very well; the level of the perception of mismanagement is higher among participants for the international actors. The level of disappointment is almost equal regarding the UN, the EU and the global society, which is around 72 percent. Higher education students reflected negative views and gave no credibility to international actors on crisis management. The Turkish state had been constructed as a "savior" who saved Syrians fleeing war as opposed to "irresponsible" international community in the official discourse (Memişoğlu and Ilgit, 2016: 327). There have been repeated referrals in the government's discourse to the contrast between "Turkey's 'responsible' and 'generous' policies towards the Syrian refugees" and "failure" of the international community (Memişoğlu and Ilgit, 2016: 327).

In addition to the failure discourse, state officials have made repeated statements about how much money spent on Syrians by Turkish state. For instance, while (then) Deputy Prime Minister Yalçın Akdoğan argued that Turkish state spent 8 billion dollars for 2,5 million Syrians, President Erdoğan claimed it was

over 40 billion in his speech at the first Global Refugee Forum organized by UNHCR (BirGün, 2019). Our finding demonstrates that while the construction of failed and irresponsible international community was well received, there is confusion among university students about Turkish states image. On the one hand the majority of students do not think Turkey has been managing the issue well. On the other hand, the discourse on high public spending has been partially accepted since 33.42 percent of participants think the Turkish state is the primary provider of cash aid. While 17.22 percent think the UN and 17.48 percent think European Commission, 29.56 percent has no idea on the issue and. The majority of the students did not know that the UNHCR and the European Commission primarily provide cash aid (Gluck, 2016).

Under Factor 3 we tried to analyze student's perception of the rights and opportunities Turkey offers to Syrians. Among independent variables, grade makes a significant difference here. Third and fourth graders have more positive attitude compared to first and second graders. For example, for the assumption "Accepting Syrian refugees in our country is our humanitarian duty", 57.46 percent of participants gave positive feedback, the majority of them were 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders. Relatedly, supporting the later positive feedback, 58.20 percent of participants think that (Turkish) state should help Syrians living in Turkey to provide their basic needs. In this respect, following these lines, it is safe to say that university students have a moderate approach on the issue being aware of it being a humanitarian crisis and this trend has tendency to increase as the education level rises.

Although participants reflected empathy on humanitarian issues with their answers to Factor 3 questions, the trend goes significantly negative<sup>1</sup> for the perception of Syrians presence and integration in Turkey (Factor 5). 81.14 percent of students find Syrians' ratio in the population of Turkey intimidating. The majority (60.97 percent) opposes the possibility of future integration and considers Syrians failed to integrate (60.76 percent). The survey results show students understand the humanitarian side of the crisis and yet they are reluctant to live together; since in majority, even after almost ten years, they are still stranger to Syrian community.

We asked our students what they think about Syrian's presence in their neighborhood. 26.77 percent did not come across any Syrians in their surroundings, 39.99 percent thinks Syrians' presence increases crime, 10.61 percent believes that cost of living rises because of them and 18.69 percent did not notice any change caused by Syrians' presence. Only 4.55 percent thinks that Syrians enriched the cultural diversity. Yet, official numbers reveal a different reality. According to Ministry of Interior, between 2014 - 2017 the rate of crimes Syrians involved to crimes in general in Turkey was 1.32 percent (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, 2017). Besides, in 2017, Ministry of Interior announces a five percent decrease in the criminal incidents involving Syrians compared to the first six months of the previous year, despite the increase in their population (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, 2017). There is no official record of Syrians' increasing the crime rates. To this end, the perception here is formed by misleading information.

<sup>1</sup> The questions grouped under Factor 4 were mainly knowledge questions and evaluated under related title. Accordingly, they are excluded here.

Recent reports suggest that there is less tension between Syrians and locals in bordering provinces such as Gaziantep, Kilis and Şanlıurfa rather than major urban cities such as Istanbul and Izmir (International Crisis Group, 2018). Speaking the same language with Syrians, having ethnic ties and geographical proximity lessens the misinformation and prejudices about Syrians among the locals living in the border regions. Lack of interaction between two communities stemming from the language barriers and segregated locations of Syrians in urban settings reinforce and reproduce the threat perceptions. If there were more Syrian university students in their classes, our respondents would have more interaction with Syrians, and threat perception would be lower.

Similar to Syrian Barometer's results which revealed that 80 percent of Turkish citizens have distant feelings toward Syrians; our study demonstrated that university students also distance themselves from Syrians but less than the general public (Erdoğan, 2020: 61). 68.2 percent sees no cultural affinity and similarity with the Syrians. The official discourse presenting Syrians as "religious brother/ sisters escaping war" and religious fraternity referencing to "ensar-muhajir" relation for Syrians were not well received by the university students. Also, regarding this topic, independent variables have no significant difference in threat perception. One significant difference in our study is about economic threat construction. Cultural threat construction often goes hand in hand with economic threat construction. Yet, that is not the case for university students. Only 25.25 percent believes that unemployment rates increase because of Syrians. It might be because Syrians are hired in the informal sector as cheap labour without any social security. Since Syrians along with other migrant workers are employed in 3D (dirty, dangerous, demanding) jobs such as textile and seasonal agriculture, they may not be considered as competitors for the same job opportunities for university students.

## CONCLUSION

Host countries face many challenges in their efforts to ensure that migrants and their families are included in society. Rising levels of intolerance, xenophobia, anti-migrant sentiments in these countries raise concerns, and make it evident that developing strategies for living together is vital. These challenges not only threaten social cohesion but also democratic governance in host countries for they fuel populism and authoritarian tendencies within politics including governments in charge. Therefore, there is an enormous need for developing policies and strategies in order to reduce barriers and social division between migrants and their host communities. For developing policies to this end, studies on perceptions of both communities are essential.

Our study aims to understand university student's perception toward Syrians in order to find out whether university students resemble rest of the society with regard to anti-migrant sentiments and prejudice towards Syrians. Host communities in general have been surrounded with misleading and provoking information about refugees and anti-immigrant populist discourses presenting the migrants and the refugees as economic, security and health threats to their communities. Studies on the Turkish media coverage of the Syrians demonstrated the link between the political stances of the news agencies, visual and print media and their representations of Syrian refugees (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018: 148). Pro-

government newspapers have adopted a humanitarian approach with Islamic “muhacir-ensar” reference (Efe, 2015: 53- 55) and framed Syrians as “victimized guests” refraining from a right-based approach (Yavcan et. al., 2017: 1). Anti-government media has either adopted an anti-Syrian position and presented them as economic burden, potential criminals (Narlı et. al., 2019: 5) or made them part of their criticism toward government by framing them as “victims” of government’s policies (Efe, 2015: 43). There has been a recent increase in the use of criminalizing language in the media coverage of refugees in Turkey (Doğanay, 2019). Teyit.org, a fact checking platform in Turkey, identified 14 fake news claiming social and economic privileges are being granted to Syrians and these items were shared by thousands on social media in 2017 and 2018 (Taş and Taş, 2018: 198). Journalists play a special role in the reproduction of dominant knowledge in society about refugees. Our findings demonstrated that university students share the misconceptions about the alleged preferential access of Syrians to public services. Nearly 80 percent of our participants think Syrians can easily access a healthcare, majority of participants is either unaware of or misinformed about the university enrollment process of Syrians, 59.06 percent disagrees to equal pay for Syrians. The majority of our respondents believe Syrians either beg for a living or depend on the cash aid provided by the state which is totally a misconception.

Our study validates that university students share the service based approach of the state toward Syrians access to health, education and decent work. Our findings also showed that official discourse repeatedly referring to the contrast between "Turkey's 'responsible' and 'generous' policies toward the Syrian refugees" and "failure" of the international community has found limited acceptance amongst the respondents. The finding that the majority of the students think that Turkish state is the major provider of the aid to Syrian demonstrates that students accept states generosity discourse. However, state’s management of the refugee issue was found unsuccessful by the majority of the respondents. International actors such as the EU and UN are also found as failures by the students which demonstrate the limited acceptance of savior discourse.

Our study showed that the level of grade has statistically significant difference on students’ perspective on establishing social relations with the Syrians, (Factor 1) and stance on the rights conferred to Syrians (Factor 3). Our study demonstrated that although university students share public disfavor toward Syrians, third and fourth graders have less negative attitude toward Syrians compared to first and second graders. University students have great potential in contributing to social cohesion by transferring the knowledge on migration they gain throughout their university education to their families and sharing their experience with Syrians based on their interactions with Syrian friends. Providing university students with the necessary knowledge and skills that would help them question, discuss and reject misinformation about Syrians and increasing the level of interaction between Syrian and other students should be part of states policies with regard to university education in order increase "the will to live together" in the host community.

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