YOUNG SYRIANS' EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE TURKISH CITY OF GAZIANTEP*

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Abstract

This article attempts to demonstrate refugees' experiences of social integration based on a case study conducted in 2017 among young male Syrians in the Turkish city of Gaziantep between the ages of 18-25. The field research included around 15 young males who were interviewed individually as well as five different groups of students who shared their experiences in groups meetings. Already a 'chaotic concept', integration gets more complicated today in the era of transnationalism in which people tend to remain mobile even after arriving to their destination through their networks that transcend national borders. This study aims to illustrate how Gaziantep turns into a multicultural city with refugees, who are mostly from Syria's second biggest city of Aleppo, creating their own locality that represents a different sociality, culture and way of living. It also argues how young Syrians' experiences of integration are strained at the crossroad of the temporality of their stay and the transnational character of their migratory behaviour. Even though as the time passes their alignment with the hosting society and culture grows naturally, their early experiences appear to make a lasting impact on their relationship with both the hosting country and the community.

Keywords: Syrian refugees, Temporary Protection, Integration, Social Adaptation, Turkey, Gaziantep

SURİYELİ GENÇLERİN ENTEGRASYON TECRÜBELERİ: GAZİANTEP ÖRNEĞİ*

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Öz

Bu makale, Türkiye'nin Gaziantep şehrinde 18-25 yaş aralığındaki genç Suriyeli erkekler arasında 2017 yılında yapılan bir saha araştırmasına dayanarak mültecilerin sosyal entegrasyon deneyimlerini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır. Saha arastirmasi yaklasik 15 genc ile yapilan bire bir roportajlardan ve bes farkli ogrenci grubuyla gerceklestirilen toplantilardan olusmaktadir. Zaten 'kaotik bir kavram' olan entegrasyon, insanların ulusal sınırları aşan sosyal ağları aracılığıyla varış noktalarına ulaştıktan sonra bile hareket halinde kalma eğiliminde olduğu ulusaşırılık çağında daha da karmaşık hale gelmektedir. Bu çalışma, çoğunluğu Suriye'nin ikinci büyük şehri Halep'ten gelen mültecilerin, farklı bir sosyalliği, kültürü ve yaşam tarzını temsil eden kendi yerelliklerini yaratarak, Gaziantep'i nasıl iki kültürlü bir şehre dönüştürdüklerini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır. Buna ek olarak bu araştırma genç Suriyelilerin entegrasyon deneyimlerinin, Türkiye'deki statülerinin geçiciliği ile göç davranışlarının ulusötesi karakteri arasındaki kavşakta nasıl gerginleştiğini de tartışmaktadır. Zaman geçtikçe ev sahibi toplumla ve kültürle uyumları doğal olarak gelişse de, bu araştırma ile sığınmacıların ilk deneyimlerinin hem ev sahibi ülke hem de toplumla ilişkileri üzerinde kalıcı bir etki yarattığı görülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeli Mülteciler, Geçici Koruma, Entegrasyon, Sosyal Adaptasyon, Türkiye, Gaziantep

1.Introduction

It all started when the unexpected revolutionary wind of the so-called "Arab Spring" that had already shaken Tunisia, Egypt and Libya made its way to Syria in March 2011. A nation-wide civil war started soon after the president Bashar al-Assad mobilised his military forces to oppress peaceful demonstrations. The fighting between the regime and the opposition groups has been continuing for the last 13 years, with the involvement of international actors and terror groups further worsening the situation (Al Jazeera, 2024).

The war in Syria is considered to have caused the largest humanitarian crisis of our time (UNHCR). According to the UK-based monitoring group The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), at least 503,064 people have been killed by March 2023 (BBC, 2023). According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), over 14 million which is more than half the country's pre-war population have been internally or internationally displaced. Nearly 5.5 million Syrians became refugees in neighbouring countries including Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Egypt, while the remaining 7.2 million people were internally displaced and continue to live under dire conditions (UNHCR, 2024).

Their flight coincided with a global environment where mobility is considered "a threat, a disorder in the system, a thing to control" (Cresswell, 2006, p.26) with states and international instruments are first and foremost aimed at terminating it (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p.180). The international protection and refugee regime that has focused on the 'non-arrival policies' since the end of the Cold War era was determined to keep refugees inside their own region or transit countries as long as possible while offering financial assistance and governance in return (Orchard & Miller, 2014; Aras et al, 2015, p.194).

However, Turkey made a significant shift from the global trend as well as its previous implementations by adopting an 'open-door' policy towards Syrians for an extended period (Aras et al, 2015, p.194). The country currently hosts the largest refugee population in the world with more than 3.1 million of Syrians making up over 3.5% of the country's population (Turkish Interior Ministry, 2024).

The overwhelming majority of the Syrian refugees (%98.15) live in cities and towns across the country largely relying on their own resources. The refugee population particularly intensifies in southern cities near the Turkey-Syria border, where Syrian population makes up a large portion of the total population, which transforms the demography as well as the cultural landscape in cities such as Kilis (%31.2), Gaziantep (%16.6) and Sanliurfa (%12.59) ((Turkish Interior Ministry, 2024; Woods, 2016, p.15).

This article is based on field research focusing on daily lives and social relations of young male Syrian refugees in one of those southern cities, Gaziantep, which has quickly become a financial and social hub for Syrians with international and Syrian organizations moving their offices to the city. Gaziantep hosts almost half a million Syrian refugees, the highest number in the border region and the second highest number nationwide after Istanbul (Global Compact on Refugees, 2024).

Based on the accounts of those aged between 18 and 25, I will endeavour to understand young refugees' experiences in adapting to life in exile. Largely adopting Castels et al (2002, p.113)'s definition of integration as 'process of adaptation', I will use the terms adaptation and integration interchangeably. While acknowledging the policy implications of the concept of integration, my aim is to find out the forms of agency that refugees themselves employ in order to engage in social spaces and to tackle the challenges that may occur in accessing the wider society.

After briefly reflecting on my methodology and field research, I will begin with a theoretical framework by engaging with the academic debate around integration as well as transnationalism which challenges the traditional understanding of integration by recognizing the increasing tendency of migrant populations to remain mobile, retaining multiple attachments and identities (Van Hear, 2006; Vertovec, 2010). Considering youth as the centre of 'continuity and change in any context' (Ensor, 2013, p.13) my research is aimed at contributing to the literature that has so far given little attention to the perspectives of the young refugees (Omar, 2009, p.116; Sirriyeh, 2007). Like Simsek (2018), I also use the term 'refugee' as a socially accepted identification rather than a legal term given the complicated nature of Syrians' legal status in Turkey.

Secondly, I will analyse the outcomes of my field research by further engaging with the literature. Splitting the section into two parts, I will first look at the production of locality that has turned the Turkish city into a Syrian hub for refugees. This can be seen inevitable due to the concentration of a large multitude of refugee populations in the area. However, my findings suggest that community formation also emerges as a survival strategy mainly based on socioeconomic reasons and aimed at avoiding conflict with the hosting society. The second part of this section will be dedicated to find out young Syrians' responses to the challenges faced in integrating into wider society in different aspects of their lives. Here, different strategies of young Syrian men and the impacts of transnational behaviour will be analysed in terms of legal status, language, education, employment, social participation etc.

However, as I will finally argue, young Syrians in Gaziantep increasingly turn in on their own community, which risks leading to isolation and exclusion. Young refugees endeavour

to utilise their time in Turkey through education and social activities, however there is not enough aspiration for integrating into wider society.

2.Methodology

2.1 Reflections on the Field Research

I utilized a qualitative method as the overall aim of this study is to understand in depth from the young Syrians' perspectives of social adaptation in the Turkish city of Gaziantep. Primary data has been collected through participant observations, semi-structured and open interviews conducted during a two-week field research in Gaziantep in the summer of 2017. I interviewed 15 young Syrian males aged between 18 and 25 individually. I also held meetings with five voluntary student groups, attended by 8 to 18 participants. Additionally, I conducted formal and informal interviews with representatives from five Syrian and Turkish NGOs as well as academics and municipal officers whom I met during my research.

I connected with my research participants through a young Syrian couple, both of which are university students based in Gaziantep. Except for a few that took place in a one-to-one concept, my interviews were carried out in the presence of at least one common Syrian friend. I have repeatedly met with some of my research participants on different occasions including home gatherings and public events, which helped create a sense of trust between us, so my participants could feel comfortable to engage with the research project. On these occasions, I also had a chance to observe how they interacted with others and the social space they occupied.

The interviews and meetings took place in Arabic, Turkish and English based on the language preference of the participants. I preferred receiving help with Arabic from family members or friends of the interviewees instead of a professional translator thinking it could be uncomfortable for them to talk about their issues in front of a stranger. I also had the chance to observe their skills in Turkish and their perception about learning the local language, which is considered as one of the indicators of integration (Ager & Strang, 2008).

As Allsopp (2017:157) underlines there is a common perception about refugee men being reluctant to share their 'vulnerability' with researchers. As a female researcher, I was aware that could cause discomfort and overshadow our interviews. I felt some restraints in a few cases when my male respondents were telling me about their experiences of the war back in Syria and their feelings of being criticized for escaping to safety instead of fighting for their cause. I was interrupted or not allowed to audio record such exchanges. Some of them were also not willing to sign the consent form due to security reasons and I was given verbal

consent instead. However, these reactions were few and did not jeopardise the completion of our interviews. I have used their accounts anonymously in this paper upon their request.

My particular interest in the experiences of male Syrians stemmed from the proposition that they are more likely to be exposed to wider society due to their socially constructed roles as 'breadwinners'. Moreover, being portrayed as a 'potential threat' in mainstream media, refugee men coming from a recently militarised country would have different challenges in coping with 'vulnerability' that is immanent in the state of displacement (Allsopp, 2017:159).

My research focuses only on Syrians living outside refugee camps relying on their own financial capacities, which vary drastically, taking place in central Gaziantep excluding the rural areas and villages. The interviewees included university students, high school graduates applying for universities in Turkey and those working in a variety of sectors. They are divergent in their views, with ethnic backgrounds ranging from Arab, Kurd and Turkmen representing in large part Syria's diverse population (Hokayem, 2013:17). Each of these ethnicities is inherited in Turkey as well as in Gaziantep. Therefore, I paid attention to the differences in their responses to same questions on befriending and hanging out with Turks, difficulties in learning Turkish, experience in applying for and studying in Turkish universities, experiences of exclusion or discrimination etc.

Finally, I acknowledge that my participants who are mainly from a Sunni Muslim background fall short to represent the entire religious diversity of Syrian people which include Alawite, Christian, Shia and other minorities (Hokayem, 2013:17). Yet, it is also important to note that neither religious and political affiliations nor sexual orientations have been particularly questioned during our conversations due to the limit in scope and the perceived irrelevance in focus. Although further studies may reveal different aspects, my findings suggest that the challenges in social adaptation of young Syrians evolve around several main issues such as language, employment, education, legal status, and discrimination, which are fundamental and widely common among displaced groups.

2.2. Theoretical Framework: Integration in the Era of Transnationalism

Integration is seen as a "chaotic concept" that is "individualized, contested and contextual" (Robinson, 1998, p.118, cited in Ager & Strang, 2008, p.167). Despite being popularly used, its meaning is perceived differently. As Castles et al (2002, p.114) reaffirms "there is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration. The concept continues to be controversial and hotly debated". Castles et al (2002, p.113) indicates that integration is tended to be perceived as 'a one-way process' that requires migrants to blend in the receiving 'culture and society' by abandoning their own. However, the literature

suggests that it is 'a two-way process' that necessitates adaptation both by newcomers as well as the existing society which should allow immigrants to access labour market and services as well as participation in social life.

This definition refers to the process that changes the relationship between newcomers and locals who happen to live together in a country. By this, not only migrants but the receiving society also transforms by adapting to a more multicultural life or preventing discrimination. This contextualisation necessitates responsibility sharing in case of a failure in the integration process (Spencer & Cooper, 2006, p.14).

The Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM, 2005, p.44 cited in Koser, 2007, p.25) emphasizes on a commitment for collaboration both by migrant and non-migrant members of the society in terms of respecting and adapting to each other, paving the way for 'positive and peaceful' interaction. It describes the concept as a process that results in the acceptance of immigrants into wider society whether as individuals or as groups (Koser, 2007, p.25)

Ager and Strang (2008) also approaches the concept as "a long-term two-way process". The authors refer to a change that "relates both to the conditions for and the actual participation of refugees in all aspects of life of the country of durable asylum as well as to refugees' own sense of belonging and membership" (ECRE 1999, p.4 cited in Ager & Strang, 2008, p.177). Rather than the insertion of a migrant group in the host society, integration should be seen as a "process of mutual accommodation" that can be facilitated by social connections between refugees and those receiving them (Ager & Strang, 2008, p.177).

The authors emphasize that access to adequate housing, education, employment, and health care services as necessary factors for successful integration. Additionally, the process requires a set of 'facilitators' consisting of refugees' ability to speak the main language and sufficient knowledge of the culture of the hosting society. Refugees should also be granted certain rights and entitlements and physical security, which would also help them to have a sense of belonging and willingness to contribute to the society (Ager & Strang, 2008, p.177).

The most debated among their set of indicators is the concept of citizenship, which is emphasized by the large part of literature around integration. Although, the understanding of citizenship can vary in different cultural and political contexts (Ager & Strang, 2008, p.173), it is widely considered as "an essential prerequisite for integration" that grants full participation in the social and political sphere (Duke et al., 1999, cited in Ager & Strang, 2008, p.174). For Koser (2007, p.22), citizenship is one way that ends the state of migranthood. As migrant is defined by "leaving the territory of one nation-state and arriving in another" (Bauder, 2013,

p.56-62), the membership to a territorially identified society is restored through 'citizenship', which reaffirms nation-state being a "legitimate agent of inclusion and exclusion" (Ehrkamp & Leitner, 2003, p.144).

Ager and Strang (2008, p.176) highlight that refugees can be fully integrated if only given the same rights. Being granted equal rights is seen necessary especially by migrants themselves in order to be respected and viewed as entitled members of society so that they can live together harmoniously (Simsek, 2018). An example of societal conflict in this regard is that refugees who depend on government benefits because of having no access to labour market are viewed as 'scroungers' by the rest of the host society.

The general persuasion in the literature is to contextualise citizenship either as a reward for 'successful integration' or as a tool to achieve it (Smyth et al., 2010, p.412). However, there is an increasing awareness about situations where citizenship is not desired or the fact that many refugees would not qualify the requirements of citizenship (Smyth et al., 2010, p.413). Also, it is argued that official citizenship may not necessarily create a sense of belonging (Sirriyeh, 2007, p.7).

The question is whether the traditional understanding of citizenship can comprehend the needs of today's transnational migrants. Some scholars attempt to replace the traditional understanding of 'citizenship' with "social practices" and "acts of citizenship" (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Turner, 1993; McNevin, 2011) as a much broader concept of rights and sense of belonging that enact social and political participation. As McNevin (2011, p.139) suggests, by involving in the essential means of citizenship by practice, refugees can overcome their legally defined state of exclusion.

This idea is widely embraced by scholars of 'transnationalism' who believe in the co-existence of multiple belongings with integration. Acknowledging that people in the global world are becoming increasingly mobile, migration related literature has shifted its focus on transnational relations and attachments that transcend national borders (Vertovec, 2010, p.574). In contrast to assimilation, this approach appreciates that migrants may strongly retain attachments to their country of origin while integrating into the receiving society (Spencer & Cooper, 2006; Finney & Simpson, 2009; Vertovec, 2010).

As Van Hear (2006, p.14) points out "transnationalism" emerges as a solution preferred by migrants who remain mobile through their transnational relations. Portes (1997 cited in Koser, 2007, p.108) describes transnational communities as multilingual, moving between cultures, pursuing households in two countries, as they maintain financial, cultural and political interests that necessitate their existence in both. Furthermore, transnationalism transforms

social life by allowing the formation of new social and cultural configurations and multiple identifications that transcend borders. Transnational migrants also produce hybrid cultures by blending their own in new contexts. They represent a significant source for economic and political contribution for their country of origin as well as the hosting society (Koser, 2007, p.108)

It is also suggested that people now increasingly tend to escape the bounds of political categories such as citizen or migrant, and transnationalism becomes a way out of these binaries. In practice, the concept of dual citizenship emerges as a result, with nationhood becoming 'an instrumental attachment' instead of 'emotional attribute' (Castles & Miller, 2009, p.44; Agamben, 1995, p.117-118). On the other hand, it is difficult to determine to what extent migrant populations employ transnational behaviour. The subject requires more empirical studies on different experiences in which they negotiate their lives while maintaining attachments in both countries of origin and destination (Castles & Miller, 2009). The intersection between integration and transnationalism engenders a need to understand how transnational links influence migrant's strategies in participating within a new national context and the ways in which they navigate between one and another (Smyth et al., 2010, p.413).

Previous research (Akcapar and Şimşek, 2018; Şimşek, 2020 cited in Aydogan 2023) on the experiences of Syrian refugees highlights that their integration has so far been "class-based" as those who have better resources find it easier to adapt to Turkish society. Additionally, the government criteria to obtain Turkish citizenship is based on certain requirements for 'legal residence, work, level of education, wealth' while leaving out other qualities including 'intention to stay, socio-cultural anchorage, language' etc. In the case of Syrians in Turkey, while citizenship is an invaluable instrument in their integration and harmonization process, it does not necessarily guarantee sense of belonging to wider society or nation. Instead, their individual experiences of adaptation to the hosting community play a more significant role in their integration process (Aydogan, 2023, p.90).

3.Findings

3.1.1 Gaziantep as the 'Second Aleppo'

3.1.1 Twin Cities

"I like it here. It's like 'second Aleppo'" says a young Syrian refugee when asked about his new life in Gaziantep. With its historic grand bazaar in the old town and its castle that resembles the one in Aleppo, Gaziantep feels like home for Syrians. Not only in historical sites, in

neighbourhoods like Guneykent wherein I stayed during my field research in a charity accommodation for Syrians, signs of the reproduction of a different culture confuses you about where you are. With many Syrians living there, the area is also explicitly multi-lingual, which makes it possible to spend a day without speaking a word in Turkish.

Then comes food. Although Gaziantep's world-famous kitchen is like Aleppo's, Syrians have their own locations such as cafes, restaurants and markets that offer affordable cigarettes and other local products channelled through the border. These locations appeal mostly to the Syrians in the city, although many of my young research participants told me that they enjoy Turkish ones too. Nonetheless, these places represent a 'taste of home', where they feel more comfortable to spend time.

As Lefebvre (1991) suggests, "space is a production", shaped by social relations and struggles between people. It is a contested concept while being constantly shaped by its inhabitants. For Vertovec (1999), transnationalism emerges out of "diaspora consciousness" or as a way of reproduction of the culture in exile (cited in Al-Ali & Koser, 2002, p.2; also see Greiner, 2010). It is displayed by "the reconstruction of places and localities" when migrant populations begin transforming the societies they live amongst "to be reminiscent of their own place of origin" (Koser, 2007, p.108).

Syrians in Gaziantep are making a space of their own. Being located only an hour's drive from the Syrian border; Gaziantep is not only geographically close to Aleppo, but also culturally. They are historically considered 'twin cities' with a shared history, as both once were parts of Ottoman province of Haleb (Sak, 2012). Being one of the three main economic hubs of the Ottoman Empire, Aleppo emerged as a transit centre of trade between Europe and the East until the late 18th century. In the early 20th century, the city was cut off from the Empire by the then-imperial powers France and Great Britain, which demarcated the borders of modern Syria (BBC, 2016).

Yet, they were not separated completely. There were families split over both countries that have maintained social linkage that transcends borders for decades. Cross border trade between the two countries continued while both Syrian and Turkish business people travel in and out regularly. After the visa-free regime was implemented in 2009, human mobility increased with many Syrians coming for shopping in Gaziantep daily (Sak, 2012; Buyukkosedere, 2016).

When the conflict in Syria began generating mass displacement, Gaziantep was already one of the best destinations to migrate for many Aleppons not only because of the geographical proximity but also due to long established networks and socio-economic links between the

two cities (Demirbaş & Akyiğit, 2018; Kaya, 2017; Chatty, 2015; Orhan, 2014; Ozerdem, 2015). Turkey and Syria shares a border that extends 909 kilometres with large family connections split between the two countries (Kaya, 2017, p.10-11)

As Zaman (2015, p.24) puts, "The rupture of displacement further affords displaced people in the Middle East the possibility to re-imagine or re-energize past traditions as well as having access to a shared cultural capital, which transcend borders across the region". Turkish people's kind reception of Syrian refugees was based on cultural and religious motivations such as hospitality, brotherhood, the *ensar* and *muhajir* relationship – a concept drawn from the first mass migration in Islamic culture (Zaman, 2015, p.1).

Except for linguistic differences the two communities had a lot in common, even referring each other as 'relatives' (Ozerdem, 2015). Overall, Syria's different ethnic and religious communities including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmens, and Sunnis and Alawites found their extensions in Turkey's multicultural southeast along the border. People in Turkish border cities like Gaziantep provided Syrians with food, clothing, shelter, and even opened their houses to refugees. These networks also helped create wider sympathy towards Syrians throughout society (Kaya, 2017; Orhan, 2014, p.16).

Although this exemplary solidarity can still be found in the region, the initial optimism in the mainstream rhetoric has worn off with much emphasis being made on differences, rather than commonalities. This has largely resulted because of the protracted period of the situation that has exhausted social and economic resources of the refugees as well as the hosting society. Housing prices increased dramatically in the city due to the arrival of Syrians; even locals have difficulty in affording to rent or buy. Refugees filled the shortage of unskilled workers in construction and agricultural sectors, however, average wages dropped for local workers with refugees settling for cheap labour. On the local level, a strain is also felt on public institutions as Syrians are granted free access to education and health services, as well as access to common areas such as parks that are widely used by Syrians (Ozerdem, 2015).

3.1.2. Communal Networks as a Challenge to Integration

As discussed by Ehrkamp and Leitner (2006; also see Sirriyeh, 2007, p.16) migrants produce symbolic spaces of their own in order to develop a sense of belonging sometimes even among hostile societies. Besides, hosting societies are heterogeneous as some parts can be friendly while some others are unwelcoming (Sirriyeh, 2007, p.16). It is particularly evident in the experiences of young refugees that they can find locations in which they feel accepted. Even those without networks can identify themselves through the cultural reproduction and other social formations (Sirriyeh, 2007, p.16-17).

Castles and Miller (2009, p.229-230) argue that such formations and reproduction of spaces seem to be born inevitably as an outcome of migration. Adding a new cultural aspect and dynamism to the city's landscape, they renew and enrich urban life and culture. However, they also may cause conflicts between communities by further alienating one another.

During our interviews, young Syrians echoed such disputes that complicate their integration, as a 24-year old Syrian who is working in an NGO told me:

"I want more integration. Gaziantep is like Aleppo. Syrians live here like they live in Aleppo. They stay outside until late hours, which Turks do not like."

Some blame the number of refugees being too high, and that the concentration of a large population in one place makes them look too visible. As another young male refugee at the age of 23 put:

"I think the main problem here is the number of Syrians… It's too many. Maybe it could have been better for all of us if they were all spread other parts of the country. We could have integrated better."

One participant compared Gaziantep with Istanbul:

"I went to Istanbul for a couple of weeks. There were many people from different countries since Istanbul is a touristic city. And I did not feel different. I felt more comfortable in Istanbul than Gaziantep. Maybe because the people in Istanbul got used to see strangers around and grew more tolerant, I don't know."

Although Istanbul is currently hosting the biggest number of Syrians (530.748) they make up only 3.28 per cent of the metropole's total population of more than 15.6 million. While in Gaziantep, there are 429.183 Syrians comprising 16.6 per cent of nearly 2 million people living in the city (Data of Interior Ministry cited in Multeciler.org, 2024). Although it has received large numbers of internal migrants since 1950s, Gaziantep was comparatively unfamiliar with international migration (Geniş & Adaş, 2011) before Syrians.

Social adaptation seems easier in cities where there are less Syrians. However, they still prefer Gaziantep to other cities for its proximity to Syria, which enables cross-border mobility, as well as the sense of security and belonging drawn from communal networks. However, as Demirbaş & Akyigit (2018) underlines the quality and integrity of these networks should be taken into consideration. Social and communal networks can also have negative impacts on refugees by creating social ghettos, influencing criminal behaviour, abuse, exploitation and

even human trafficking. Such cases have been documented in Turkey especially in the cities with large refugee populations.

Although such cases have not come up in our interviews, some of my participants expressed discomfort with feeling 'too visible' because of the large number of Syrians in Gaziantep. However, they also admit that the city remains as the best location, as one participant puts:

"Here, in Gaziantep there are a lot of Syrians, so they have connections. It is much easier to work here. They are afraid to move out of Gaziantep because in somewhere else there may not be anybody to even speak Arabic."

Gaziantep is the industrial hub of south-eastern Turkey, performing above average in economic development compared to any other city in the region (Geniş & Adaş, 2011). Therefore, despite the challenges and the financial burden caused by the influx, the city provides better job opportunities. Moreover, Syrians also contribute to the economy by owning businesses that create jobs as well as boosting consumption growth. A study (Askin, 2017) found that "one in three newly established foreign firms in Turkey in 2017 was owned by Syrians, reaching 2.4% of all new companies in 2015" many of which are operating in the south-eastern region, with Gaziantep being the centre of export, boosted by Syrian entrepreneurship to the Middle East and North Africa.

The city is also the centre for community-based organisations created by Syrians themselves. Although I was not able to find an official number of Syrian NGOs as they are registered as Turkish entities, a Syrian NGO representative told me that as of 2017 there were around 1800 international and local NGOs operating in Gaziantep to address the needs of refugees. These civil initiations constitute a form of 'social capital' (Putnam, 1996, p.56 cited in Zetter et al, 2006, p.9) bringing 'networks, norms and trust' together and "enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives". They also provide resources and career opportunities, which appeal particularly to young Syrians (Field Notes, 2017).

3.1.3. Integrating into What?

Focusing on the role of social networks in the experience of Syrians in urban Jordan, Stevens (2016, p.51) describes Syria's pre-war society as a combination of overlapping identities based on "religion, ethnicity, and region or origin, family and class". These networks have historically been utilised to generate solidarity and protection especially in times of crises. Social formations have also played a key role in the build-up of the ongoing uprising in the country as religious, sectarian or ethnic groups demonstrating different reactions to the conflict, which largely represent the pre-war politics of these groups (Hokayem, 2013, p.41-49).

Although these pre-established formations continue to exist in the diaspora, they are reconfigured with the involvement of new actors and circumstances in a different societal context (Stevens, 2016, p.51). As one refugee from the Syrian city of Homs told me, he did not come across with Kurds back in his hometown. He is a 19 year-old working in manual labour and says he has made many Kurdish friends from Syria since migrating to Gaziantep. He described some sort of 'inter-community integration' among Syrians as;

"Those from other Syrian cities are integrating into Aleppo guys because they are the majority".

Social networks also serve as the source of information, which assist groups and individuals to access 'symbolic and material resources' and to develop their 'social wellbeing' (Simsek, 2018). Although they can facilitate the adaptation of newcomers into the hosting society, they can also lead to the propagation and consolidation of misconceptions among migrant communities through the transmission of negative experiences. Reflecting on this issue, another male refugee pointed out:

"In Mugla (a touristic city with few refugees in the Aegean part of Turkey), I was more encouraged to go and speak to Turkish people. But, here in Gaziantep, I don't have that courage anymore. I think it is because it has been four or five years since many Syrians started living here and they keep saying that Gaziantepians are not friendly; that discourages you."

Hosting the highest number of refugees in the world since 2015, Turkey has been witnessing an increasing anti-refugee sentiment, which challenges its integration capacity (Karacay, 2024). In the case of Syrians in Gaziantep, transnational locations appear as 'comfort zones' (Schiller, 2014) where they can escape from challenges of communication, potential conflicts as well as change of their perception of others (Daley, 2007, p.166). Hostility directed by some members of the hosting society towards refugees is identified as a significant barrier to integration as it hinders the building of 'social bridges' between the two communities (Spencer & Cooper, 2006). Receiving negative reactions, migrants and refugees turn to their own networks, 'social bonds' (Ager & Strang, 2008) and community-based organisations seeking emotional or practical support (Griffiths et al., 2005, Zetter et al., 2005 cited in Beirens et al., 2007, p.225).

However, this can be perceived as refugees' unwillingness to become part of the wider society while the closed nature of some of these networks pose a danger of further isolation and discrimination (Beirens et al., 2007, p.225). Focusing on migrants' comfort zones, Schiller et al (2005) argues that migrant groups are seen as 'others' when categorised through the 'ethnic lens of national discourse'. Although all of us have our own 'comfort zones', places

and circles we like to live in, our choices are considered "as refusing to integrate and a threat to the social fabric of the nation" when looked through an ethnic perception (Citation from Schiller, 2014). Considering that those of Turkish origin (Turkmen) among Syrian refugees have fewer problems in accessing the host society due to better language skills (Field Notes, 2017), this locality can be alienated for being 'Arab' in case of further isolation.

3.2. Young Syrians' Experiences of Integration

3.2.1 Temporary Legality

Giving a brief overview of Turkey's legal framework for Syrian refugees will help to understand the experiences of the focus group of this research. Being one of the signatories of the international treaties such as the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees (UNHCR, 2015), Turkey upholds geographical limitation that grants only those coming from Europe with refugee status. The country respects and practices non-refoulement policy, however, non-European migrants are expected to be resettled in a third country or returned to their country of origin (Kilberg, 2014; DGMM, 2016).

Consequently, Syrians were initially taken in as 'guests' (Kirişçi, 2014, p.7), which is a rather cultural description and does not necessarily carry a legal commitment (Zaman, 2015, p.21). In November 2011, the Turkish government started granting temporary protection status to Syrians and Palestinians who were displaced from Syria. Two years later, further steps were taken to constitute a comprehensive legal framework in close consultation with the UNHCR, the European Court on Human Rights, and other related civil organisations to protect the rights of Syrian refugees (Kirişçi & Salooja, 2014; Woods, 2016; Icduygu & Simsek, 2016; Kirişçi, 2014).

Refugee integration especially in the case of non-European populations is a new phenomenon in Turkey's historical relationship to migration ((Danis & Dikmen, 2022). Although using a rather cautious term 'harmonisation' *(in Turkish: uyum)* instead, the country included the concept of integration in its migration law for the first time under the LFIP of 2013 (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016, P.65-66).

Under the legislation titled 'Law of Foreigners and International Protection Act' (LFIP), which was passed in April 2013, the General Directorate of Migration Management (DGMM) was formed as a new governmental institution to deal with the issues regarding refugees and to oversee the implementation of new legislation (Kirişçi & Salooja, 2014). Although, criticised for not removing the geographical limitation for refugee status, (Kilberg, 2014), Turkey replaced the term 'guest' with a legally abiding definition as majority of Syrians are given subsidiary protection that grants them access to education and health service (DGMM, 2014).

Although this law falls short to promise long-term residency or citizenship rights (Kutlu, 2015, p.4 cited in Rygiel et al., 2016, p.317), the government has introduced additional regulations for integration such as granting Syrian refugees access to work permits. As of 2021, 91 bin 500 Syrians have been issued permits since legislation passed in January 2016 (Multeciler.org, 2024). Another step was taken on 2 July 2016 when the Turkish President announced that Syrians could eventually acquire citizenship (AA, 2016). The move was initially subjected to heated debates in Turkish society (Askin, 2017). As of November 2023, only 237.995 refugees have been granted Turkish citizenship (Multeciler.org, 2024).

According to Ager & Strang (2008), access to certain rights is integral to the integration process of refugees. Simsek (2018) underlines that granting a clear legal status to refugees will also positively impact their integration and those who do not have a guaranteed status will take a longer time to integrate because it will be much harder for them to settle and build a future in the hosting country. Although Turkey introduced new laws to improve the rights and legal status of Syrians, these policies and practices remain timid with the government's consistent emphasis on 'voluntary return' (Karacay, 2024). All these indications suggest that the initial framework of temporality remains at play, which continues to hamper Syrians' integration process.

3.2.2. Temporality of Destination

As Strang and Ager (2010, p.600) indicate, integration is a process that starts in the moment the refugee arrives in his or her country of destination regardless of their legal status. Refugees describe their experience through more practical means such as learning the local language, culture and customs as well as participation in social life. On the other hand, integration policies do not take into consideration whether refugees want to stay in the long run. Authors argue that once refugees determine a country being their destination, they are firmly motivated to engage and contribute to the hosting society (Strang and Ager, 2010, p.600).

However, Gaziantep being the destination was not predetermined in the subjective accounts of my research participants. Those who came in the early stages of Syrian exodus did not think the conflict in their country would last this long (Field Notes, 2017). When asked about their future the first option was to return to Syria once the war ended. Some of my respondents also mentioned their desire to apply for asylum or higher education in Europe as their hope to return was fading away. For many, Gaziantep was a temporary place of residence, which affects their process of social adaptation.

3.2.3. Self-representation

As Landau (2011, p.2) points out refugees tend rather to employ 'a form of silent integration' trying to elude the categorisation of refugee. This can be drawn from their reluctance to be identified as refugees. In the case of Syrians, especially those with better resources are not willing to be limited by implications of the term such as 'vulnerable people living in the camps, under dire conditions or even begging in the streets' (Woods, 2016, p.17).

Discomfort with the term 'refugee' was apparent during my field research. Despite migrating to Turkey with his family who lost their property due to bombardments in Aleppo, one of the participants preferred to identify himself as an international student. He had a residency permit and health insurance like any other international student from Europe, Asia or Africa.

"I came to Turkey 4 years ago on my passport. There was not visa requirement for Syrians back then. We lived in Antalya for a while and my family moved to Germany. I stayed because I had already learned Turkish and got accepted by Gaziantep University. I did not register as refugee because I did not need to."

Although he was aware that all Syrians are called "refugee" by Turkish community regardless of their legal status, his self-identification seemed to have helped him adopt a form of consciousness to construe his presence differently.

3.2.4. Language

Language is key to integration processes both in the literature and on a policy level as it is considered "a barrier to social interaction, economic integration and full participation" (Ager & Strang, 2008, p.182). For example, adequate ability in Turkish language is one of the prerequisites in Turkey's citizenship law (GDMM, 2017). However, Syrians do not feel the urgent need to learn Turkish due to the availability of multilingual people including Arabic speakers in the south-eastern cities (Kanat & Ustun, 2015, p.24). Despite living in Turkey for years, a considerable number of my participants were not comfortable with the language.

This situation is more evident in the case of newcomers. Although transnational networks help them settle and overcome various difficulties, most of my participants undermine the materiality of having sufficient skills in the main language, as they think that they don't need to learn Turkish, because in Gaziantep everything is available in Arabic. Some participants explained that because they believed they would go back to Syria soon they did not take learning the language seriously.

Yet, I observed how their insufficient skills in Turkish discourage them in tackling formal procedures, applying for official institutions even dealing with issues regarding their bills. They recognise the chance for better opportunities in the labour market if they learn the language better. One difficulty in the learning process mentioned is lack of time, as they need to work. Language courses available in the city either take place during working hours or refugees complain about not having enough energy to do the course after work. They justify it as the more time they spend in Turkey, the better their Turkish will eventually get. Yet, educated ones prefer to improve their English instead, in line with their career plans or aspirations for further migration to Europe, which implicates a lack of motivation to settle and learn the local language.

Here, Turkmens represent a specific example. Coming from Turkish origin and having learned the language back at home, Syria's Turkmens adopt to the hosting society much easier. In a group meeting I held in an association formed by Syrian Turkmens, one of the respondents stated that their migration experience in Turkey has revived their ethnic consciousness especially through the language.

"In Syria, there was discrimination against Turkmens and many of us chose to assimilate, they were Arabicised. Here, we remembered our own language."

3.2.5. Employment

Employment is defined as one of the key factors of an integration process as it enables refugees to be financially independent, have realistic goals for the future, improve language skills, interact with members of the host society and restore confidence (Ager & Strang, 2008, p.170). Having sufficient financial conditions make them more able to access their legal rights in practice while those who struggle financially have more trouble acquiring (Simsek, 2018).

Young Syrians who have sufficient qualifications such as a university degree, language skills and experience, prefer to work in local or international non-governmental organisations for reasons including better salaries and more comfortable working conditions compared to the informal market. It is also difficult for them to find a qualified job and underemployment is a significant issue. Although working -especially in Turkish businesses- helps them learn the language, those who work as intermediate staff in other sectors spend long hours at work, which limits their social activities.

Majority of the employed work without work permits, which deprive them of legal and social security rights. Although refugees were granted the right to legally access the labour mar-

ket, employers need to apply on behalf of their Syrian employees who need to fulfil several requirements regarding their residency, registration, and health conditions. However, there are two reservations, the first is the number of Syrian employees that cannot pass the quota, allowing up to 10 per cent of the employee to be Syrian in a workplace. Secondly, formal labour costs more for employers, as they will be obliged to pay the minimum wage regulated by the authorities (Icduygu & Simsek, 2016, p.64). As one refugee puts:

"Even Syrian companies pay you less than they pay for a Turkish employee simply because you are a refugee which means you are desperate."

My participants were aware of the unwillingness of their Turkish employers and were not planning to demand in order not to jeopardize their job. In general, having a job is seen more important than accessing more rights at this stage as the primary objective for many of them is to afford adequate housing and other needs.

3.2.6. Education

Their migration experience is observed to have extreme impacts on young refugees' lives and educational performances as many may have had bad memories of the war back in their country or have witnessed family members or people around them being imprisoned, tortured, injured or even killed. Education becomes crucial for them to heal their emotional wounds, regain a sense of normality and ready to integrate into a new environment. Education provides them a social medium to become active in the society and help them improve their social skills as well as language (Omar, 2009, p.118).

In Turkey, Syrian students began being accepted into public universities in 2012, first in seven southern cities populated by the highest number of refugees. The scope of the move was expanded a year later, and Syrians became able to enter all Turkish universities (Wood, 2016, p.22). Turkish universities also employ Syrian academics in various departments.

In Gaziantep, although there are also private universities accepting refugees, they prefer the city's public university, which enrolled at least 1847 Syrian students in associate, graduate and postgraduate degrees during the 2016-2017 academic year. 1111 of them were male whose department choices mainly comprise of medicine, dentistry and civil engineering mirroring their pre-migration aspirations. Syrian students with sufficient ability in Turkish adapt to the school much easier; however, the university also offers Arabic education in several departments (Interview with University Officer, Field Notes, 2017).

There are scholarships provided by Turkish governmental and nongovernmental institutions as well as international scholarships available for Syrian students (Turkey Burslari, 2017; Spark, 2017). However, some of my participants told me that they could not continue their study due to economic reasons. This also implies a gendered aspect of their situation as young men take the responsibility of supporting their families. On the other hand, there are many unaccompanied young Syrians whose families remain in Syria or moved to another country while they stay in order to go to university in Turkey. Educational aspirations appear as an important driver of young Syrians' migratory behaviour in Turkey.

They describe the university environment as a multicultural and multilingual place where they feel more comfortable. This is where they meet and befriend Turkish professors and students as well as those from different backgrounds. They can also find their own connections and form their own social groups. Omar (2009, p.122-127) found that refugee students, particularly the youth tend to socialize with members of their own community as they share the same culture and language. Similarly, most of my respondents stated that their interaction with Turkish students remain limited as they are surrounded by the members of their own community.

Ogbu (1978)'s concept of 'blocked opportunities' suggests that students from disadvantaged social groups are likely to demonstrate low ambitions when they believe that their degrees will not lead them to better employment or financial successes (Omar, 2009, p.119). Although it can be expected in the case of young refugees who are likely to be associated with disadvantageous circumstances, as Omar (2009) indicates there are examples demonstrating the otherwise.

 However, I do not completely dismiss the relevance of Ogbu (1978)'s concept given my findings. Some of the university students among my participants expressed that they suspect the usefulness of their educational achievements in terms of finding better career options in Turkey. Also, Syrian students in general are not yet among the most successful except for a few cases, which is largely due to the language barrier (Interview with Hasan Kalyoncu University Officer, 2017). Although some of them sounded more confident defying easy conclusions, many of my participants voiced their aspiration for higher education based on an idealistic goal of rebuilding Syria once the war ended.

3.2.7. Social Participation

The literature highlights migrants' tendency "to become invisible, to disappear, to disidentify themselves" (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p.186) They can hesitate to actively engage with institutions in the receiving country. The need for alternative ways for social participa-

tion increases in the absence of mainstream means of engagement such as the right to vote or membership in trade unions etc. (Spencer & Cooper, 2006, p.6).

Yet, migrants can choose to mobilise, as Witteborn (2015) puts, 'to become perceptible' in a social or political way. However, they create different strategies in order not to face any conflict and discrimination (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p.186; also see Witteborn, 2015). For Wiiteborn (2015, p.15), the process of 'becoming' is a form of agency that is employed by migrant individuals and groups to "manoeuvre their lives under conditions of physical and social arrest".

In the case of young Syrians, becoming 'visible' and 'perceptible' happens through civil society activities. Majority of my respondents were increasingly engaged with social activities by means of forming student groups, volunteering and participating in local or international NGO activities. NGOs and voluntary activities constitute an "opportunity to speak for themselves and maintain a sense of belonging through a common purpose (Witteborn, 2015, p.16) as one of the motivations is to help their fellow Syrians. A 23 year-old male participant who works at a Syrian NGO explained:

"We were not allowed to mobilize and open such organizations under the regime of Bashar al Assad in Syria. Here, we have this opportunity to do something meaningful and help each other."

In our meetings with some of those groups, I am told how these engagements helped them meet other members of their community, migrant groups such as Iraqis and Palestinians, and improve their social skills. They exchange knowledge and experience in a variety of areas such as school, work, applying for scholarships or procedures in asylum processes. It also constitutes ways in which Syrians can interact with the hosting society. However, they remarked on the limits of collaboration:

"We as Syrians live like we are in Syria. We do not have many connections with Turkish organizations. We do not know how to connect to be honest."

3.2.8. 'Manhood' and Escaping War

The youth in crisis-affected societies were largely described in earlier literature as a potential source of social conflict and disruption (Ensor, 2013, p.3). Similarly, gender stereotyping was used in differentiating male youth as "troublesome" from females who were simply identified as "troubled" (Stainton-Rogers, 1992 cited in Ensor, 2013, p.3). Although, as Ensor (2012) indicates there has been a recent awareness on "the creative roles that young people can play

as agentive participants in the process of post-conflict reconstruction, not just passive recipients of others' provisions" (Ensor, 2013, p.3), this mainstream categorisation still influences the way hosting societies understand the reasons of refugees' flight. Accordingly, women are seen more deserving of our help and sympathy while men are perceived as suspicious of not being really in need but a labour migrant seeking for fortune (Schrover & Moloney, 2013, p.256-157).

A sort of resentment is generated by the hosting society when refugees start striping away 'vulnerability' and being represented as the 'self'. For example, residents question when they see Syrians living in nice neighbourhoods or driving expensive cars (Ozerdem, 2015). As young men, my respondents specifically complained about the criticism they receive for 'living at peace in Turkey while their fellow citizens are fighting in Syria'. This approach earned a nationalistic character after the Turkish military forces started operations in northern Syria against ISIS in August 2016 (BBC, 2017b) as Turkish citizens were sensitive about their soldiers battling in a foreign country. One Syrian NGO representative explained that this issue is a source of pressure for young refugees as they also receive criticism by members of their own people back in Syria.

Although describing themselves as "opposition" they are reluctant to be identified with the war and the warring sides. One participant in his early 20s explained: *"I demonstrated in the streets, but I cannot fight. I am non-violent"*. Another accounted: *"I sometimes think to go back and fight as this criticism makes me feel bad. But it is too complicated now; I do not even know who to fight for."*

Moreover, identification of men with violence has an official contextualisation embodied in "military service" (Hinojosa, 2010). Most of my participants have identified the compulsory military service in Syria as a primary reason to migrate to Turkey. One refugee said that his family lives in a relatively safe area controlled by the regime. While they are not considering leaving, they sent their two sons to Turkey so they could get away from the military service, which has two main motivations. One is political, as they do not want to "serve Assad's military" while the other reason is the perceived consequences of it:

"Military service is not like fulfilling your duty in 6 months or a year then go back home. If you're not one of them they send you to intense fighting just to get rid of you. It's pointless."

4.Conclusion

Turkey has undertaken significant steps to improve its migration policy in recent years and introduced a comprehensive framework aiming to expand protection for Syrians. Although

benefitting a few refugees so far, the country passed laws granting refugees access to a work permit and an opportunity to acquire citizenship. However, many refugees suspect whether they will be able to obtain these rights, and largely rely on transnational networks and community-based relationships to sustain their lives while their interaction with the hosting society remains limited.

Those who pursue higher education are more motivated with an aim to rebuild Syria after the conflict instead of seeking career achievements and prosperity in the hosting country. Here, the primary ambition seems to be utilizing their migration experience in order to upskill themselves through education, work and social activities. This was particularly apparent in the language preferences of some of my participants who were aiming to improve their English instead of Turkish. Overall, only those who have clear goals for their future were better engaged with the environment around them whether in education or professionally.

Although many of them described that the existence of a large Syrian population in the city obstructs their adaptation to wider society, Gaziantep is still preferred for its proximity to Syria. It allows them to maintain dual experiences of life and keeps the option of return consistent. Geographical proximity also makes them feel connected to 'the revolution' as they face criticism for escaping to safety instead of fighting for the cause. Many of those who do not plan to go back to Syria aspire to migrate to Europe instead of settling in Turkey. Although, Ankara's open-door policy in the beginning of the refugee crisis encouraged them to come to Turkey, their lack of integration into wider society and prospect of living in Europe affect the refugees' long-term decision making.

Yet, with no foreseeable end to the war back home in sight, Syrians remain in between their temporary reality and the possibility of a permanent return. In such a situation, they establish their presence in their own locality and comfort zones, which help them to generate a sense of belonging. As Schill (2014) underlines, this locality does not necessarily involve physical space. Syrians seem to have created a second 'Aleppo' – the city where most refugees are coming from-, a space of their own which is mainly based on social relations and practices. The established relationships and formations of Syrians' pre-migration society are reconfigured in the diaspora, leading to some form of integration within their community.

As Karacay (2024) highlights, although the Turkish government has taken steps to improve conditions for their integration, its continuous focus on voluntary return strengthens the temporary nature of their acceptance in the country while also affecting their coexistence with the local people. Furthermore, my respondents repeatedly emphasized how misconceptions on both sides affect their integration. Thus, in the absence of social interaction between refugees and the hosting society, they lean more on close community networks which may

ultimately lead to further isolation and exclusion. Previous research reminds us that social networks can also have negative impacts on refugees' experiences, trapping them in a social ghetto, and in some cases leading to exploitation, abuse, and human trafficking (Demirbas & Akyigit, 2018). Related actors should perhaps address this risk by creating different ways in which two peoples can build connections and bridges to ensure multicultural co-existence in the city.

To conclude, I acknowledge that even among the same migrant group, experiences may vary in different settings, based on diverse realities and perspectives of migrant individuals. As for the case of Syrian refugees, the academic literature focusing on their integration experiences has been growing in recent years. However, there has not been much research on the experiences of young male Syrians specifically. This article has aimed to contribute to the literature by drawing on the unique perspectives of young male Syrian refugees in Gaziantep who represent different educational and financial backgrounds. There is a clear need for further empirical studies to comprehend their perspectives and practices in terms of adapting to their destination, which would hopefully influence policy responses for the better.

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