

# Evaluating the Socio-Economic Consequences of the Southeastern Anatolia Project in Conjunction with the Migration of Syrians

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## Abstract

This study aims to examine the effects of the mass migration of Syrian refugees to Türkiye since 2011 on the social and economic structure of the region within the context of the Southeast Anatolia Project (GAP). Statistical data regarding the provinces where GAP is implemented were analyzed by taking into account the post-mass Syrian migration. The reflections of the mass migration of Syrians in Gaziantep, the most developed province in terms of socio-economic aspects, have been critically evaluated according to development index parameters. Statistical data have been utilized to understand the effects of Türkiye's development and migration policies on GAP. The mass influx of Syrian refugees has resulted in significant socio-economic and cultural changes in the border provinces of southeastern Türkiye. The nature of the relationship between socio-economic development and the implemented policies is crucial. The originality of this study is the lack of studies on the relationship between the socio-economic consequences of GAP and the mass Syrian migration.

**Keywords:** Southeastern Anatolia Project, Syrian Refugees, Migration and Development.

**Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesinin Sosyo-Ekonomik Sonuçlarının Suriyelilerin Göçüyle Birlikte Değerlendirilmesi**

## Öz

Bu çalışma, Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi (GAP) bağlamında 2011 yılından itibaren Türkiye'ye kitlesel bir şekilde göç eden Suriyeli sığınmacıların bölgenin sosyal ve ekonomik yapısı üzerindeki etkilerini incelemeyi hedeflemektedir. Bölge ekonomisinin sosyoekonomik yönden en gelişmiş ili olan Gaziantep'te yaşanan kitlesel Suriyeli göçünün bölge genelindeki yansımaları gelişmişlik endeksi parametrelerine göre kritik edilmiştir. Türkiye'nin uygulamakta olduğu kalkınma ve göç politikalarının GAP üzerindeki etkilerinin ne olduğuna ilişkin istatistiksel verilerden yararlanılmıştır. Kitlesel olarak gerçekleşen Suriyeli göçü sonucunda Türkiye'nin güneydoğusunda bulunan sınır illerinde sosyo-ekonomik ve kültürel yapıda büyük bir değişim yaşanmıştır. Sosyo ekonomik kalkınma ile uygulanan politikalar arasındaki ilişkinin niteliği önem arz etmektedir. GAP'ın sosyo-ekonomik sonuçlarının kitlesel Suriyeli göçüyle ilişkisi konusunda çalışmaların eksikliği bu çalışmanın özgünlüğüdür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, Suriyeli Sığınmacılar, Göç ve Kalkınma.

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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, development has been regarded as “good governance” and “proper management of institutions.” The emphasis has been on “capacity building, public-private partnerships, social participation, and public accountability” as prerequisites for development. Over time, alternative development approaches have begun to be discussed and debated. In the 1980s, the emphasis on “gender” emerged regarding development. In 1987, “sustainable development” gained importance, and since 1990, “human development” and “participation” approaches have been emphasized. The 1990s also experienced a new process known as post-development approaches. During this period, the claim that development had become “outdated” was also asserted. According to the post-development perspective, Western-centered development approaches are argued to have a “top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic” content. Henceforth, the development approaches proposed have been used as a tool for economic control over “Third World” countries. Approaches to development depict the West as “civilized” while portraying non-Western societies as “backward” (Bilgen, 2018: 129). It should not be forgotten that the solutions offered by Western-centric approaches to development for developing countries are open to debate. Western-centric approaches and their discourses on the reconstruction of non-Western societies are criticized in the relevant literature. Edward Said’s work entitled “Orientalism” can be given as an example of a critical work against Western-centric approaches. In this work, Said emphasizes that the West has developed a hegemonic method for “dominating, restructuring, and establishing authority over the East” (Said, 1978: 3).

The study also addressed the level of success in areas such as the policy discourse used regarding the development project implemented in the GAP example, the long-term sustainability of the project, and its suitability to regional conditions. In this context, the State Planning Organization (DPT), considered one of the concrete indicators of planned development in Türkiye, stands out as an important and fundamental institution. Established in 1960 by Law No. 91 under the Prime Ministry, the DPT’s main objectives are as follows:

“1- To assist the Government in fully identifying and monitoring all kinds of natural, human and economic resources and possibilities of the country; 2- To make recommendations to ensure coordination in the activities of various ministries concerning economic policy and to act as consultants on these matters; 3- To prepare long and short-term plans that will realize the targets accepted by the Government; 4- To make recommendations on the functioning of relevant institutions and local administrations for the successful implementation of the plans; 5- To make evaluations on the implementation of the development plan and to make changes to the plan when necessary; 6- To take measures and make recommendations on the examina-

tion, encouragement and regulation of the working situation of the private sector” (Official Gazette, 05.10.1960).

The 1961 Constitution emphasized “planned development,” and the concept of “planning” was included in the constitution. From 1960 to 2011, the DPT functioned as a fundamental institution of the state regarding public investments. The DPT prepared five-year development plans and annual plans for the functioning of all public institutions. In 2011, the Ministry of Development was established, and the DPT was reorganized under the ministry. In 2018, the Ministry of Development was abolished, and the “Presidency of Strategy and Budget of the Republic of Türkiye” was established. Institutional sustainability has not been achieved in the development and implementation of development policies in Türkiye since 1960. The success of development projects in the medium and long term is directly related to corporate sustainability. Considering that the “Black Sea, Eastern Anatolia, and Southeastern Anatolia Regions” are less developed than other regions, they are evaluated as “prioritized regions in development.” The Southeastern Anatolia Region consists of the “area between the southern foothills of the Taurus Mountains and the Syrian border.” The area to the east of the Karacadağ massif is called the “Tigris Section” and the area to the west is called the “Middle Euphrates Section” (Benek, 2009: 48).

The fundamental objectives of the projects prepared and implemented for the socio-economic development of priority regions are: “To reduce socio-economic differences between developed and less developed regions; to improve the economic structure of less developed regions; to accelerate regional development; to protect, improve, and ensure the sustainable use of natural resources; to develop industrial, service, and tourism activities in less developed regions; to increase employment opportunities and prevent the migration of qualified labor abroad; to increase the national income per capita.”

It has been understood that the projects implemented for the prioritized regions have not been fully successful due to reasons such as “political instability, lack of coordination between central and local government units, deficiencies in planning, inadequacies in monitoring and evaluating the implemented development projects, sustainability issues of the projects, and errors regarding the suitability of the implemented projects to regional conditions” (Partigöç, 2025: 3-4).

In Türkiye, regional development plans have aimed to eliminate socio-economic imbalances between regions. It can be said that the socio-economic impact of regional development projects implemented in Türkiye is limited in terms of socio-economic indicators. It has been observed that development

projects have had a limited impact on addressing inequalities in fundamental areas such as income distribution injustice, education, health, and employment. According to development index data, imbalances between regions continue in Türkiye. According to the “Research on Socio-Economic Development Ranking of Provinces (II SEGE-2017)” report published by the General Directorate of Development Agencies, no significant change has been observed in the socio-economic development differences among provinces in Türkiye. The GAP region ranks above the Turkish average in socio-economic indicators such as “population growth rate, household size, infant mortality rate, and unemployment rate.”

## Research Methodology

This study aims to examine the economic, social, and cultural outcomes of development-related institutions and implemented projects, using the GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) as an example. This study sought answers to the following fundamental questions: “What is the impact of the mass Syrian migration on the achievement of GAP’s long-term and medium-term goals? What is the impact of migration policies implemented in connection with the mass influx of Syrian refugees on the socio-economic structure of the Southeastern Anatolia Region? What are the findings regarding GAP’s current structure in terms of the region’s socio-economic development? Is institutional sustainability ensured in the implementation process of regional development policies in the GAP example? What is the change in inter-regional socio-economic differences in the GAP example? How has the mass Syrian migration, along with GAP, affected the socio-economic structure of the Southeastern Anatolia Region? What is the current state of the industry, service, and agriculture sectors in the Southeastern Anatolia Region, using Gaziantep province, considered the most developed province in the region and hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees, as an example? Has the potential of the Southeastern Anatolia Region been developed with the GAP project?”

In this study, data was collected by conducting a literature review on GAP and Syrian migrants. In this context, data obtained from scientific books, articles, official documents, and reports were evaluated. Data obtained from primary sources regarding the current situation of GAP in the context of mass Syrian migration were subjected to content analysis. The aim is to contribute to the relevant literature by reinterpreting the data obtained with the content analysis technique (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011: 39-82). There are different application examples of the content analysis technique. In this study, the “in-

terpretive content analysis” technique was preferred. In interpretive content analysis, sources are examined based on the relevant literature. The content of the examined sources can be used as evidence to draw conclusions. Interpretive content analysis provides researchers with the opportunity to find answers to the questions of “what,” “how,” “why,” “for whom,” and “with what effect” (Erdoğan and Uyan Semerci, 2021: 212-213). In this study, which employed content analysis techniques, online and written sources regarding the current situation of GAP (Southeastern Anatolia Project) and Syrians were utilized. In qualitative research, online and written sources are considered important sources of information (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2011: 188).

Quantitative research involves the use of methodological techniques called statistics, which are numerical categories related to the researcher’s experience. Qualitative research, on the other hand, provides a detailed analysis of the researcher’s experience. However, there is overlap between quantitative and qualitative research both in practice and theory. Quantitative and qualitative studies have complementary characteristics. Quantitative and qualitative studies are based on observable reality (Marvasti, 2004: 7). In qualitative studies, social phenomena are evaluated within the context of the existing conditions. Qualitative studies are metaphorically described as “a complex fabric made up of fine threads, many colors, different textures, and various material mixtures” (Creswell, 2013: 42). Qualitative researchers develop concepts and theories from patterns in data (Taylor, Bogdan, and DeVault, 2016: 8).

## **GAP in The Context of Regional Development**

GAP is considered one of the largest dam projects in the world (Açıkgöz at al., 2022: 2). GAP is a regional development project evaluated with a “multi-sectoral, integrated, and sustainable development approach.” The project aims to raise the income level and living standards of the local population, reduce the development gap between the Southeast Anatolia Region and other regions, and improve productivity and employment opportunities in rural areas (GAP, 2024).

The region where GAP is implemented covers an area of 76,014 km<sup>2</sup>, which constitutes 9.7% of Türkiye’s total land area. GAP includes the provinces of “Adıyaman, Batman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Kilis, Mardin, Siirt, Şanlıurfa, and Şırnak” (GAP, 2024: 10). The idea of building dams and hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates River was first proposed in 1934 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk with the words, “Let’s build a lake of humanity here.” As a result of the idea of constructing dams and hydroelectric power plants, the Electricity Administration’s Survey Works were established in 1935 under Atatürk’s or-

ders. Geological and topographic surveys were conducted in the Keban Gorge in 1938 (GAP, 2012). Atatürk assessed the importance of dam construction by stating, “The technical capability and strength of the public administration of waterworks, which is one of the main measures of our economy, must be firmly established” (Demir, 2001: 8). The idea of constructing dams and hydroelectric power plants on the Euphrates River became concrete plans. The projects were established after the establishment of the “General Directorate of State Hydraulic Works” in 1954. In 1975, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel emphasized that the developed plans as “special plans for the development of the Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia regions.” In 1977, all projects planned to be built on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers were combined and named “GAP.” There were public expectations that GAP should have solved the socio-economic problems of the Southeastern Anatolia Region and built an “economically strong Türkiye” (Bilgen, 2018: 131-132). GAP was legally implemented in 1977. Initially, the project aimed to construct 22 dams and 19 hydroelectric power plants on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and irrigate 1.8 million hectares of land. Since 1989, the scope of GAP has significantly expanded. Approximately 32 billion US dollars have been allocated from the central budget for the implementation of the project, and investments have been made within this framework. Many hydroelectric power plants have been completed and put into service during the implementation process of GAP. Approximately half of the hydraulic energy produced in Türkiye is supplied by the hydroelectric power plants within GAP, including “Karakaya, Atatürk, Kralkızı, Dicle, Batman, Birecik, Karkamış, Şanlıurfa, Çağçağ, Erkenek, Sırıntaş, Garzan, Bulam, and Ilısu” (Prime Ministry, 2013: 143; Bilgen, 2018: 126; GAP, 2023a: 39). The share of investments made in the GAP region from the central budget among all investments made in Türkiye is around 14%. As a result of the investments made, irrigated agriculture can be carried out on 63% of the agricultural lands in the GAP region (Anadolu Agency, 2024).

The dams built in the region also meet irrigation needs in addition to energy. Of the 22 dams planned to be built on the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, 19 have been completed. With the completed dams, the irrigation needs of 600 thousand hectares of fertile land are met. If all ongoing dams and hydroelectric power plants are completed and put into service, it is expected that “1.8 million hectares of land will be opened for irrigation, and 27 billion kilowatt-hours of hydroelectric energy will be produced annually.” As a result of the investments made in GAP, the region’s exports have exceeded 14.4 billion dollars. Looking at the sectoral distribution of the 14.4 billion dollars of exports in 2023 in the GAP region, it is seen that “12.12 billion dollars are from

the manufacturing industry; 1.3 billion dollars from agriculture, forestry, and fishing; and 118 million dollars from mining and quarrying.” According to the sectoral distribution of the 9.33 billion dollars of imports in the GAP region in 2023, “7.5 billion dollars are from the manufacturing industry; and 1.6 billion dollars from agriculture and forestry.” When examining the economic data related to GAP, it is observed that “the exports made from the agriculture sector do not cover the imports” (Communication Presidency, 2019, GAP, 2023a; GAP, 2024). The situation of “imports not meeting exports” in the agricultural sector shows that the targets emphasized in the GAP regarding increasing agricultural capacity have not been achieved. Gaziantep is seen as the province that imports and exports the most in the GAP region. Gaziantep, which is the province that exports the most in the GAP region, ranks sixth in Türkiye’s overall export figures (GAP, 2023b: 102). Among the objectives set for GAP are addressing the deficiencies related to the agricultural sector. Currently, Türkiye’s agricultural production capacity lags behind that of developed countries. There is a continuous decline in the share of agriculture in national income. Although 30% of the workforce is employed in the agricultural sector, agriculture accounts for only 13% of the national income. The low productivity in agriculture indicates that agricultural capacity is not being utilized adequately. “The majority of the poor population in Türkiye lives in rural areas and is employed in the agricultural sector” (Pamuk, 2021: 215-238). Factors such as “the effectiveness of natural conditions, which brings various unpredictable risks” make “agriculture” a sector that should be especially supported (Özkan, Atik, and Çelik, 2023: 10).

GAP aims to develop the potential of the region. There are different approaches regarding the effects of GAP on “natural environment, cultural heritage, and demographic structure.” In the 1990s, the economic and technical aspects of GAP were emphasized more, while its social aspect remained weak. In this context, the GAP Region Action Plan covering the years 1993-1997 was created. The GAP Region Action Plan aimed to “increase investment and income levels in the region; improve health, education, transportation, and infrastructure services in urban and rural areas; develop employment opportunities; and reduce socio-economic problems.” Since 1994, a “human-centered development project” approach has begun to be adopted. From 1994 onwards, efforts to improve regional conditions in terms of “sustainable development, social development, human-centered development, education, agricultural practices, gender relations, and participation” have gained importance. Within the framework of GAP, the following have been adopted as the principles of sustainability: The inclusion of the poor in the development process, the

active participation of local people, local governments, and non-governmental organizations in decision-making processes, and ensuring minimum standards for a secure and humane life for everyone. With the concrete action plans created in this framework, it is aimed to ensure participatory social development, establish a balance between technical and economic projects and human resources, and include disadvantaged social groups in the development process (Bilgen, 2018: 137-138; GAP, 2002: 19). GAP has been shaped according to the strategies of “justice, participation, environmental protection, ensuring employment, and spatial planning for infrastructure development” based on “sustainable human development goals” (Sakar, 2019: 22).

In the 1980s, GAP had a “technical, state-controlled, predominantly infrastructure and economically focused project” nature. The GAP Regional Development Administration was established in 1989. From the 1990s onwards, GAP transformed into a project that considers social aspects, market compatibility, sustainability, and human development. Between 2002 and 2007, it was understood that the government placed more importance on development agencies rather than GAP in its development policies. In 2008, the “GAP Action Plan” was implemented to meet the basic infrastructure needs, primarily irrigation, and to achieve socio-economic development in the region. The GAP Action Plan consists of four main headings: “achieving economic development,” “ensuring social development,” “improving infrastructure,” and “developing institutional capacity” (Prime Ministry, 2013: 144).

The mass influx of Syrian refugees has resulted in significant socio-economic and cultural changes in the border provinces of southeastern Türkiye. Existing infrastructure and municipal services in these border provinces have proven inadequate. Published reports and field studies show that Syrian refugees have both positive and negative impacts on the labor market, particularly in the Gaziantep province of the GAP region. The services provided to Syrian migrants in Türkiye since 2011 have had socio-economic consequences. The continued presence of millions of Syrian refugees in Türkiye for over 13 years has exacerbated chronic problems in Türkiye’s socio-economic life.

In recent years, limited changes have occurred in the social structure of the cities where GAP is implemented. The influence of traditional cultural structures reflecting tribal relations continues in the generality of the cities where GAP is implemented. As a result of the influence of traditional cultural structures, socio-economic development in the region is hindered. Among the total households in the GAP region, 81% in Şanlıurfa, 64% in Mardin, 34% in Diyarbakır, 31% in Adıyaman, and 21% in Gaziantep identify themselves with-

in tribal ties. The effects of traditional tribal relations are widely prevalent in social life. “The development of participation, transparency and democratic values” is hindered due to traditional tribal relations (GAP, 2002: 97; Sakar, 2019: 91). Ensuring participation in the implementation process of policies and projects related to development is particularly important for social groups living in rural areas. Considering the living conditions, expectations, needs, and desires of the local population in the decision-making process is essential for participatory development (Toksöz, 2018: 35). In participatory development, different segments of society are actively involved in decision-making mechanisms. Supporting the active participation of individuals in the development process is a necessity for social and economic development.

## Findings and Discussion

When examining the socio-economic development ranking of provinces in Türkiye, it is seen that 6 provinces in the Southeast Anatolia Region rank at the bottom of the list. According to the Socio-Economic Development Ranking Research data, Gaziantep ranks 30th, Kilis 62nd, Adıyaman 66th, Diyarbakır 68th, Batman 72nd, Şanlıurfa 73rd, Mardin 74th, Siirt 75th, and Şırnak 81st among 81 provinces. Gaziantep, one of the provinces with intense industrial activities, stands out as the most developed province in the Southeast Anatolia Region. Other provinces in the region, excluding Gaziantep, are categorized as “prioritized provinces in development.” Due to Gaziantep’s competitive and innovative characteristics in the industrial sector, it ranks high in the development ranking list. Although the export-oriented manufacturing industry is the most important sector in Gaziantep, the share of the service sector in the city’s economy is increasing. For these reasons, Gaziantep carries the identity of a “center of attraction” in the region. Gaziantep, which accounts for a significant portion of the region’s exports, is the province with the highest GDP per capita. However, Gaziantep ranks low in social welfare indicators such as “education and health” compared to the national ranking of provinces in Türkiye (General Directorate of Development Agencies, 2019: 35-48; GAP; 2023b: 42). Development indicators for provinces in the GAP region demonstrate the importance of indicators other than GDP for social development. All indicators related to socioeconomic structure should be evaluated together in the preparation and implementation of development projects.

The main features that distinguish Gaziantep socio-economically from other provinces in the region are: “having fertile and irrigable lands; proximity to southern ports for maritime transportation; the development of the man-

ufacturing industry; accumulated experience in trade; the availability of employment opportunities; the adequacy of physical and social facilities; entrepreneurial characteristics; and possessing rich cultural heritage and tourism potential” (GAP, 2002: 45-46). One of the most significant problems of Gaziantep, the most developed province in the region, is the very high urbanization rate resulting from intense internal and external irregular migration. “57.86% of manufacturing enterprises are concentrated in Gaziantep” (GAP, 2002: 7). While there is one organized industrial zone in each of the other provinces in the region, Gaziantep has three. The organized industrial zones completed and operating in Gaziantep provide employment opportunities for 255,624 people. Gaziantep is the province with the highest employment in the industrial and service sectors in the GAP region. It is observed that “textile product manufacturing, building construction, and retail trade” sectors have higher employment capacities in Gaziantep (GAP, 2023a: 45; GAP, 2023b: 102).

It is crucial to analyze and evaluate the impact of Syrian refugees under “temporary protection” status on the regional economy and social structure within the framework of scientific data. According to data from the Directorate of Migration Management as of September 2025, “There are 2,463,042 Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye. As of December 8, 2024, 474,018 Syrian refugees have returned to their country.” Syrian refugees are returning to their countries through border gates in Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, and Şanlıurfa provinces under the control of the Directorate of Migration Management (Directorate General of Migration Management, 2025; UNHCR, 2025).

It has been observed that a significant portion of Syrian refugees under temporary protection in Türkiye have been included in the return process. However, due to the current conditions in both Syria and Türkiye, a large number of Syrian refugees who are not included in the return process continue to exist. In order for Syrian refugees under temporary protection who are not included in the return process to become a more productive group in Türkiye, certain legal regulations need to be implemented.

According to the “Gaziantep Monitor 2020 Syrians” report, more than 50% of Syrian households have an income below the minimum wage. In both Türkiye and Gaziantep, a significant portion of Syrian workers are employed in informal sectors, working without job security and at low wages (Gültekin et al., 2021: 59). The employment of Syrian refugees, often in the informal sector at low wages, can provoke a reaction from the local population. It is observed that Syrian refugees mostly work in labor-intensive sectors such as “textiles, construction, shoe manufacturing, agriculture, furniture, and sea-

sonal agricultural work” (International Crisis Group, 2016: 13). In Gaziantep, the high rate of unregistered employment among Syrians under temporary protection has negative consequences in terms of both social integration and economic conditions. Globally, whether or not refugees have legal status determines their susceptibility to labor exploitation. Refugees with legal status are provided with equal treatment in working life, including job security and wage parity. Syrians working informally are forced to work overtime at the discretion of employers, are deprived of social security, and face discrimination in wage payments. Informal employment in the workforce leads to unfair competition, non-payment of taxes, and tensions between the local population and the Syrian migrant population (Aslan and Köse, 2024: 17-37). The fact that a significant portion of Syrian refugees arriving in Türkiye are working informally poses a risk of socio-economic exclusion. In the case of Gaziantep province, it is observed that Syrian refugees work informally in various areas of the “industry, agriculture, and service” sectors. The prevalence of informal employment among Syrian refugees in the labor market is one of the main factors increasing “poverty and unemployment” (Dedeoğlu and Gökmen, 2011: 31). Based on the findings from field studies, tensions between the local population and Syrian refugees in Gaziantep are primarily experienced among the “working poor.” This situation raises discussions about “social exclusion.” The inability of an individual to participate in essential activities in their society is defined as “social exclusion.” Social exclusion has various indicators, such as access to “socio-economic, health, psychological satisfaction, education, housing, and transportation” services. The socio-economic and political consequences of social exclusion are significant (Toksöz, 2018: 43). According to the Directorate General of Migration Management, Gaziantep is the second city in Türkiye with the highest population of Syrian refugees under temporary protection. When evaluating statistical data, it should be noted that a significant portion of Syrian refugees are informal. When comparing the registered Syrian refugees to the population of their respective provinces, “the province with the highest concentration of Syrian refugees is Kilis with 34.3%, followed by Gaziantep with 16.5%, Hatay with 14.6%, and Şanlıurfa with 12.3%” (Ministry of Industry and Technology, 2025: 133).

The Medium-Term Program (OVP), prepared jointly by the Presidency of Strategy and Budget and the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, is a document that guides Türkiye’s policies and practices related to development. The OVP is prepared considering “global, regional, and national developments” along with existing development plans. The most recently published and enacted OVP, covering the years 2026-2028, has been prepared within the framework

of the objectives of the Twelfth Development Plan (202-2028). According to the table of “Budget Ceiling Proposals for Public Administration within the General Budget for the Year 2028” published on September 9, 2025, the projected total budget for the Directorate General of Migration Management is set as in the following:

31,613,903,000 TL for 2026, 35,839,684,000 TL for 2027, and 39,220,269,000 TL for 2028. The total budget allocated for three years is seen to be 106,673,856,000 TL. The projected budget for the Regional Development Administration, which has been affiliated with GAP since 1989, is set as follows: 1,405,112,000 TL for 2026, 1,536,318,000 TL for 2027, and 1,667,871,000 TL for 2028. A total of 4,609,301,000 TL has been allocated for three years (Republic of Türkiye Presidency of Strategy and Budget, 2025). There is a 23-fold difference in budget size between the two institutions. This situation reveals the degree of additional costs that migration policies and practices will impose on the national economy in the coming years. The magnitude of the budget allocated for migration indicates Türkiye’s aim to protect its long-term national interests. The political instability and conflicts in the Middle East, primarily affecting Türkiye, will influence how development and migration policies are shaped in the medium and long term.

The Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquakes that occurred on February 6, 2023, affected five of the 11 provinces (Adıyaman, Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Şanlıurfa) located in the GAP region. Tens of thousands of people lost their lives due to the earthquake, and financial damages occurred in the infrastructure of the affected provinces, including housing, education, health, industry, transportation, and energy. The socio-economic structure in the provinces of the GAP region has been adversely affected (Ministry of Industry and Technology, 2025: 9). In the case of Gaziantep province, Syrian refugees actively participated in the reconstruction process in earthquake-stricken areas. Their presence in the post-earthquake reconstruction process significantly contributed to addressing the employment gap in the labor market.

Before the mass migration of Syrian refugees and the February 6, 2023 earthquake, there was already a significant housing need in the GAP region. The intense external migration and the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş have increased the demand for housing even more. Since the 1990s, the housing permits issued by municipalities have only met one-third of the housing demand. This situation also indicates the existence of “informal housing constructed and used without a permit” outside of the registered housing statistics (Kayan, 2020: 112-113). According to the 2025 TURKSTAT data, “the average number

of houses per 100 people in Türkiye is 22; in the GAP region, it is 12 houses per 100 people, and in Gaziantep, it is 18 houses per 100 people.” The number of houses in the GAP region and Gaziantep is below the national average. In the central districts of Gaziantep, namely Şahinbey and Şehitkâmil, intensive housing production continues; however, it has been observed that the housing needs are not fully met. The findings and observations of local officials at the time regarding the massive Syrian refugee migration are summarized as follows: “According to initial findings that migration would occur, a low rate of migrants was assumed. This assumption was reflected in initial planning. Initially, expert delegations from Ankara to the border provinces considered the proposal to establish tent cities in certain locations. Initially, plans were made for a six-month period. The tent cities were established accordingly. In the example of the İslahiye district, it was soon understood that the short-term and narrow-scale tent cities established in all settlements in the border region were inadequate. As a result of Türkiye’s open-door policy, implemented for humanitarian reasons during the initial period of forced migration, millions of Syrians were allowed to cross. This led to the revision of the initial plans. After a certain period, when it became clear that Syrian refugees could not leave in the short term, both local and central governments changed their approach to migration policies. Initially required to stay in tent cities, Syrian refugees were allowed to participate in various areas of life under certain conditions. With millions of Syrian refugees beginning to receive services in Türkiye in areas such as health and education, the workload on public institutions has increased. Consequently, the Syrians’ continued residence in Türkiye for over 13 years has provoked various reactions from different segments of society. The rapid influx of millions of Syrian refugees into Türkiye, who then decided to settle there permanently, caused disruptions in the socio-economic structure of the country and the region. The mass migration of Syrian refugees to the GAP region since 2011 has increased the demand for housing and led to a rise in housing prices. The intense demand for housing has caused chaotic and unplanned urbanization in the city center, leading to land issues. For these reasons, housing and land prices in Gaziantep are above the national average. The disadvantaged socio-economic structure of the GAP region compared to other regions, combined with the density of Syrian refugees in the area, has negatively affected the balance of housing supply and demand.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

Statistical data demonstrates that regional development projects implemented in Türkiye have not been fully successful and have not met expectations.

According to statistical data published nationwide, provinces in the GAP region, excluding Gaziantep, rank below the national average in terms of socio-economic development criteria. In this context, development projects, particularly in the GAP example, are particularly significant in the provinces where underdevelopment, inequality, and income inequality are most prevalent. Based on the data obtained regarding development efforts and migration in the context of GAP, the following recommendations are directed towards policymakers and relevant institutions:

Projects to be implemented in the GAP region should be based on the principles of “participation, sustainability, and social development.” The participation of disadvantaged segments of society in the development process should be supported.

Measures should be taken to increase productivity in agriculture and the national income in Türkiye. Projects supporting qualified agricultural production efforts utilizing high technological opportunities should be implemented in the GAP region. In this context, efforts to evaluate a significant portion of the population employed in agriculture as qualified labor in the industry and service sectors should be supported. Conditions should be established for both urban and rural populations to receive quality education.

With an approach based on scientific knowledge, preparedness efforts should be supported against natural disasters such as “global warming, drought, fire”; social disasters such as “hunger, poverty, inequality”; and political crises such as “terrorism, conflict, war”. The development and implementation of medium- and long-term national strategy documents is crucial for addressing potential risks and crises arising from global uncertainties in the international system. In this context, regional development projects such as the Southeastern Anatolia Project, in conjunction with the State Planning Organization, should be updated and implemented in line with global developments. Despite a series of setbacks regarding GAP, it would be beneficial to re-establish the DPT, which is the most concrete indicator of planned economic activities.

The potential of disadvantaged groups, whose labor is underpaid, to contribute to development efforts is overlooked. In the case of Gaziantep, removing obstacles to the participation of individuals classified as disadvantaged groups in social and economic activities is crucial for the success of development policies. Policies should be developed to more actively include disadvantaged groups in the development process, ensure fair income distribution, and reduce social inequalities. Policies regarding “social development and migration” should be developed with an approach that combats all elements of social exclusion.

Efforts to eliminate barriers to the participation of individuals defined as disadvantaged groups in social and economic activities should be strengthened to ensure social justice and eliminate inequalities. Policies related to development and migration should be created with an approach to combat all aspects of social exclusion. The forced mass migration of Syrian refugees has adversely affected the socio-economic development of the GAP region. To ensure social cohesion between the local population and refugees, measures should be taken to reduce informal employment.

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