

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Comparative Study on Social Perceptions Towards Syrians Living in Şanlıurfa and Ankara

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## Abstract

*This study examines the social perceptions of Syrians under temporary protection in the Turkish cities of Şanlıurfa and Ankara, which host significant Syrian populations. Şanlıurfa, with approximately 273,000 Syrians, and Ankara, with around 90,000, were selected due to their differing cultural, linguistic, and geographical contexts. Using a quantitative research method, data were collected from 500 participants—300 from Şanlıurfa and 200 from Ankara—through 400 face-to-face interviews and 100 telephone surveys. The survey, consisting of 28 five-point Likert scale questions, aimed to capture the local population's attitudes toward the integration of Syrians, focusing on aspects such as education, cultural proximity, and forced repatriation. The findings revealed significant regional differences. In Şanlıurfa, societal acceptance of Syrians was largely influenced by religious, ethnic, and cultural proximity, particularly regarding access to education. In contrast, respondents in Ankara demonstrated a more negative attitude toward these factors. Furthermore, a clear divide emerged in views on the forced return of Syrians, with Şanlıurfa showing higher tolerance and Ankara favoring repatriation under certain conditions. These results underscore the importance of localized studies in understanding the nuanced public perceptions of refugee communities*

**Keywords:** Perception, Syrians, Temporary Protection, Comparison, Ankara, Şanlıurfa

## Öz

*Türkiye'de geçici koruma altındaki Suriyelilerin en yoğun yaşadığı illerin başında 530.165 kişi ile İstanbul gelirken, Şanlıurfa'da yaşayan Suriyeli sayısı yaklaşık 273.000, Ankara'da yaşayan Suriyeli sayısı ise yaklaşık 90.000'dir. Buna göre çalışmanın amacı, Şanlıurfa ve Ankara'daki yerel halkın Suriyelilere yönelik (toplumsal) algılarının nasıl olduğunu belirlemektir. Nicel araştırma yönteminin kullanıldığı çalışmada, veri toplama yöntemlerinden anket tekniğine başvurulmuştur. Araştırma kapsamında Şanlıurfa'da 300 kişi ve Ankara'da 200 kişi olmak üzere bölgede yaşayan 500 kişiden 400 katılımcı ile yüz yüze ve 100 katılımcı ile telefon üzerinden anket tekniği ile veri toplanması gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırma kapsamında uygulanan anketler, görüşülen kişilerin Suriyelilere yönelik (toplumsal) algıları ile ilgili fikirlerini öğrenmek için beşli likert şeklinde hazırlanmış 28 sorudan oluşmaktadır. Şehirlerin seçiminde kültürel yapı, dil, etnik yapı ve coğrafi faktörler temel alınmıştır. Çalışmada; eğitime erişim konusunda her iki ilde de toplumsal bir kabulün olduğu, Şanlıurfa'da Suriyelilere yönelik toplumsal kabulde din, etnik ve kültürel yakınlık önemli bir rol oynarken Ankara'da ise bu üç unsurdan da olumsuz bir yaklaşım olduğu ve Suriyelilerin zorla geri gönderilmesi konusunda Ankara ve Şanlıurfa'daki vatandaşlar arasında ciddi görüş ayrılıkları olduğu yönünde dikkat çekici sonuçlar elde edilmiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Algı, Suriyeliler, Geçici Koruma Statüsü, Karşılaştırma, Ankara, Şanlıurfa

## Introduction

Migration is a societal phenomenon that leaves deep imprints on the consciousness of individuals and societies. Throughout every period of history, various migrations have occurred due to political, economic, environmental, and social factors, and these migrations will continue as long as the world exists. Migration is a social phenomenon that profoundly affects societies in economic, cultural, and political aspects. People who migrate, either voluntarily or involuntarily, are influenced not only as individuals but also as communities by the effects of migration. Therefore, it is clear that both the quantity and the quality of the migration phenomenon, which is not just about numbers, are important.

Migration, as a social phenomenon that causes cities to change, has many causes. Domestic migrations are often driven by the desire for development in education, health, and technological opportunities, which make it easier to travel from one place to another. In the case of external migrations, the idea of continuing life in a different country can be a factor, but forced migration can occur due to risks of loss of life and property, increasing violence, or even war. One example of such a migration is the influx of Syrians to Turkey, which has been escalating in recent years. Due to the war, Syrians have been compelled to leave their country, seeking refuge in Turkey, owing to both historical and geographical proximity. The beginning of this process dates back to 2011, when public demonstrations in Tunisia quickly spread to other Arab countries (T.C. Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management, 2024a).

In 2011, popular demonstrations that began in Tunisia quickly spread to other Arab countries. Following Tunisia, anti-government protests in Egypt encouraged opposition groups in Syria. By February, the first anti-regime protests took place in Damascus, Syria's capital (Ayhan, 2012). These small protests escalated into mass demonstrations across cities like Damascus and Aleppo. In

response, the Baath regime employed force to suppress the protests (Ayhan, 2012).

By late 2011, armed conflicts erupted near the Turkish border, with opposition forces organizing attacks against the regime. As the violence intensified, the Syrian regime targeted civilians, leading to mass displacement. Turkey's Open-Door policy facilitated the migration of Syrians to its borders (Tuj-Juhra, 2021). The main reasons for this migration include ongoing conflict, loss of state control, and the collapse of security, prompting Syrians to flee for safety. Although Turkey did not formally recognize Syrians as refugees, it enacted measures to offer legal protection (Makovsky, 2019).

Turkey's efforts to address the mass influx led to the introduction of the 'Directive on the Reception and Accommodation of Citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic' in March 2012 (Acar, 2019). This directive emphasized non-refoulement (protection from forced return to persecution) and established minimum humanitarian standards (Mazur, 2022). The 'Law on Foreigners and International Protection,' passed in April 2013, formalized the legal framework for Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey. Article 91 of this law defines temporary protection as providing emergency assistance for those forced to leave their country en masse and seeking asylum (<https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/1.5.6458.pdf>).

Syrians in Turkey are granted temporary protection, allowing them to stay under legal status. According to the United Nations Executive Committee Resolution No. 100 (2004), temporary protection is necessary when mass asylum occurs, and normal asylum processes cannot be applied. It offers immediate solutions and ensures that people are not returned to life-threatening situations.

Thus, the term 'Syrians under temporary protection'<sup>1</sup> is used to refer to Syrians residing in Turkey as a result of this legal framework. Over time, social perceptions of Syrians have evolved due to political, economic, and cultural factors.

<sup>1</sup> Syrians have been granted Temporary Protection Status in Turkey in accordance with national and international custom. In this study, instead

of repeating the expression 'Syrians under Temporary Protection', only the expression 'Syrian' or 'Syrians' will be used.

## Theoretical Framework

Migration has existed throughout human history, driven by various factors. Individuals and groups may migrate for educational, economic, religious, or touristic reasons, either temporarily or permanently. Some migrations are voluntary (Toker & Kozak, 2023). However, migration can also occur involuntarily due to political upheaval, natural disasters, or other crises. Forced migration refers to individuals compelled to move because of such events (Cohen & Bradley, 2010).

Forced migration can be categorized as displacement caused by political instability, disasters, or coercion (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2019). Post-World War II, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people due to conflict prompted the UN to address the issue. The 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees legally defined "refugee," marking a significant advancement. The convention, along with the 1967 amendment, defines a refugee as follows (<https://multeci.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/1951-Cenevre-Sozlesmesi-1.pdf>):

*An individual who, owing to a well-founded apprehension of persecution on account of nationality, religion, race, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside the country of his nationality and who, owing to such apprehension, does not desire to avail himself of the protection of that country.*

This definition highlights the political value associated with the term "refugee," differentiating it from other migrant communities. Countries that have signed the convention have committed to not forcibly returning refugees, providing them with protection and support. Organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) work to distinguish between refugees and other migrant groups. Over time, the definition of refugees has expanded, particularly with the involvement of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU). The expanded definition includes individuals fleeing foreign invasions, civil conflicts, or severe disruptions to public order (Wood, 1994). The 1984 Cartagena Declaration also broadened the definition to include those fleeing human rights violations (Toksöz, 2006).

In some cases, the terms "refugee" and "asylum seeker" are used interchangeably. A refugee is an individual who has not yet attained legal refugee status but is undergoing the necessary procedures (UNHCR, 2021). Asylum seekers, on the other hand, are individuals seeking protection in another country but may not meet all the criteria set out for refugees under the 1951 Convention (Expert Group on Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Statistics, 2018). In some studies, the terms are used synonymously (Turton, 2003). While asylum seekers may request protection for economic or better living conditions, political asylum specifically refers to forced migration due to political causes (Marfleet, 2006).

Forced migration is generally defined as the displacement of individuals fleeing disasters, man-made or natural, as well as armed conflicts (Castles & Miller, 2008). In some contexts, it refers to people displaced within their own country, while in others, it applies to those crossing national borders (Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2013). Whether migration occurs within or across borders, the root causes remain consistent. Migrants displaced by necessity are often referred to as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). While refugees flee across borders, IDPs are displaced within their own country (Fragomen, 1970).

Researchers have categorized forced migration based on factors like political instability, war, persecution, economic collapse, or environmental crises that threaten lives. Discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, or tribe also contributes to forced migration (Wood, 1994). Wood (1994) identified three primary categories of forced migration:

1. Conflicts or civil wars, persecution, and political instability.
2. Life-threatening economic crises caused by environmental factors.
3. Conflicts stemming from religious, ethnic, or tribal disputes.

While multiple factors may occur simultaneously, even one of these factors can be sufficient to prompt forced migration. Wood (1994) further identifies three categories of refugees: illegal migrants, guest workers/legal migrants, and refugees/asylum seekers. For those who fail to

settle in the host country, options like mandatory repatriation or deportation may apply. These concepts are essential to understanding the migration of Syrians to Turkey and their status within the country.

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of understanding "perception" in this context, as societal perceptions of Syrians play a crucial role in shaping the study's focus.

## Perception

The existence of facts, events, and physical objects is independent of individuals' attitudes towards them. While these elements have objective reality, various factors—such as mistakes, paradoxes, and differing perspectives—can create discrepancies between what is perceived and what is actually happening (Tutar, 2013, p.185).

Behaviors and attitudes of individuals, groups, and societies are shaped by perceptions, which are influenced by historical accumulation and experience. Perception, in its broadest definition, is the process through which objective reality is transferred to subjective consciousness via the senses. Since individuals believe in their perceptions, these perceptions become their reality. However, perceptions can either enhance or diminish individual value. To react to events, take action, or generate ideas, individuals must first perceive and process the relevant information or stimuli (Özer, 2012, p.148).

Perceptions allow individuals to interpret what they feel, how they behave, and how they understand the world around them (Bakan & Kefe, 2014, p. 20). The accuracy and truthfulness of one's perceptions determine their ability to evaluate events and situations in a balanced manner (Tutar, 2013, p. 188). For harmonious social interactions, individuals must be able to perceive and organize their social environment at a basic level. This understanding of situations, events, and objects is essential for adapting to social life (Güney, 2012, p.118).

Perception, influenced by individual characteristics, organizes information about others' actions and behaviors by categorizing it in the mind. This process updates initial perceptions

as new information becomes available. As a result, the individual assigns value or worthlessness to the person, event, or situation being perceived, enabling them to form interpretations (Bakan & Kefe, 2014, pp.21-22).

With this background on perception, the next section explores societal perceptions regarding the social acceptance of Syrians.

## Public Perception of Social Acceptance of Syrians

The 2011 civil war in Syria triggered the forced migration of hundreds of thousands of people in a short period (Ceritoğlu, Gürçihan-Yüncüler, Torun, & Tümen, 2017, p.2). By September 2015, 1.7 million Syrians had officially migrated to Turkey, with unofficial figures suggesting close to two million. The number of registered Syrians in Turkey reached 3,303,113, although this figure had decreased to 3,099,524 by August 2024 (T.C. Ministry of Interior Directorate General of Migration Management, 2024b). In the initial five years, a significant portion of Syrians were required to reside in border provinces. Many of them stayed in camps managed by the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) (AFAD, 2016, p.47). During this period, few Syrians migrated to western provinces, as AFAD camps were both geographically and culturally close to the conflict zone (AFAD, 2016, p.49).

However, over time, particularly for economic reasons, many Syrians began moving to western provinces. After 2020, the number of Syrians in cities like Istanbul, Bursa, Izmir, and Ankara significantly increased (Erdoğan, 2022, p.79). This shift led to increased tension and confrontation between citizens and Syrians.

For Syrians, life in Turkey has introduced numerous challenges. International forced migration often involves adjusting to a new environment, people, social relations, and an unfamiliar cultural structure. This is compounded by language barriers and differences in religious practices or sects. Migration to western provinces intensified these challenges. Border provinces such as Şanlıurfa, Hatay, and Kilis, which share cultural and linguistic similarities with Arab-speaking regions, allowed immigrants to maintain

communication and kinship ties (Kalaycı Önaç & Altunsoy, 2020, p.272). In contrast, Syrians moving to western provinces encountered a vastly different social structure. For instance, while a Syrian in Şanlıurfa could easily communicate with locals in Arabic, the same individual in Ankara would need to converse in Turkish, leading to a lack of neighborhood ties and limited social interaction.

This study compares the perceptions of individuals in two distinct cities regarding Syrians. Şanlıurfa, geographically and culturally closer to Syria, was chosen due to its linguistic, ethnic, and cultural similarities. In contrast, Ankara, Turkey's second-largest and more cosmopolitan city, was selected for its greater cultural distance from Syrians. The study compares participants' perceptions of equality in education, religious, ethnic, and cultural proximity, forced return, family unity, commercial relationships, and social stability.

## Methodology

The aim of this study is to comparatively measure the perceptions of citizens in Şanlıurfa and Ankara towards Syrians between July 2018, when opposition to Syrians began to increase, and July 2024. In this context, the study uses a quantitative research method, specifically the survey technique.

In this context, the study compares the perceptions of citizens in Ankara and Şanlıurfa regarding Syrians living in Turkey and provides detailed information based on the data obtained. As of July 2024, the number of Syrians residing in Şanlıurfa was recorded as 272,919, while in Ankara, the number stood at 89,926 (<https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>).

The universe of the study consists of Turkish citizens living in the cities of Şanlıurfa and Ankara. The sample consists of 500 participants, aged 18 and over, who were randomly selected and agreed to participate in the study. The sample size was determined in proportion to the number of Syrians living in these cities. Accordingly, 300 participants were selected from Şanlıurfa, where more Syrians reside, and 200 participants were selected from

Ankara, where fewer Syrians live. The gender distribution of the total number of participants was 60% male (n=300) and 40% female (n=200).

Face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with these 500 participants from the two cities. Of the total, 400 participants were interviewed face-to-face, while 100 participated via telephone surveys. In Şanlıurfa, 250 out of 300 participants were interviewed in person, while 50 were interviewed by phone. Similarly, 150 participants in Ankara were interviewed face-to-face, with 50 contributing through telephone surveys. Table 1 provides details on the participation of individuals from each city.

**Table 1. General demographic properties of participants**

	Şanlıurfa	Ankara	Total
Number of Syrians	272.919	89.926	362.845
Number of participants	300	200	500
Number of participants (Attended to face-to-face survey)	250	150	400
Number of participants (Attended to survey over the phone)	50	50	100

The survey used in the study was developed by Özpolat (2019) and consists of 28 Likert-type items designed to assess societal perceptions of Syrians. The reliability of the scale was confirmed with a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .95, and the margin of error was determined to be 5%. The data obtained were analysed in SPSS statistical programme and the findings were obtained.

## Findings and Discussion

### Perceptions in Şanlıurfa Towards Syrians

The findings from the interviews conducted in Şanlıurfa are presented in Table 2.

The survey aimed to understand the perceptions of Syrian individuals who arrived in Şanlıurfa following the Syrian civil war. The results show that negative societal reactions are limited. In addition to general perceptions, the survey explored societal attitudes toward factors such as "historical and geographical responsibilities," "education rights," and "humanitarian reasons."

**Table 2. The Perception of the Province of Şanlıurfa Towards Syrians in Turkey**

Propositions	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Answer / Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Humanitarian reasons are more important than religious, linguistic, or ethnic factors in accepting Syrians in Turkey.	64.25%	22.75%	5.25%	4.50%	3.25%
The acceptance of Syrians stems from Turkey's historical and geographical responsibility.	21.75%	27.00%	13.00%	27.00%	11.25%
The acceptance of Syrians is beneficial and will strengthen Turkey.	10.00%	17.25%	19.25%	25.75%	11.25%
The problems of Syrians do not concern us, and we should stay away.	11.50%	12.75%	14.00%	43.50%	18.25%
Syrians are disrupting the social order in Şanlıurfa.	13.50%	24.25%	23.50%	26.00%	12.75%
Syrians are our religious brothers; they should be accepted.	24.00%	45.25%	8.25%	15.00%	7.50%
Syrians are our ethnic brothers; they should be accepted.	18.50%	36.00%	6.75%	23.25%	15.50%
Even if the war continues, Syrians should be returned to their country.	9.75%	5.50%	15.75%	23.00%	46.00%
Syrians should be returned to their country.	23.07%	13.93%	21.42%	17.86%	23.09%
Syrians should only be housed in camps.	19.25%	21.00%	5.50%	34.00%	20.25%
Do you think you share the same culture as Syrians?	13.25%	23.25%	14.25%	33.50%	15.75%
Could the continued presence of Syrians in Şanlıurfa lead to problems?	19.00%	33.75%	20.75%	17.25%	9.25%
Şanlıurfa welcomed Syrians during the Syrian crisis.	31.75%	37.00%	5.25%	20.00%	6.00%
I would support a family member marrying a Syrian.	19.75%	30.00%	26.50%	10.00%	13.75%
I would do business with a Syrian.	11.50%	38.00%	18.50%	14.00%	18.00%
Syrians should have the same educational rights as Turkish citizens.	19.50%	36.25%	6.00%	13.50%	24.75%
I do not see any problem with shopping from Syrian-owned businesses.	20.50%	38.00%	9.50%	14.00%	18.00%

Regarding the local community's sensitivity and approach toward Syrian individuals, 87% of respondents agreed with the statement, "In the process of accepting Syrians into Turkey, humanitarian considerations are more important than ethnic, linguistic, or religious factors." Only 7.75% disagreed with this proposition, highlighting the prominence of humanitarian concerns in local attitudes.

In response to other questions, approximately 50% of respondents agreed with the statement, "I would welcome a marriage between a Syrian and someone from my family," while 26.5% were undecided or did not wish to answer. Similarly, 69% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Syrians are our religious brothers and sisters and should be accepted." Moreover, 54.5% of participants supported the proposition, "Syrians are our ethnic brothers and should be accepted." This question, not included in the Ankara survey, was added to the Şanlıurfa survey due to the region's large Arab and Kurdish populations.

The survey results indicate a strong social acceptance of Syrians in Şanlıurfa, grounded in humanitarian, religious, cultural, and ethnic factors. The level of agreement with the statement that Syrians are "ethnic brothers" is particularly noteworthy, underscoring the significant role of religion, ethnicity, and cultural proximity in fostering social acceptance.

To assess the community's stance on more provocative issues, participants were asked additional questions. In response, 24.25% agreed with the statement, "The problems of Syrians do not concern us and should be avoided," while 61.75% disagreed, indicating a sense of responsibility among the majority. When asked whether Syrians should be sent back to their country even if the war continues, 15.25% agreed, while 69% opposed the idea.

Although the proposition, "The acceptance of Syrians benefits our country and will strengthen it," did not receive strong agreement, the results suggest that the community's acceptance of Syrians is driven by humanitarian concerns and

shared religious values. Overall, it is clear that the humanitarian perspective is prioritized within the local community.

### Perceptions in Ankara Towards Syrians: A More Distant Approach

The findings from the interviews conducted in Ankara, as part of this study, are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3 Perceptions in Ankara Towards Syrians**

Propositions	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Answer / Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Regardless of religion, language and ethnicity, the humanitarian reason is more important in the admission of Syrians to Turkey.	30,36	25,00	12,50	14,29	17,86
The admission of Syrians stems from Turkey's historical and geographical responsibility.	16,07	23,21	8,93	32,14	19,64
Admission of Syrians is beneficial and strengthens Turkey.	3,57	23,21	17,86	17,86	37,50
The problems of Syrians do not concern us and should be avoided.	25,00	14,29	10,71	16,07	33,93
Syrians are our religious brothers and sisters and should be accepted.	14,29	23,21	10,71	16,07	35,71
Syrians disrupt social order in Ankara.	26,79	28,57	14,29	21,43	8,93
Even if the war continues, Syrians should be sent back to their country.	16,07	8,93	32,14	17,86	25,00
Syrians should be sent back.	41,07	8,93	21,43	17,86	10,71
Syrians should only be accommodated in camps.	23,21	14,29	10,71	39,29	12,50
Do you think that you are from the same culture as Syrians?	5,36	14,29	17,86	23,21	39,29
Can Syrians staying in Ankara cause problems?	37,50	17,86	12,50	26,79	5,36
Ankara has embraced Syrian asylum seekers with the Syrian crisis.	12,50	48,21	23,21	10,71	5,36
I would welcome a marriage between a Syrian and a member of my family.	7,14	17,86	26,79	8,93	39,29
I would do a joint business with a Syrian.	7,14	25,00	21,43	12,50	33,93
Syrians should have the same right to education as Turkish citizens.	21,43	28,57	19,64	7,14	23,21
I do not see any problem in shopping from Syrian shops.	25,00	33,93	7,14	8,93	25,00

Unlike Şanlıurfa, the migration of Syrians to Ankara began to intensify after 2015. By 2017, the number of Syrians in Ankara had reached 73,042 (Gürel Üçer, Özkazanç, & Atılgan, 2018, p. 617), and by 2024, this figure had risen to approximately 90,000. There are several reasons why Syrians prefer Ankara over Şanlıurfa. These include the quieter neighborhoods they settle in, lower rental costs compared to other areas, and better job opportunities. Additionally, Syrians reportedly

feel safer in Ankara than in cities closer to the Syrian border.

Survey results on citizens' perceptions of the mass migration of Syrians to Ankara after 2015 show that citizens generally perceive Syrian migration as forced. The survey focused on questions related to "humanitarian reasons," "cultural elements," "religious reasons," and "the country's historical and geographical responsibilities" to better understand the public's perspective. The results of questions aimed at

measuring citizens' determination and sensitivity toward Syrians are as follows:

1. More than 55% of respondents agreed with the proposition, "Humanitarian reasons are more important than religious, linguistic, or ethnic factors in the acceptance of Syrians in Turkey." However, around 31% disagreed, which is significantly higher than the rate in Şanlıurfa.

2. Approximately 37.5% agreed with the statement, "Syrians are our religious brothers and sisters and should be accepted." This indicates that humanitarian concerns and responsibility, rather than religion, play a more dominant role in the acceptance of Syrians in Ankara.
3. Around 25% agreed with the statement, "Even if the war continues, Syrians should be sent back to their country." This further highlights the importance of humanitarian concerns in shaping public opinion.
4. Similarly, only 19.5% agreed with the statement, "Do you think that you are from the same culture as Syrians?" while 63% disagreed. This demonstrates that while citizens of Ankara maintain a humanitarian perspective, they still perceive significant cultural differences. Despite this, the overall humanitarian approach toward Syrians remains positive. However, responses to other questions measuring social acceptance reveal a certain level of social opposition to Syrians in Ankara.
5. When analyzing the results in more detail, it becomes evident that approximately 55% of respondents in Ankara believe that Syrians disrupt social order and stability. In contrast, around 20% disagreed with this statement.
6. Similarly, more than 55% of respondents believe that the continued presence of Syrians in Ankara will cause future problems.
7. Approximately 27% of respondents agreed with the proposition "The acceptance of Syrians is beneficial and will strengthen our country," while around 55% disagreed.
8. On the other hand, only 25% of respondents agreed with the proposition "I would support a family member marrying a Syrian," while about 48% disagreed. The rate of those who were undecided or did not want to give an answer was approximately 27%.
9. Around 52% of respondents opposed the proposition "Syrians are our religious brothers; they should be accepted."
10. The proportion of respondents who believed that Syrians should receive equal education rights was close to 50%, reflecting a humanitarian stance.

### **Syrian perception in Şanlıurfa and Ankara Provinces: Comparisons in the Context of Thematic Issues**

#### *Equality in Education*

The survey conducted in Şanlıurfa aimed to assess the attitudes of citizens toward the access and utilization of education for Syrians. Respondents were asked about the rights of Syrian individuals in this context. In Şanlıurfa, 56% agreed with the statement, "Syrians should have equal rights to education as Turkish citizens," while 38% disagreed. These results suggest that most residents of Şanlıurfa have no issue with the education provided to Syrian individuals.

In Ankara, the survey found that 50% of respondents agreed with the same statement regarding equal educational rights for Syrians, while approximately 30% disagreed. This level of disagreement is lower than in Şanlıurfa. Overall, the findings indicate a level of social acceptance in both provinces regarding access to education for Syrians.

It is noteworthy that in both cities, the proportion of individuals supporting equal educational rights for Syrians is higher than those opposing it. This suggests a recognition within the local community of the importance of not excluding those affected by war from their right to education, and ensuring they can continue their education in line with Turkey's system.

The positive approach toward education for Syrians, particularly for those displaced by war, demonstrates that the local community upholds a humanitarian and rights-based perspective toward these individuals.



### ***Perception of religious, ethnic and cultural affinity***

The findings of the study, aimed at identifying the perceptions of citizens towards Syrians from neighboring southern Syria, reveal cultural and religious differences in perceptions across provinces. In Şanlıurfa, 69.25% of respondents supported the proposition "Syrians are our religious brothers, they should be accepted," while 22.5% opposed it. Similarly, around 55% supported the proposition "Syrians are our ethnic brothers, they should be accepted." However, the favourable attitude of the citizens participating in the Ankara survey towards the proposition of religious brotherhood remained at 37%. The rate of those who oppose the proposition is close to 52 per cent. In Ankara, the rate of those who agree with the statement 'Syrians are our ethnic brothers and sisters and should be accepted' is around 30 percent, while the rate of those who oppose this statement is above 57 percent.

In this context, it can be said that religious, ethnic, and cultural proximity plays a significant role in the societal acceptance of Syrians in Şanlıurfa, whereas a more negative approach exists towards these three elements in Ankara.

### **The Forced Return of Syrians**

Approximately 49% of respondents living in Ankara support the repatriation of Syrians. However, only about 25% agree with the statement, "Syrians should be sent back to their country even if the war continues," while around 43% oppose it. This indicates that although a significant portion of Ankara's citizens support repatriation, the proportion of those advocating for forced repatriation during ongoing conflict decreases to 25%. The fact that the rate of opposition is below 50% suggests that there is some level of social acceptance in Ankara regarding the idea of forced return.

There are notable differences in opinions between citizens of Ankara and Şanlıurfa on the issue of forced return of Syrians. In Şanlıurfa, 37% of respondents agree with the statement, "Syrians should be sent back," while over 41% oppose it. Furthermore, only about 15% of Şanlıurfa's

citizens agree with the idea of sending Syrians back even if the war continues, with around 68% opposing this view.

These findings reveal a significant divergence of opinions between the citizens of Ankara and Şanlıurfa regarding the forced return of Syrians.

### ***Family unity and commercial relations***

Nearly 50% of respondents in Şanlıurfa supported the proposition "I would support a family member marrying a Syrian," while less than 24% opposed it. Similarly, more than 58% of respondents agreed with the proposition "I do not see any problem with shopping from Syrian-owned businesses," while around 34% directly opposed it. About 50% of respondents supported the proposition "I would do business with a Syrian." In Ankara, 25% of respondents agreed with the statement, "I would approve a marriage between a Syrian and a member of my family," while over 48% opposed it. Similarly, 32% stated they would do business with Syrians, whereas over 46% opposed the idea. However, nearly 60% of respondents expressed that they would have no issue doing business with a Syrian-owned business.

This contrast highlights that while there is notable social opposition to family unity and direct business relations with Syrians in Ankara, there is a higher level of social acceptance towards Syrians in Şanlıurfa.

### ***Perception of social stability***

To measure public perception of the social stability and social cohesion of Syrians, certain propositions were presented to the survey participants. In this context, the proposition 'Syrians disrupt social order in Şanlıurfa' was presented and 38% of the respondents agreed with this statement, while 38.75% of the respondents disagreed with it. In the second proposition, which measured societal perceptions crosswise, the question "Could the continued presence of Syrians in Şanlıurfa lead to problems?" was asked. Approximately 43% of respondents stated that it could cause problems, while around 27% indicated that it would not.

The participation of the citizens residing in Ankara to the statements 'Syrians disrupt social order in Ankara' and 'Syrians staying in Ankara would cause problems' has been above 55%. Therefore, more than 50% of the citizens in Ankara have the perception that Syrians are a factor of social instability.

## Conclusion

In recent years, many public opinion surveys on the perception of immigrants have been conducted in Turkey. These surveys often present a general overview of public perception across the country. However, when conducting comparative analysis at the city and settlement level, different patterns of perception emerge.

Religious, cultural, geographical proximity, and ethnic similarities play a significant role in the social acceptance of Syrians. This research highlights that humanitarian concerns are shared across various social groups, especially as the Syrians' presence in Turkey enters its 13th year. Particularly in perceptions towards Syrians, religious, cultural, geographical proximity, and ethnic similarities play a significant role in societal acceptance, which is one of the prominent findings of the study.

In both provinces, a social acceptance has been reached in terms of access to education. In a study by Kızıl & Dönmez (2017), the educational services provided to Syrians in Turkey were discussed, and the challenges that arose from this process were highlighted. The educational policy developed by the Ministry of National Education for Syrians who are of school age has changed many times since the first wave of migration. Initially, Syrians were perceived as "short-term guests," and thus not many educational measures were taken. It was even considered that students should receive the Turkish education system's curriculum in Arabic (Seydi, 2014, p. 275). This education was not designed to award students with any certificate or diploma, and the main goal was to ensure that they would not lose any academic years when they returned to their country. However, following the significant increase in the number of Syrians in 2013 and the realization of their long-term

presence in Turkey, certain educational measures were implemented. As a result of these ongoing measures in the following years, Syrian students were given the opportunity to receive education both in the camps and in Temporary Education Centers (TEC) established in city centers, as well as in public schools. However, these policies and implementations also brought challenges in terms of civic education. Studies on the curriculum that Syrian children were receiving in their home country revealed that many elements in the curriculum were antagonistic to the Turkish nation and the Republic of Turkey. Moreover, Syrian students, who had to interrupt their education and came to Turkey, faced issues regarding the "national" character of the curriculum they received in Syria compared to what they started learning in Turkey. In Syria's national curriculum, Turkey's territory was presented as part of the "Arab Homeland," with claims that these lands were forcibly taken from the Arabs. The Asi River was depicted as an internal waterway of Syria, the Tigris and Euphrates were said to originate from Armenian highlands, negative aspects of Ottoman policies towards Arabs were emphasized, and Hatay was portrayed as a city of Syria. These issues, especially during middle school Social Studies and high school History education, have led to contentious topics.

For Turkish society to coexist with these individuals within itself and for a peaceful and stable environment to be established socially, one of the necessary conditions is the achievement of equality in education. However, as mentioned above, it is crucial to prepare curricula that will ensure equality in education and are compatible with the historical backgrounds and national ideologies of both countries' peoples, minimizing conflict and tension.

Among the findings of the study, it was determined that there is societal opposition to family unity and joint commercial relations in Ankara, while there is social acceptance towards Syrians in Şanlıurfa. In a study prepared by Baydemir (2024), the neighborhood relations between Turkish citizens and Syrians living in Şanlıurfa were examined. In this study, which included 360 Turkish citizens and 360 Syrians, a

total of 720 participants, it was found that neighborhood relations between the two communities were weak and that there was a significant lack of contact between the citizens of the two countries. This result differs from the findings of this study. This variation may be due to some demographic characteristics (age, occupation, income level, education level, etc.) of the participants. In fact, the perceptions of Turkish citizens living in areas where there is a high concentration of Syrians in Şanlıurfa regarding neighborhood, joint trade, and family unity may differ from those living in areas with lower concentrations.

Another conclusion reached in the study is that more than half of Turkish citizens living in Ankara perceive Syrians as a source of social instability. It can be said that social changes and instabilities, which are the result of socio-economic and political crises, generally stem from migration movements that force the local population and foreigners to live together (Eser & Uygur, 2019, p. 87). It can be suggested that the legal framework that emerged over time, allowing Syrians to live alongside Turkish citizens, contributed to the perception of social instability.

Another conclusion reached in the study is that religious, ethnic, and cultural proximity play a significant role in the social acceptance of Syrians in Şanlıurfa, while a negative approach exists in Ankara towards these three factors. In a study by Güzel (2021) examining local attitudes towards Syrians in Kahramanmaraş, it was found that local society had a low level of acceptance towards Syrians. The study suggested organizing religious and cultural events that would allow Turkish and Syrian citizens to spend more time together, which corresponds to the findings of this study that religious, ethnic, and cultural proximity plays a significant role in societal acceptance in Şanlıurfa.

According to the final result of the study, there are significant differences in the views of citizens living in Ankara and Şanlıurfa regarding the forced return of Syrians. On March 28, 2022, work began on the "Support for the Nationally Endorsed Voluntary Return Mechanism in Turkey" (NAVRR) Project, in cooperation with the Directorate General of Migration Management

(DGMM) and the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), which aimed at supporting voluntary return. However, these projects, which primarily focused on health and education, made it more difficult for Syrians to integrate and adapt in Turkey, and also complicated their harmonious coexistence with the local society. In fact, the integration policies, which attempted to change the economic and social habits of Syrians in a one-sided manner, failed to reduce the social tension between the local population and Syrians. In a report by the Refugees Association (Mülteciler Derneği) (2020) on the subject, it was noted that the local population viewed foreigners as an unnecessary burden on the state and perceived them as competitors in an already shrinking labor market. The report also stated that these dynamics led to the local society seeing foreigners as "disruptors of order," and individuals in disadvantaged groups (such as the disabled, elderly, etc.) becoming "disillusioned citizens." These developments explain the findings of this study. In the country's capital, Ankara, where there are relatively fewer Syrians compared to Şanlıurfa, and due to its cosmopolitan nature and its status as the political center, there is a stronger perception of returning Syrians. In Şanlıurfa, where ethnic structure, cultural similarity, and religious brotherhood are more prevalent, the idea of forced return is less common compared to Ankara, which is an expected result.

In conclusion, the lack of micro-scale field studies in public opinion research on the social acceptance of Syrians and the perception of Syrians has been the main motivation for this research. Thanks to this research, it has been seen that the results that will emerge in the case of deepening micro studies in measuring public perception will be different from macro-scale results.

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