Articles (Theme)

CONSTRUCTING MIGRANT FOODSCAPES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS: THE CASE OF SYRIAN MIGRANTS IN FATIH, ISTANBUL[1]

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Abstract

This research explores the transnational and dynamic connection between food, culture, and migration by examining the Syrian foodscapes in Istanbul's Fatih district -one of the most popular settlement areas for Syrian refugees in Türkiye- following the forced migration flows due to civil war in 2011. Based on semi-structured deep interviews (82 people) and participant observation, the paper aims at understanding the social transformations after migration. Rather than focusing on the refugee households, I concentrate on the public café-restaurants, food markets, delis, herbalists etc. as places of contestation and negotiation for Syrian people to construct new social/economic ties and to claim a right to the city. Social networks for

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Syrian migrants are of utmost importance because they struggle to build new lives in the metropolitan cities almost completely relying on their own social networks and financial capital. The food businesses in Fatih emerge as distinct places where we can trace the ways in which Syrian migrants build/maintain or transform social bonds, shared identities, cultural traditions, socio-economic ties, daily-life habits, consumption-production patterns, etc.. However, these networks might also counteract as mechanisms of exclusion for Syrian migrants both hindering social cohesion with the receiving society and continuing the fellowship- kinship ties. My study offers field-driven discussion points to gain more insight into these intricate relationships among migrant foodways, socio-cultural integration and social networks.

Keywords: Migrant foodscapes, socio-cultural integration, social networks, Syrian refugees in Türkiye

GÖÇMEN GASTRO-AKIŞLAR VE SOSYAL AĞLAR: İSTANBUL-FATİH BÖLGESİNDEKİ SURİYE MUTFAĞI ÖRNEĞİNDE GÖÇ, KÜLTÜR VE YEMEK İLİŞKİSİ

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, 2011'deki savaş sonrası İstanbul'da Suriyeli göçmenler tarafından yemek kültürü aracılığıyla inşa edilip yeniden üretilen ulusaşırı, değişken ve çoklu gastro-akışları incelemek ve bölgede göç sonrası meydana gelen toplumsal değişim sürecini anlamaya katkı sağlamaktır. Bu amaçla, Suriyeli göçmenlerin en fazla tercih ettiği ilçelerden biri olan Fatih'te, 82 kişi ile yarı-yapılandırılmış derinlemesine mülakat ve katılımcı gözlem metodu ile veri toplanmıştır. Türkiye'ye göç eden Suriyeli grupların büyük çoğunluğu, geçici barınma merkezlerinde kalmak yerine daha iyi yaşam koşullarına erişebilmek amacıyla -neredeyse tamamen kendi beşeri, sosyal ve finansal sermayelerine güvenerek- İstanbul başta olmak üzere büyük şehirlere göç etmiştir. Ülkedeki belirsizlikler ve güvencesizlik koşullarında açılan gıda işletmeleri, bir anlamda yeni mücadele ve müzakere alanları olarak Suriyeli göçmenlerin büyük kentsel merkezlerde kendilerine yeni bir alan açma çabasının somut göstergesi olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Bir yandan da kültürün

önemli sembollerinden biri olan yemeğin çeşitli gruplar arasında kültürel uzlaşıyı mı yoksa kültürel çatışmayı mı daha fazla beslediği konusu tartışmaya açılmaktadır. Bu araştırmada sahadan elde edilen birincil veriler ışığında, bahsi geçen tartışma konularına dair güncel bulguların ve yeni bakış açılarının sunulması hedeflenmektedir. Böylelikle, mutfak kültürünün hem göçmenler hem yerleşik gruplar açısından taşıdığı anlamlar, göç ile yaşanan toplumsal dönüşümler ve kültürel bir sembol olarak yemeğin toplumsal kabul ve uyum sürecinde oynadığı roller ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: göçmen gastro-akışlar, sosyo-kültürel entegrasyon, sosyal ağlar, Türkiye'deki Suriyeli mülteciler

Introduction

This research examines the socio-cultural integration process of Syrian refugees[3] in Türkiye with a focus on how they construct immigrant foodscapes in Istanbul as a way of claiming a right to the city and creating a shared sense of belonging in a new country. The immigrant foodscapes are built around intricate social networks by Syrian refugees at the intersection of kinship relations, socio-economic ties, transcultural interactions, fellow-townsmenship, and post-war solidarity. Food emerges as one of the most significant cultural symbols for Syrian refugees in Türkiye for it transfers the collective cultural memory to a new migration culture both metaphorically and physically. Hence, the socio-cultural ties shaped around the foodscapes in Istanbul serve both to protect the existing culture, and to re-flourish or transform it in a different cultural setting. Yet, this process is full of various struggles including post-war traumas, adaptation to a new culture, discrimination, and lack of effective policies for migration management. The main research question of this paper is to investigate how Syrian refugees in Istanbul deal with these challenges through constructing immigrant foodscapes in Fatih, one of Istanbul's most densely populated provinces in terms of Syrian refugee settlements.

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[3] According to the 6458 numbered "Law on Foreigners and International Protection" adopted in 2013 by the Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, Syrian people are under the status of "temporary protection" and not officially given the refugee status. This conviction results from Türkiye's partition to the 1951 UN Convention, which puts a geographic limitation on the definition of asylum seekers and refugees within international law. This convention prevents Türkiye to grant asylum to displaced ones who come from countries other than Europe. This "temporary protection" status was put into effect in 2013 within the framework of international protection standards (non-refoulement) to deal with forced, mass or acute migration movements, including Syrian immigrants. In this paper, the term "refugee" is used in consideration of Syrian people's forced migration state, yet the discussion on their legal status should be kept in mind. Further info about the temporary protection status can be obtained via https://en.goc.gov.tr/general-information2.

Methodology and Data

This research presents a qualitative analysis of the data collected through an ethnographic field work in Fatih, Istanbul from August 2021 to May 2022. Throughout the field work, I made semi- structured face-to-face in-depth interviews, follow-up interviews, focus group discussions with 82 participants from 53 food businesses in Aksaray-Yusufpaşa-Haseki-Fındıkzade and Fatih central districts[4].

In addition, I visited different venues in the region both as a client and as a researcher, usually once a week or once every two weeks, for detailed exploration and participant observation of the site. 29 of my interviewees are business owners or authorized managers. Employees were not always available because of the workload and sometimes they had to ask permission from the bosses. Despite this, I was able to interview 27 staff members (chefs & waiters), in addition to 19 customers from different ethnic communities. Most of my interviewees are Syrian (56), and I have also interviewed 16 Turkish people (customers and shopkeepers) in addition to customers and waiters from different communities (ex. Iraqi, Tunisian, Lebanese, Philippine). The age range of participants is 18-65 years. Legal status of the participants is kept confidential but the number of those who got citizenship was only a few. In terms of gender, the majority of my interviewees were male (71). At this point, I should mention that Syrian café-restaurants in Fatih are gendered places when it comes to labour force. In other words, it is not a culturally common and accepted norm for women to work at café-restaurants[5]. Hence, the women I interviewed for my research belong to the customer category.

Furthermore, doing extensive ethnographic research in the district as a young Muslim Turkish women had both advantages and disadvantages. Most of the time it was challenging for me to visit the Syrian café-restaurants by myself because of the cultural norms -usually articulated by my interviewees- that would find it awkward when a young woman goes to a restaurant alone (without family, husband, or friends). And when this gender-specific difficulty combined with the language barrier, building a social bond with the interviewees was much more demanding. On many occasions, however, the restaurant owners were very happy to meet and talk to me about their experiences in Istanbul, often referring to the common cultural and religious notions in terms of being Muslim and coming from Ottoman roots. Both during interviews and my observations, most of the participants were quite welcoming, generous and open for mutual exchange. Yet, as they were triggered by the deep anxiety and fear of intelligence by the Syrian regime back in their country, it was not surprising to see many participants were shy, hesitant, and suspicious of my intentions as a

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[4] The maps showing the main districts in Fatih used for ethnographic data collection is added in the appendix section.

[5] It is possible to encounter migrant women working as waitress or in the back of kitchens, but throughout my study I have seen only a few and they did not accept to be interviewed. Another note here is that women join the workforce in the food sector via informal economy by preparing traditional and demanding dishes such as kibbeh, yalanci etc. at their homes and selling them to restaurants.

researcher in the first place. Being in the field with a friend, with my interpreters, or sometimes with my family helped me overcome this difficulty, enabled a positive communication, and allowed me to gain trust of my interviewees.

Although it was possible to communicate with many Syrian migrants at a basic level in Turkish, the percentage of Syrian immigrants who know Turkish was very low. In general, the language barrier constituted a serious limitation both in terms of communication in my research (despite working with interpreters one of whom is a male post-graduate student from Aleppo and one of whom is a male Turkish undergraduate student fluent in Arabic) and in terms of the integration processes of Syrian immigrants in Istanbul. Another difficulty I experienced in the field so far was the state of uneasiness that we can say stems from the fragile and insecure situation of immigrants. The political and social uncertainties regarding the legal status of Syrian people in Türkiye are reflected upon each realm of life because they expect to be given citizenship, yet they are still "under temporary protection". A further challenge was the difficulty of continuing in-depth interviews in a busy environment due to frequent interruption of conversations and constant busyness in cafes-restaurants like customer arrivals, food orders, management issues and so on. Additionally, Covid-19 pandemic greatly affected my fieldwork as the businesses were closed for long periods of time. In addition to the financial and social hardships experienced by everyone, the pandemic made it extremely difficult to visit the field, talk to and actively observe people for about six months but the situation gradually returned to normal in time.

Throughout the research and especially during interviews, I strictly followed the main ethical principles of voluntary participation, protecting the right to privacy, and 'do no harm' (Vanclay et al., 2013; Clark-Kazan, 2017), which are particularly important when working with vulnerable groups such as refugees. In the interviews, questions about migration histories were asked in the beginning, followed by open- ended questions in line with the research questions related to migration, food, culture, social ties, and integration. The participants include business owners, authorized managers, paid employees, and customers. The food establishments examined in the research are restaurants, cafés (hookah), dessert shops, coffee shops, herbalists, and grocery stores. In terms of the restaurant's subcategories, some features specific to Syria's culinary culture are also significant (such as having a family hall, hookah culture, serving main courses and desserts in different places, and having several branches at the same street).

The interviews and observations were coded via NVivo software and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As a result of the coding process, I specified 5 main themes related to the central theme of my research question, which is Syrian foodscapes in Fatih. The five main themes are the transformation of urban space and social life; sense of identity and belonging; home-making practices;

social networks; socio-cultural integration. These themes have both distinct features and interconnected aspects with respect to the formation of Syrian foodscapes in Istanbul.

Migrant foodscapes in the age of global mobility and precarious hopes

The concept of "immigrant/migrant foodscapes" refers to multiple dimensions of social networks in a transnational, multiple and hybrid way that are built and reproduced through food culture for immigrants, going beyond immigrants' eating-drinking habits or culinary practices. The term is derived from Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conceptual framework used for the analysis of global culture, and it represents the multidimensional relations evolving around global consumption/production chains, food and belonging. This perspective helps us to understand the emerging "alternative modernities" in the globalizing world, independent of any national borders either physical or metaphorical. Researchers who adopted a similar approach continued to produce new concepts by applying this framework to different fields, including the sociology of migration and food. For example, Silivia Ferrero's (2002) and Komarnisky (2009) focus on transnational culinary practices and global circulation of food culture by looking at different Mexican foodscapes in Los Angeles and Alaska. In these examples, Mexican immigrant foodscapes creates transnational eating and drinking practices that shape and often upset global consumer societies. Immigrants can import, prepare, offer for sale, share and consume food and beverages that migrated with them from their homeland in their own unique ways. In this way, immigrants can reconstruct their immigrant identity on their own cultural elements via transnational cultural practices that connect people and places on a global level. Ajay Bailey (2017), likewise, examines Indian foodscapes in the Netherlands in terms of maintaining transnational social networks and a sense of belonging through commensality. Indian immigrants in the Netherlands maintain the habit of eating at the same table (*commensality*), reproducing the idea of "imagined community" and the sense of belonging to a shared culture. In general, belonging, homemaking, sense of community and sense of integration emerge as the building factors of immigrant foodscapes in the transnational sphere. In addition, factors that determine the global cultural economy such as technology, capital, power struggles, economy, and media also direct or affect the formation of transnational immigrant foodscapes.

Cultural memories and social ties are significant in each immigration story, yet they are more vital when it comes to forced migration because refugees and asylum seekers often leave their countries without knowing when or if they will return. Hence, they carry not only their personal belongings, but also their memories, traditions, relationships, experiences, and cultures from their homeland to maintain a sense of belonging and to transfer their cultural heritage to future generations (Agutter and Ankeny, 2017; Kashdan,

2019). Almost all that comes out of the migrant's suitcase help refugees while starting a new life in a new culture. Living in the memories, minds, and senses of the refugees, food in this case -like music- is an indispensable piece of the migrant suitcase, making it possible to maintain an integrity of the sense of self, home, belonging both physically and metaphorically. In a way food helps the refugees to struggle with the big losses on the strenuous road of migration, reminding them of what is still not lost or what they still preserve to cherish "precarious hopes" (Parla, 2019) in the face of brutal wars.

In the context of transnational migration, the bond established with food mostly emerges as a resistance tactic in the post-migration process where the sense of transnationality, national identity and belonging is shaken. A common aspect shared by different international diasporas is that immigrants build on cultures with more plural and mixed identities rather than singular national and cultural identities. In this process, holding on to the culture of origin, which is a resistance tool for international diasporas, helps people to maintain their self-esteem in cases where talents and experiences are damaged (Castles and Miller, 2008, p. 53). Just like language, music, rituals, clothes and so on, food is one of the most important resistance tools in this sense (Bascuñan-Wiley, 2019). Immigrant culinary cultures also inevitably gain a symbolic value in the ideological wars and struggles after migration and cannot be thought separately from the political and ideological struggles (Fırat, 2014). Food is often instrumentalized in socio-political struggles, national identities and mechanisms of global cultural production embedded in the receiving society. Anny Gaul (2019) presents a good example of ethnographic research on the writing of "culinary histories" by examining the food memories of three Moroccan immigrant women in terms of nation-culture ideologies, migration, memory, and the formation of national identities.

Immigrant foodscapes and culinary culture is a constantly evolving and dynamic set of values interwoven with cultural and social networks. Consumption of the traditional dishes together with the same ethnic or social community and keeping the same eating-drinking habits/rituals after migration has a unifying affect for migrants who built a new cohesive shared cultural identity. Senegalese food in Italy (Gasparetti, 2012), Moroccan food couscous in Europe, doner-kebab in Germany (Çağlar, 1995), Chinese food in the U.S or Indian food in England (Chapman & Beagan, 2013) are different examples among many cases where we observe consuming a country-specific food nurture a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity based on culturally symbolic culinary practices among the immigrants. On the other hand, immigrant foodscapes mostly lead to multinational and multicultural encounters which sometimes result in the creation of new culinary and cultural practices that brings together the receiving and migrating society. We might think of hybrid or fusion foods or culinary practices for immigrant societies by changing, adding or omitting some ingredients or ways of cooking for instance (Kahraman, Güneş & Kahraman, 2017; Raman, 2011).

It is possible to come across examples of strong symbolic values based on belonging, which are attributed to the concept of food by immigrants, in other immigrant communities apart from the ones mentioned above. For example, Chapman & Beagan (2013) approaches the relationship between food cultures-practices and the formation of transnational identities from an anthropological perspective, based on case studies on two families who immigrated to Canada from Punjab, India. Similar to Senegalese-Italian immigrants, Punjabi-Indian immigrants blend and continue their food practices in the receiving country, while at the same time constructing multinational and multicultural identities that transcend national borders through these new food-based cultural practices and changing cultural norms. As another example, we see that Bulgarian immigrants who came to Türkiye after 1989 also created a hybrid immigrant cuisine and immigrant culture in interaction with the food cultures in the new country (Kahraman,Güneş & Kahraman, 2017). Similarly, as seen in a study on families who immigrated from South Asia to England to open restaurants or markets serving South Asian dishes (Raman, 2011), the relationship established with food in migration cultures creates a sense of belonging through family and home metaphors. Traditional food practices, which are maintained with the idea of "food of home", are central to immigrants' sense of belonging and common identity.

Syrian foodscapes in Fatih, Istanbul

Fatih, one of the oldest historical districts in Istanbul, has long been a centre of intense migration flows from different countries coming to Istanbul. Apart from immigrant groups with a large Muslim population such as Uzbek, Uyghur and Afghan immigrants, many immigrants from African and Central Asian countries also settle and work in Fatih (see İçduygu & Kirişçi, 2009; Erdoğan & Kaya, 2015). Simultaneously, the district has also been a gastro-tourism center for Türkiye for local and foreign tourists with its various dining venues bearing the traces of "historical Ottoman cuisine". The Syrian migration added a new dimension to the urban structure, and now the district of Fatih has become a representative of not only the historical Ottoman cuisine, but also the historical Arab cuisine. However, when talking about Syrian cuisine, we should not ignore the existence of other immigrant groups in the district. In the period before the Syrian migration in 2011, food establishments belonging to diverse immigrant groups found a place not only in the central parts of Fatih, but also in quarters such as Aksaray, Laleli, Yenikapı, Samatya and Kumkapı. The best-known examples among these are the Uzbek, Uyghur, and Georgian restaurants, most of which are in Aksaray, Laleli and Kumkapı districts. Other migrant foodscapes include Iraqi, Afghan, Yemeni, Lebanese, Palestinian, Somalian, Ghanaian, Moroccan, Senegal, and so on. In other words, we are faced with a multi-layered cultural diversity that nurtures the "cosmopolitan" structure of Fatih today, which flourished even more after the Syrian migration.

Having said that, when we look at the construction of foodscapes in Fatih after the Syrian refugee influx to Istanbul, we initially realize that there are different layers of urban and social structure within the district. That is, when you go from Aksaray towards Fatih's headquarter and the famous Malta Bazaar, you realize the multicultural diversity manifested in Aksaray leaves its place to more Syrian-dominated spheres. The food venues preferred by Syrian families are in the majority in the Malta Bazaar and around. There are restaurants that are relatively "decent", setting higher standards in terms of taste and quality, appealing to both the middle and upper- middle classes, in Malta Bazaar and surrounding main streets. In the venues in Aksaray and Yusufpaşa, however, restaurants for the lower or middle classes are high in number, and the quality/price is considered lower by most of my interviewees. The criterion of being a place you can visit with family is also very important. For example, a graduate student from Aleppo I interviewed says:

> *I live in Üsküdar with my older brother. Sometimes we come to Fatih to eat home-cooked meals that we miss. I usually don't prefer to eat downstairs [referring to Yusufpaşa]. The quality there is a bit low, it hurts my stomach. I always bring my friends here too, or there are a couple of other places. These dishes are unique to Aleppo [talking about kibbeh and mensef], not everyone can do it well.*

In addition, the prices are generally more affordable than the Turkish restaurants or restaurants in the vicinity. I asked one of the managers why the prices were more affordable than other places, and "This is a public restaurant, anyone who has no money can come and eat for 15-20 TL," he replied.

Evidently, there is no clear-cut boundaries, and the city has multiple layers. However, the socio-economic differentiations between districts of Istanbul also affects the Syrian foodscapes. For instance, Istanbul's Başakşehir district, which gained popularity among Islamist conservative elites in Istanbul in the last two decades (Özet, 2018), is now also emerging as another prominent urban center for elite migrants due to the increasing Syrian refugee settlements. Fatih is usually the point of entry for upper-middle and high-class Syrian population with enough financial capital. On condition that they thrive at business and are part of social upward mobility in time, they usually prefer to move from Fatih to Başakşehir to settle and do business as well. I learned from my manager interviewees that the entrepreneurs who generated profit opened new offices/branches in Başakşehir and moved their headquarters there. Business owners also moved their houses to Başakşehir as well. Fatih province is currently far from being a place to live for them (especially Aksaray and Yusufpaşa). They list security ("not suitable for family environment") as the primary reason for this internal migration trend. Neighbourhoods such as Aksaray, Kumkapı, Yusufpaşa, and Haseki are seen as "uncanny" because it hosts illegal immigrants from many different ethnicities, mostly belonging to poor or lower classes. A Syrian restaurant owner near the Yusufpaşa tram station said: "You cannot safely walk alone on this tram street after evening. Even I hesitate. In the daytime, everywhere is full of beggars. In the evening, there are drugs, women [meaning sex workers], whatever you look for. But the

police don't say anything to anyone." During our meeting, beggars came to our table several times. While sitting at the tables outside the restaurant during the interview, my interviewee warned me as well to protect my bag and phone.

Sense of community and social networks in Syrian foodscapes

Social ties have always been crucial in migration studies literature in various aspects ranging from migration decision to the integration of immigrants or to economic and political relations among countries. The "network theory" is one of the significant theories which emphasize the importance of social networks in shaping the migration decision of individuals (Çağlayan, 2006, pp. 84-88). Immigrants establish strong or weak interpersonal ties between the sending and receiving countries both before and after they migrate (Abadan-Unat, 2006). In time, these interpersonal social ties (based on kinship, friendship, partnership etc.) also lead to chain migration movements, as social networks or bonds evolve over time and are not broken easily once they are established (Castles & Miller, 2008; Massey et.al., 2014). The immigrant networks have functions such as providing information flow that will shape the decision to migrate, adaptation to life after migration, helping each other find employment, accommodation, socialization, and fostering solidarity against discrimination/hardships. Pre-migration kinship or compatriot relations also play a significant role in shaping social networks. Most importantly, social networks have always played a key role in integration and social cohesion practices, whether positive or negative, from the very beginning.

When the network theory was first put forward, the focus was on the role of social networks in shaping the decisions to migrate and the migration chains. In time, the research focused on the multinational, multidimensional and deeper immigrant networks that connect the sending and receiving countries and go beyond national identities; "transnationalism" approach gained more importance in migration studies (Vertovec, 2009; Faist et.al., 2013). Numerous studies have been conducted on the international Turkish diaspora, especially in the context of Turks in Europe, with a transnational approach (Pitkänen, Içduygu & Sert, 2012; Robins & Aksoy, 2015; Modood, Triandafyllidou & Zapata-Barrero, 2006). There is also research on transnational immigrant ties such as family, business, friendship networks based on qualitative and quantitative data analyses utilizing social network analysis (SNA) method (Freeman, 2004; Bilecen, 2014; Bilecen & Lubbers, 2021; Seibel, 2020).

During the last decade since the civil war, there has been a rapid increase in the number of cafés-restaurants serving Syrian cuisine in Istanbul, especially in Fatih, Esenyurt, and Başakşehir. The foodscape here consists of a variety of food establishments ranging from fine-dining restaurants to fast-food chains, charcuteries, butcher's shops, patisseries, bakeries, grocery stores, herbalists, so on and

so forth. These foodscapes are also surrounded by other businesses run by Syrian migrants in any branch. What distinguishes the Fatih province is the high demand for and domination of Syrian food establishments (mostly Aleppo or Damascus) in the area. One of my interviewees, who is a famous restaurant owner being among the first Syrian refugee entrepreneurs coming to Istanbul, said:

There are more than 100 Syrian restaurants on this street, wherever you look. In the beginning, there was no one but me on this street. I am the only one. Then everybody came here. Now, to those who call me and say, 'We want to come and open a place, what do you think', I say 'don't come'. There were also those who opened different restaurants, but they couldn't survive. For example, Iraqi, Lebanese etc. restaurants were opened, but it's not happening here. There is no demand, they all closed the shops or went back to Syrian food.

In this period, Syrian businessman paid almost double for shops in Fatih, and Syrian restaurants were popping up everywhere. Many Turkish restaurants transformed their menus and began serving Syrian foods. Even other local business owners (real estate agents, jewellers, markets, etc.) closed their old shops and opened cafés and restaurants serving Syrian cuisine. Initially, Syrian businessmen and investors bought Turkish restaurants and kiosks in the Malta Bazaar for higher prices (twice and three times) than usual. Later on, with the help of transnational social networks and chain migration, the number of investors who came to the region increased and spread to the districts outside the main headquarter. There are some pioneering restaurants that started the chain migration. These well-known restaurant owners then functioned as locomotives for other restaurant owners and paid workers who would want to migrate to Istanbul. For example, there are some chefs who initially worked in these established restaurants, learned the job, saved some money, and then opened their own new restaurants in Fatih. Likewise, there are partnerships in the beginning, and later on partners go their separate ways and open new branches while keeping their first restaurants. Among the Syrian investors who initially went to other countries during the war in Syria, there are also people who have recently immigrated to Türkiye and are planning to open new restaurants in Istanbul. For example, in one of my most recent interviews, I met two investors who stayed in Saudi Arabia for a few years and came to Istanbul-Aksaray to open a döner-kebab shop. In the same week, I learned one of their friends from Saudi Arabia was also trying to make an agreement with a jeweller owned by a Turkish operator next door and they would come here to open a new restaurant too. Friendship ties like this make it possible for the refugees to easily find contacts, accommodation, operate business plans etc.; and such cases are among the good examples whereby we see the positive effects of social networks on refugees' migration and integration processes in a new country.

In addition to these kinds of small-scale or individual social ties, the Syrian restaurant owners also have an organized social network called "Ziyafet Association", which brings together almost 200 food establishment owners in Istanbul, mainly Fatih, to meet and support each other in business management. I interviewed two

board members of this association and learned that they mostly use social media channels to support each other but they also gather in person frequently. One of the board members (G75) tells:

Now we have 184 members, all of whom are restaurant owners in our Whatsapp group. Syrian, Yemeni doesn't matter. Generally Arabs, mostly Syrians, Egyptians, Iraqi, Palestinian. Most Yemeni restaurants are in Şirinevler, whoever is Egyptian they go there. Whoever is Syrian comes to either Fatih or Başakşehir. Whatever problem we have, we talk about it in the group.

The board members underlined that while it is good to be part of such a helpful organization, they also need to be more involved in other local or national gatherings (e.g. being more acquainted with the Turkish local restaurant unions in the region) so as to be more cohesive with the receiving society. Plus, they told there is sometimes competition among the owners and the solidarity is not so intense, as told by G59 "There is of course a solidarity to some extent, but there is also jealousy you know, who has more customers etc." Aside from this association, social media networks are very crucial for the Syrian foodscapes in Istanbul. It is mostly through social media that the investors and customers connect to each other and get organized. As some famous and well-established brands in the Syrian foodscapes make more profit here, they expand their businesses at a transnational level and becomes their headquarters in this expansion. They open their own factories in the city, rather than buying the ingredients from other suppliers; and some of them also open new branches in and out of Türkiye, such as European or Gulf countries. Plus, most migrant workers in my research stated that they settled in Istanbul and were employed here with the help of their acquaintances or previous relationships (friends, relatives, colleague, boss etc). Here, it is possible to see the effect of social ties and solidarity networks, as also presented by the network theory of migration (Çağlayan, 2006).

Although solidarity networks among immigrants have generally positive effects in facilitating migration decision and post-migration adaptation, social networks do not always have a positive function. In addition to rivalry among the businesses, kinship ties or previous hostilities might continue in the new country. In the case of two *kunefe* selling Syrian shops in Malta Bazaar in Fatih, we see an example of the negative effects of kinship ties. One of the relatives (G25) tells me the story:

We are in fact relatives with them but we don't see each other, our families fell out with each other back in Syria. Now here I was going to buy a larger place in this bazaar but they learnt it and paid more money to buy it before me, just to make me go out of business. I had very difficult times trying to find this small shop to continue working.

Social networks initially establish an environment in which immigrants can feel more secure economically and culturally, but the negative effects of these networks appear in two areas in particular. First, the strong social ties and the social circles organized around these ties (for example, networks of friends, associations, civil society initiatives, religious communities, etc.) can create a barrier to the integration and interaction of immigrant societies with the society in the receiving country. Ghettoization and social detachment may become much more pronounced, as we see in the comments below by a Syrian young-male restaurant chef working in Yusufpaşa:

> *Living in such a dense and crowded community in somewhere as immigrants, like we do here in Aksaray for instance, is too bad for integration. That's why we have a bad image in the society. We have to change this ghetto mindset. In order to close the cultural gap between the Turkish and Syrian communities, we need a complete mentality transformation.*

Secondly, the fact that immigrants build a cultural, economic and social life only around their own social networks and the lack of equipment to survive outside this social environment can push immigrants to stay in the same social environment all the time, almost like a prison. In the face of any negative experience in the social environment, in-group discrimination, conflict or being pushed out of the group for any reason, it can make immigrants vulnerable. As part of the subject of this article, attention has been drawn to the positive and negative effects of ties in Syrian refugees' social networks (Demirbaş & Akyiğit, 2018; Gülenen & Demir, 2022). In addition, in the field research I conducted, there are discussions (in the third part) about both positive and negative effects of social networks in the context of culinary culture. Different studies on effective social networks in the international Syrian diaspora also draw attention to the functions of social networks (including digital networks) in the integration processes of Syrian immigrants (Jauhiainen et.al., 2022; Speed et.al., 2021; Bailey et.al., 2022).

Can Syrian foodscapes be a starting point for socio-cultural integration and transculturation?

As cultures close in on themselves in today's world where the fear of foreigners is high, the gap between "us" and "them" is getting bigger and bigger. This gap will continue to increase as individuals imprison themselves within cultures/communities, which is seen as a "fortress under siege", and today's societies live in an all-encompassing ambiguity, fluidity, insecurity and fear in which time and space are lost (Bauman, 2012; Bauman, 2006). Refugees -including Syrians- who are deterritorialized because of war are the most well-known foreigners of the age of liquid modernity" (Öztürk, 2019). Due to the insecurity and fear of foreigners prevailing in both refugees and settled societies, social orders are formed in the

multi-communitarianism approach, which Alain Touraine points out, instead of multiculturalism. As a result, individuals who claim to belong to a culture are also obliged to prove their loyalty day by day for the sake of defending this castle (Bauman, 2011, pp. 67- 68). In the context of the European Union's increasing security, anti-refugee and closed policies in recent years, the frequent emphasis of the term "Fortress Europe" in current literature can be given as an example of the increase in both physical and symbolic borders (see Şemşit & Çelik, 2019; Karabağ, 2019).

In such conditions, the idea of cultural equity is also crucial for a successful integration process for the Syrian refugees in Türkiye. In the Turkish migration studies literature, there are different uses for integration processes such as "social acceptance and adaptation" (Erdoğan, 2016) or "social cohesion" (İçduygu & Özçürümez, 2020). Another important concept is the idea of "transculturation" (Hoerder, 2012). The common point of these approaches is to emphasize the new hybrid cultural formations that emerge as a result of the mutual interaction between different and "equal" cultures, as opposed to the concept acculturation, which is based on the idea that the immigrant group adopts the culture of the receiving country. The aim here is to emphasize mutual cultural exchange and cultural harmony, rather than a unilateral and top-down cultural transformation (the idea of assimilation). New habits in the culinary culture or fusion cuisines in the immigrant foodscapes can be a good example of these mutual interactions and ways of hybrid cultural formations.

Regarding the transculturation processes reflected in the example of Syrian foodscapes in Türkiye, first of all, it should be underlined that neither Türkiye nor Syria has a homogeneous culture (hence cuisine culture). We can see Syrian refugees and receiving societies in the southern region of Türkiye (Mardin, Kilis, Antep, etc.) share the same cultural patterns resulting from close networks as neighbours, families, business partnerships and so on. However, when we come to Istanbul, it is possible to observe that the cultural gap increases considerably. Cities such as Konya and Malatya can also be included in this realm. In Istanbul, which has a cosmopolitan and ghettoized urban structure even before Syrian refugee influx, it has been difficult for Syrian people to build a place for themselves in the city from nothing. Contrary to the southern regions, cultural differentiation and conflict elements make their overwhelming pressure evident rather than cultural alikeness.

Cuisine or culinary practices are surely an important symbol of the culture, but there are different opinions on whether Syrian cafés-restaurants reflect this cultural feature. Accordingly, opinions also change in terms of food being an integration/cultural interaction tool. According to some, these foodscapes do not go beyond a touristic-commercial income source and the interaction in these places is very limited. According to this point of view, restaurants are temporary common areas where permanent relationships cannot be established, and one can only come and eat for a short time. According to these people, real interaction

should occur with a more "intimate" and "constant" relationship that recurs in daily life. Neighbourhood relations are the best example of this situation. One of my interviewee's comments on this, saying:

Eating several times at any restaurant is not an integration, a relationship. Two cultures cannot know each other like that. I will come to you, you will come to me. You will bring me the food you cooked and I will bring it to you. That dish has a story, a sincerity. You talk once or twice, you will know as you speak.

Yet, for some Syrian refugees, the foodscape is one of the most important centres for starting and ensuring a mutual cultural interaction. For these people, the café-restaurants in the heart of Istanbul (Fatih) are a very important opportunity for Syrian and Turkish societies to find out more about their cultures, and to overcome any prejudices. A chicken-restaurant owner settled in Fatih for 9 years says "Food can be a starting point for breaking prejudices and for mutual cultural interaction. That's why we want to make some changes in our menu and make our meals suitable for the taste of Turks as well". Similarly, the foodscape in Fatih is also a way to promote Syrian culture not only to Türkiye but to the whole world. A well-known hummus-falafel shop owner (for 12 years) on the Akşemsettin street explains "My goal is to introduce Syrian cuisine and Syrian culture to the whole world. Our history is shared [meaning Turkish and Syrian histories]. We need to know each other more and introduce our civilization to the world. That's why I opened this restaurant in Istanbul".

In these two different views, we also see the effect of the distinction between public and private spaces, or simply the distinction between home and workplace. For Syrian immigrants, the distinction between home-cooking and eating out is very important. As a reflection of gender roles, for example, women working in restaurants are not tolerated. Men who are chefs or cook very well in food businesses rarely enter the kitchen at home. If you are going to eat out, ideally this should be at a place where you can eat as a whole family, and the meal eaten out should be a main course (mostly kebab type) or dessert that is not cooked at home. Therefore, café-restaurants can be considered "superficial" for an intercultural interaction compared to a cultural exchange in a home environment. But those who emphasize the importance of interaction in these restaurants are not few. Most of my interviewees state that they prefer to go to Turkish restaurants whenever they have the opportunity, so as to know more about the Turkish culture and meet with new people. In addition, the business owners also state that the number of Turkish customers has gradually increased over the years they have been here. I have often heard that Turks usually come with curiosity but with a prejudice but leave very satisfied after tasting the food. When I talked to some of the Turkish customers, they also supported this view. Some restaurants have Turkish regulars. It is true that there is a certain socio-cultural distance and introversion due to the language barrier, prejudices and increasing hate

speech in society. However, despite all this, "kitchen", as a symbol of the common history and cultural heritage shared by the two cultures, has a conciliatory effect in the process of mutual harmonization.

Conclusion: Reflections on social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Turkish communities in Istanbul

The significant increase in the number of Syrian establishments in Fatih since the refugee influx to Türkiye in 2011 should not mean it has become a completely separate (or ghettoized) Syrian district only with Syrian people. On the contrary, we are speaking of an ethnically-diverse area where the local communities and different migrant populations co-exist. In this respect, we can evaluate Fatih as one of the leading centres that reflect the multi-ethnic and multicultural urban districts in Istanbul. Nonetheless, print and social media often portrays the district as "invaded" by the refugees, mainly referring to Syrian people, judging by appearance. And refugees are often instrumentalized by policy makers for their own benefits. For instance, the last 2023 presidential elections of Türkiye were the most recent examples whereby the "refugee problem" was one of the key policy issues. And the social tensions are on the rise as we go along these politically, economically and socially turbulent times.

When immigrants and the receiving society create shared solidarity networks voluntarily, this greatly enhances transculturation and socio-cultural integration. The culinary culture, as an indispensable part of daily life and culture, also plays a facilitating role in the formation of such networks of solidarity and natural encounters. As discussed before, it is important to provide an environment of interaction at the level of equality between immigrants and the receiving society, trying to minimize hierarchies and discrimination while ensuring peaceful coexistence and social cohesion. At this point, simply opening booths at cultural fairs to introduce Syrian dishes to the local people, for instance, will in the end foster the host-guest dichotomy and hierarchies in between, although well-intentioned at the beginning. Instead, initiatives based on commensality or cooking together Syrian or Turkish dishes can open the door to a non-hierarchical interaction by keeping the participants at an equal level. In such an environment, the participants will enter into a more egalitarian interaction by chatting while sitting at the same table and eating the food they cooked together, perhaps a little hesitant at first, but asking about each other and learning more about each other. Judging from my field research, I can say that the Syrian foodscapes in Fatih raise hopes for this sort of natural and egalitarian interaction among diverse groups or people. Despite anti-immigrant attitudes in the midst of increasing social and political tensions in the country, it is always possible to find common grounds for humanitarian dialogue, whether it is through music, art, theatre, literature, food or whatever it is that binds us with a cosmopolitan consciousness to live together with dignity and peace.

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Appendix

1.   **Maps of Fatih, İstanbul, Türkiye showing the main regions the author collected data.**
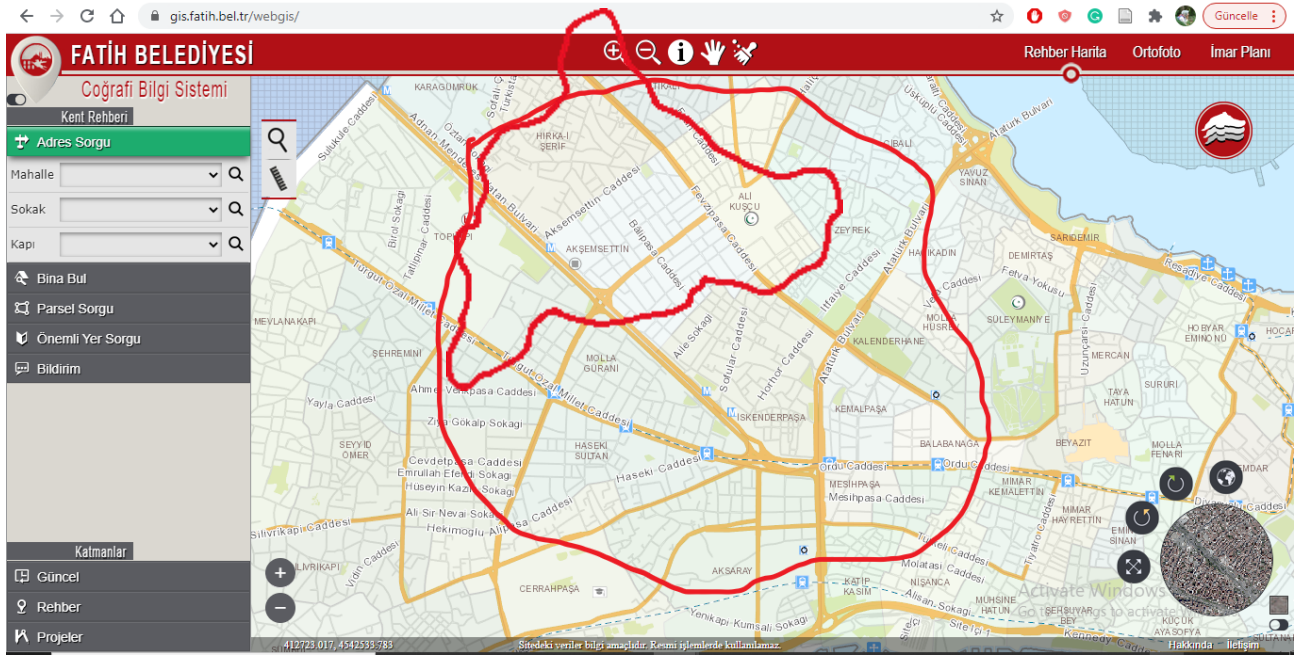
Main districts of fieldwork area in Fatih Municipality, Geographic Information Systems, accessed on June 2021.
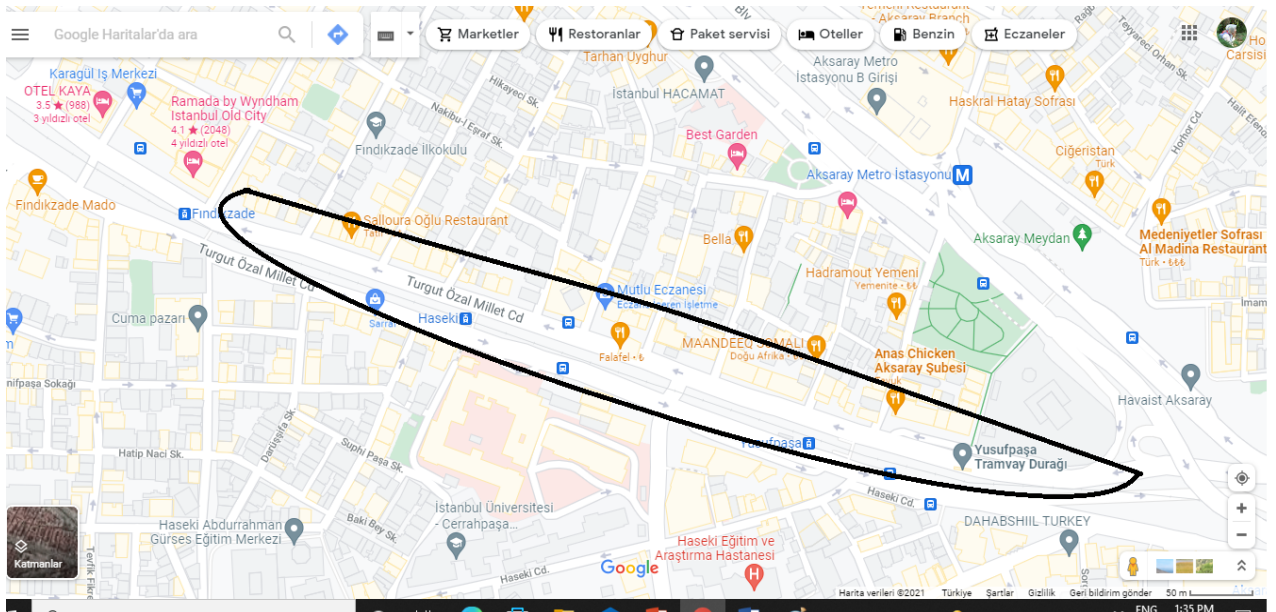
The map showing the mostly populated street by Syrian café-restaurants in Aksaray-Yusufpaşa district of Fatih (accessed via Google Maps in June 2021).

The map showing the location of Fatih in İstanbul, an ancient district within the historical peninsula on the European side (accessed in June 2023).