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Marginalisation, Hate Speeches and Criminalisation of Syrians Under Temporary Protection in Turkey

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We are very grateful to Halil Ibrahim Bahar for submitting this piece amid challenging circumstances, which prevented full development and editing beyond the submission stage. We also thank his daughter, Hacer, for being involved in the editing process and communicating with us on behalf of Halil.

This opinion piece addresses the tensions that arise when legislation such as the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection 2013, Law No. 6458 (UNHCR, 2016), which should protect vulnerable groups, is not adequately resourced or enforced in practice to provide safe routes into full citizenship, for example, by failing to address hate speech, by politicians, the public and via social media, and by preventing legal rights to work.

Through the example of a YouTube video which was widely watched and engaged with through public comments, Bahar draws attention to how the Turkish government appear to use ideologies of hate (Yanay, 2012) to dehumanise, blame, and forcefully exclude refugee peoples through justifications of them being a 'threat' to national security and standards of living.

Indeed, the key themes and examples raised in this piece hold current relevance in many parts of the world, capturing how states and authoritarian, far-right political regimes have long targeted the vulnerabilities of refugee, asylum, and racialised migrant communities as 'dangerous problems to be solved' (Morrison, 2019: 5-41). Beneath the manufactured hate and racialised 'great replacement' conspiracies, are long-established techniques of far-right politics, which aim to divert attention away from critiquing those in positions of power, by displacing the structural socio-economic and political roots of human struggle, often linked to widespread inequalities, and instead blaming 'unwanted others' who are constructed as the 'real threats to the nation' (Fromm, 1941; Bauman, 1989). As Bahar argues, the dehumanisation of people crossing human borders is an increasingly urgent issue to document and resist.

All involved in the editing of this special issue are thinking of Halil and his family, along with all who speak out against war, conflict, and dehumanisation amid the threat of persecution.

Introduction

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, resulted in a staggering loss of life and widespread displacement. By the end of 2023, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) reported that 7.2 million people remained displaced within Syria, including 6.5 million refugees and asylum seekers. Consequently, a total of 13.8 million Syrians were forcibly displaced across 137 countries (ibid.). This piece outlines the ongoing situation in Syria regarding the treatment of refugee communities.

As of October 31, 2024, Turkey is hosting 2,935,742 Syrians under temporary protection status. These refugees are distributed across fourteen of Turkey's eighty-one provinces, with the highest concentrations in border areas. For example, Gaziantep hosts 412,354 Syrians (16.0% of its population), Hatay has 222,627 (12.6%), Mardin has 46,499 (4.97%), and Sanliurfa has 243,405 (9.91%). Kilis, a smaller province, has an exceptionally high concentration, with 64,116 Syrians (29.24%). Other southern provinces, such as Adana (211,977 or 8.54%), Mersin (188,214 or 8.85%), and Kahramanmaras (83,275 or 6.94%), also have significant populations of Syrian refugees. Larger, more economically significant provinces, such as Ankara (85,586 or 1.45%), Bursa (169,049 or 5.00%), Izmir (115,477 or 2.51%), Kayseri (80,207 or 5.26%), and Konya (119,404 or 4.89%), host a smaller proportion of refugees. Istanbul has the most significant number of Syrians, with 511,645 individuals, accounting for approximately 3.16% of the province's population (MoI, 2024). The demographic impact is particularly pronounced in the smaller southern provinces.

According to the UNHCR (2024), as of November 7, 2024, there are 3,085,056 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey. The discrepancies between the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and UNHCR data likely stem from the Turkish government's use of "temporary protection" for Syrians. Meanwhile, the UNHCR refers to them as "registered refugees." As of December 31, 2023, Turkey's population was 85,372,377 (TUIK, 2024), with 57,774 Syrians living in camps as of May 9, 2024 (Mülteciler Derneği, 2024). The Turkish government has primarily managed the care of these refugees with its resources, supplemented by assistance from the European Union.

In 2014, Turkey introduced the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which established a temporary protection status for Syrians. This law guarantees them the right to remain in Turkey until the Syrian conflict is resolved and provides access to essential services such as healthcare, education, social assistance, and, to some extent, the labor market. However, these rights are not sufficiently supported by policies that protect Syrians from discrimination and hate speech.

This opinion piece highlights how the circulation of online hate speech against Syrians in Turkey, sometimes perpetuated by established political parties, may provide the context for specific incidents of street violence. Drawing on political speeches and widely available social media videos, the piece aims to underscore the vulnerable situation of Syrians who have fled the civil war in their country, only to face ongoing discrimination and exploitation despite the legal protections that international agreements and national legal provisions should offer.

Hate Speech, Marginalization, and Criminalization of Syrians

Hate speech occurs in various social contexts, including political disputes, creative expression, professional sports, and workplace environments. Hate speech is a wilful public statement intended to denigrate a person as representative of a specific group (Paz et al, 2020: 1), typically targeting members of a social minority. Consequently, we can categorize it as sexist, racist, xenophobic, ageist, fatphobic, or homophobic, among other classifications (Di Fátima, 2023, 11). This phenomenon is particularly prevalent against Syrians in Turkey, primarily through new social media.

Anti-Syrian sentiment in Turkey refers to the prevailing social reaction to the influx of Syrians into urban areas due to irregular migration (Yükseker et al., 2022, 9). Anti-Syrian factions assert that Turkey is, as expressed by one of the widely shared X hashtags, "quietly occupied" by Syrian forces.

Social and news media often portray Syrians as either "replacing Turkish workers" or as criminals involved in "drug smuggling, sexual harassment, rape, theft, harassment, violence, and other forms of street and property crime" (Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021, 2249; Yükseker et al., 2022), illustrating their ongoing

criminalization, which follows typical tropes of populist politics and far-right rhetoric.

Primarily raised by the populist Zafer (Victory) Party and its leader, Mr. Ümit Özdağ, displaced Syrians have become a highly contentious political issue on the agenda. Mr. Özdağ argues that Turkey is heading toward a civil war. Aiming to create moral panic by exaggerating the risk posed by Syrian people (Cohen, 2011 [1972]), particularly during the latest presidential and parliamentary elections in 2023, the Victory Party prioritized the 'Syrian issue' on its political agenda. Mr. Özdağ has garnered significant positive attention from the public, especially from young people who may feel the effects of societal instability most acutely, and his party has consistently scapegoated Syrians to gain consensus.

These populist narratives create tension and expose Syrians to vulnerability, harassment, and mobbing in their workplaces and on the streets. For example, on August 10, 2021, a confrontation between a group of Syrians and locals in Ankara resulted in the tragic death of a young boy. The tension escalated the following day when Turkish people targeted the homes, vehicles, and shops of Syrians living in these neighborhoods. The words of a young man, aged 15-16, who participated in these events and has his face partially covered in a related video are telling:

> *"If they (authorities) give us half an hour, we will send them (Syrians) away as a nation; the aim is not to kill"* (BBC News, 2021).

This indicates possible reasons behind the attack and seems to suggest political and media discourse surrounding 'the invasion' or 'replacement'. This further illustrates how Syrians, who are marginalized through online verbal means, can be violently attacked in Syria, despite the protections that humanitarian laws should provide.

The precarious situation faced by Syrians in Turkey under international protection leads to increased marginalization, discrimination, and exploitation. Often, Syrians are compelled to accept irregular working conditions and exploitative jobs, are hesitant to voice their grievances, and suffer from human rights abuses (Yükseker et al., 2022). For many Syrian men, working has become essential to support their families; however, taking jobs at a young age has been shown to contribute to higher school dropout rates (Yükseker et al. 2022, 8).

Due to restrictions on the right to work, working-age refugees may resort to informal and irregular employment, often earning inadequate wages that are significantly lower than Turkey's minimum wage, primarily in the textile, services, construction, and education sectors. This situation arises because these "protected" Syrians, despite receiving essential public services like healthcare and education, cannot legally work in Turkey because of their temporary status. To secure legal employment, Syrians must apply for residency permits; however, the bureaucratic hurdles and limitations associated with this process make it exceedingly challenging.

In contrast, and perhaps reflecting how Syrian communities are framed as a 'threat' by politicians and media outlets, some locals argue that Syrians are 'responsible' for rising unemployment and higher rent prices. Furthermore, some locals claim that Syrians have 'unfair economic advantages' because they can open unlicensed businesses and are not subject to the tax requirements imposed on citizens.

Nationalist and exclusionary content has been found to predominate on social media sites (Öztürk and Ayvaz, 2018). For instance, terms like 'traitor', 'potential threat', and 'source of the country's economic problem' on YouTube portray Syrian refugees in a hostile, discriminatory, and hateful light (Aslan, 2017; Filibeli & Ertuna, 2021: 2249). As a result, it is unsurprising to witness the rise in anti-Syrian sentiments and attitudes. One notable example involves a suspect who explained in court after being called to testify about the death of a 10-year-old boy killed by a shotgun for allegedly making noise in Gaziantep, "I thought the children were Syrian. I didn't think Turkish children were so ill-behaved" (Refugee Agency, 2024). This tragic testimony captures the prevalence of prejudice against Syrians in Turkey.

Political Parties and Campaigns

Harmful and dehumanizing discourses about migration have increasingly been utilized by political groups that exploit migrants and refugees as scapegoats for deep-rooted societal issues and anxieties,

often for political or monetary gain, particularly during election campaigns. Candidates centered their campaign rhetoric on Syrian refugees, with numerous themes specifically crafted to address Turkish voters' concerns regarding employment and housing.

The targeting of societal anxieties is particularly evident in a TV show where Mr. Özdağ, who does not hesitate to threaten Syrians under temporary protection, argues: "As your stay here gets longer, you feel the nerves of the Turkish people who welcome you here with hospitality get tense too" (Haberiniz, 2023). Connecting with Mr. Özdağ, who repeatedly claims that Turkey is 'being dragged into civil war', he mobilizes nationalist othering by establishing 'outsiders and insiders', asserting that those 'who say "Syrians should stay in Turkey" are traitors!' (Abluka, 2024). Mr. Özdağ declares that he founded the Victory Party to end this civil war and adds, "All refugees will go back when the Victory Party is in power."

Through this anti-migration nationalism, and amid very real socio-economic struggles, the Victory Party has become a beacon of hope for anti-immigrant sentiments, especially among the youth. This use of migration as a political and electoral tool is also coupled with a greater emphasis on criminalizing communities in highly vulnerable positions, labeling them as a 'security concern'. In a recent TV show, Mr. Özdağ (2024) said:

> *"I have no issue with foreign workers in Turkey. They contribute positively. My concern lies with those foreigners who become a burden to Turkey and depend on the Turkish state. The Zafer Party is opposed to mass migration, particularly against the illegal immigration of unskilled, jobless, and vulnerable individuals. As a result, there is increasing worry that Turkey's streets may become unsafe."*

In the securitization process, particularly women and migrant groups, including those who arrived from Afghanistan, are utilized to emphasize the gravity of the issue. On the same TV show, once again, Mr. Özdağ attempted to heighten the sense of insecurity, fear of crime, and victimization among the public by targeting women to increase their feelings of insecurity:

> *"People who are originally from Afghanistan have begun to compare Turkey to Afghanistan. It is that unsafe. 74% of women do not feel safe. 62% of men also feel unsafe on the streets"* (Özdağ, 2024).

Continuing to discuss the sense of insecurity felt by a migrant from Afghanistan, he went on to say:

> *"In a TV interview in Izmir yesterday, someone mentioned that things were different in 2015. Everything has changed in recent years. These migrations no longer make me feel safe. When I came from Afghanistan in 2015, this was a very safe city. Now it has become like Afghanistan"* (ibid.).

Comparing Turkey to Afghanistan makes the contrast even more pronounced, considering that Afghanistan is a country linked to significant insecurity for women.

To justify claims of needing 'take action' regarding migration and citizenship rights, these rhetorics seek to pit one group of migrants against another while employing stereotypical gendered tropes to emphasize, and possibly exploit, sexist discourses of 'protection'. It appears to be urging males to act to protect women, echoing how the 2001 war in Afghanistan was seemingly also launched to 'save women'.

The level of normalization of prejudice against Syrians is such that even the titles of some shared videos are discriminatory. For instance, a YouTube video is titled: "Syrians cannot leave their homes…There is garbage everywhere," referring to the dehumanizing trope of uncleanliness attributed to Syrians. In the video below, the YouTuber shares life in Şenyurt Street, known as the "Syrian neighborhood," where Syrians make up the majority in Gaziantep province, which borders Syria. The YouTuber, who has previously visited this neighborhood, compares his current observations with those from his last visit. He emphasizes that there are fewer people on the streets than during his previous visit, and the shops run by Syrians are closed. A Turkish shopkeeper claims that the documents of Syrian shopkeepers have deficiencies, which prevent them from opening their shops due to fear of facing fines from the relevant authorities. Turkish shopkeepers claim that they pay their taxes, while Syrian shopkeepers do not. The video also highlights the removal of Arabic signs from shops owned by Syrians. The large open area where Syrians once set up the market is now empty. The YouTuber points to the garbage on the street and adds:

"Many Syrian neighborhoods we visited have hygiene problems" (Kola, 2024).

The comments made on the video are as crucial as the content of the video itself in revealing how nationalist, racist, anti-migration language and dehumanization may be shaping reactions to vulnerable communities in everyday life. For example, comments left by YouTube viewers include:

> *"Isn't it a crime to open a business without a license, not to pay taxes, and to operate without insurance? Who allowed this lawlessness to continue? I wish they would all return to their lands. What will happen tomorrow? They will increase. Why should our children bother with them? Being guests should end. They are not our brothers. We don't need their taxes. Even their surroundings are filthy. The policy that the state has been following is wrong. Let them go; we don't want them! They have overstepped their limits. Please don't give them shops; don't give them houses; don't sell them property; let them go. Look and observe where there are Arabs; there is almost no peace or cleanliness. I don't want Syrians in my country. We have no patience left"* (Refugee Agency, 2024).

All these comments demonstrate how many in Turkey seem to buy into these videos and their narrative, which build on typical tropes of the migrant as dirty and as a burden to the country. This reflects the broader circulation of hate speech promoted by political parties for their gain. This set of comments further illustrates how these sentiments may make Syrians more hesitant to work openly in specific neighborhoods.

On December 8, 2024, armed insurgents seized the Syrian city of Damascus, forcing long-standing leader President Bashar al-Assad to flee the country. This action follows 13 years of civil conflict and effectively marks the end of the strict reign of the Assad dictatorship (Bakkour, 2025). In Turkey, Syrian refugees celebrated the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on Sunday. People gathered in the central square of Kilis, a border city in southern Turkey, waving Syrian and Turkish flags. In Hatay province, near the Syrian border, some individuals expressed a desire to return home after years of living in Turkey (Çelik 2025; Smith 2024).

Turkey has expressed its support for Syria's autonomy (Çekebilir, 2024). While visiting Damascus in December 2022, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan stated that the priority in Syria is "to achieve national reconciliation, to ensure economic development, and to create conditions that will enable Syrians who have been separated from their country for years to return to their homeland." (in Çekebilir, 2024).

Turkey, a significant economy in the region with a robust construction industry, acknowledges its ability to rebuild Syria, which has endured extensive devastation over the past decade regarding its economy, infrastructure, and services. Projects aimed at repairing Syria's roads, airports, energy, and electrical infrastructure have already been announced by Turkey's ministries of transportation, energy, and natural resources (ibid.).

Conclusion

Since 2011, there has been a barrage of hate propaganda and disinformation targeting Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey. People are discussing a systematic operation that employs artificial intelligence and other technical tools to create numerous fake accounts solely for this purpose. Discriminatory and racist messages have a clear visibility advantage on social media and other online platforms, as they tend to accumulate likes and thus gain value for these platforms. Intensive criticism from politicians like Mr. Özdağ has asserted that Turkey is facing a 'silent invasion', fostering fears that irregular migration will disrupt its demographic structure. The claim that 'demography is disrupted' seems to imply that the population should consist of a specific ethnic or religious composition. Amid this harmful political rhetoric, some view even a slight increase in the number of Syrians as a threat.

However, Turkey is a country with diverse ethnic, religious, sectarian, and belief origins. It's essential to recognize that these speeches can potentially lead to severe discrimination and even violent racist incidents with tragic consequences. As a result, Syrians are viewed with suspicion, and they have become targets of hate-based crimes by individuals they do not even know. These discourses and narratives, therefore, must be stopped.

While some opposition political parties specifically highlight the serious problems faced by refugees and criticize the government, they also use language that is far from humane, incorporating discrimination, racism, and hate speech. This issue is compounded by the fact that these parties tend to rely on false data, and the government fails to provide accurate information about Syrians. Additionally, some claim that these criminal incidents against Syrians and the subsequent arrests are politically organized, making it more difficult to portray these violent incidents as "spontaneous events" or "the people's instant reaction." This political atmosphere of hate speech, criminalization of Syrians, and contention undermines the foundations of social peace in Turkey, hindering the development of effective immigration policies that could positively influence the country's domestic and foreign policy.

Even after the fall of the Assad regime, a sustainable political resolution in Syria seems unlikely while hostilities continue. In the absence of a resolution to the conflict in Syria, simply calling for Syrians to 'go back to their country' does not seem to address the concerns of those Syrians who are understandably hesitant to return home, considering the complexity and unresolved nature of governance in Syria (Fraser and Wilks 2024). As we have explained, Turkish officials have made statements to assist in rebuilding Syria's roads, airports, energy, and electrical infrastructure. However, these further developments in the conflict in Syria will not necessarily resolve the issues of international protection for refugee communities in Turkey.

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