

FROM INFORMATION TO PERCEPTION: A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS, MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN TURKEY



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PREFACE

As individuals living in Istanbul, the idea of a project on Syrians and other asylum-seekers, immigrants and refugees whom we have been, whether consciously or not, living together with was brought forward during a routine conversation. Our curiosity on the perceptions of these people, whom we or others around us are talking about everyday, and the sources of these perceptions has been the driving force for this research.

The biggest contribution for the development of our idea into a research project was undoubtedly made by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in Turkey. We are also grateful to Assoc. Prof. Emre Erdoğan for all his support for our project. We hope that this study will open up the way for further research on how Syrians other asylum-seeker, immigrant and refugee groups are perceived by the individuals from different segments of the society.

FROM INFORMATION TO PERCEPTION: A STUDY ON THE PERCEPTION OF ASYLUM-SEEKERS, MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN TURKEY

ASYLUM-SEEKERS, IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN TURKEY

In Turkey, a transit country with its geopolitical position, total number of international asylum-seekers, refugees and irregular immigrants (ASRIs) under temporary protection is over 3.5 million.¹ The civil war in Syria that started in 2011 displaced nearly 10 million people and Turkey pursued an open-border policy to provide protection for displaced Syrians from the beginning of the conflict onwards (Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016). According to the statistics of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 3,079,914 registered Syrian Refugees living in Turkey.² According to the report of the Freedom Research Association, only 8% of the Syrian Refugees registered in Turkey live in 25 refugee camps located in 10 cities, while the remaining 92% live in cities (Erdoğan, Kavukçuer & Çetinkaya, 2017). This makes the Syrian refugees a social fact as well as a central matter of debate.

Of all Syrian refugees in Turkey, 44% are younger than 18 years of age and 72% are women and children in need of special protection (Erdoğan et al, 2017). Of all Syrian children refugees, only 36% have access to state-sponsored education, while remaining 64% either get an informal education or do not get any education at all (Ibid). As for the working conditions, while certain steps have been taken to provide Syrian refugees with the legal rights enjoyed by working Turkish citizens, only a very small portion have obtained working permit (Korkmaz, 2017). At least 400.000 Syrian refugees are estimated to be illegally employed in Turkey

¹ For more detailed statistical information, see the website of the Directorate General of Migration Management <http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik/goc-istatistikleri> 363 378

² Syria Regional Refugee Response, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>

(Erdoğan et al, 2017). When considered in tandem with the high unemployment rate in Turkey (10.5%, April 2017), this raises questions regarding the impact on Syrian refugees on job security in Turkey (Ibid).

MEDIA AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS, IMMIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Many studies have so far drawn attention to the fact that media plays an important role in shaping the prevalent perception and discourses in public about immigrants and refugees. It can be inferred from these studies that by means of portrayals that solely emphasize potential threats for host societies media may not only encourage the marginalization of immigrants and refugees but also provide ready justifications for their dehumanization and consequent outcomes (Esses, Medinaw & Lawson, 2013). By disseminating political messages and taking certain positions, media can be both supportive of and opposed to refugees' existence (Blinder et al, 2011).

There are various viewpoints as to how immigrants and refugees are framed and presented. The prevalent framing process is divided into three phases, which are as follows: the construction of information by political elites, the application of frames by the media and the impact of frames on individual opinions (Heibling, 2004). While ideological positions are important in construction of information on immigration, immigrants and refugees, it should also be taken into consideration whether the constructed information and discourses are supported by any political party (Slothuus & Vreese, 2010).

The second phase, the application of the frame by the media, is at least as important as the construction of the frame. One of the reasons why media has the aforementioned power is that the perceptual position against immigration policies is dependent on certain cleavages substantially cared by people such as race, ethnicity and class (Heinmeuller & Hiscox, 2010). This factor is based on studies carried on within the discipline of psychology, which emphasizes that in order to understand immigration as a complex phenomenon, we should first

understand the mental representation of immigration (Cook, 1985; Schwarz, 1998; Wyer & Carlston, 1994). The fact that mental images of immigration are likely to vary across individuals highlights the importance of investigating how these mental images affect individuals' judgments about immigration and immigration policy (Wyer & Carlston, 1994).

Referring to the analyses of Blinder based on perception of immigrants, immigration attitudes and news coverage of immigration in British media, a study in the field emphasizes that the public perception of immigrants and immigration created by the media may not match the reality (reported by Blinder et al, 2011). Blinder strikingly reveals the differentiation between the "imagined immigration" from the real immigration by comparing immigrant profiles in the minds of people to the group of immigrants targeted by the social policies of the state (2013). Another important expression of this finding was revealed, when British people were asked about their opinions on immigrants. Despite the fact that students make up the largest group of immigrants in Britain, the study reveals that British people have mostly refugees in mind when asked about immigrants (Ibid).

Another study reveals what role media plays in western societies in promoting the 'de-humanization' of immigrants and refugees (Esses, Medianu & Lawson, 2013). According to this study, media representation of immigrants and refugees that shape the popular perception is one of the important dynamics of the process of 'de-humanization'. Common media portrayals include certain 'imagined depictions' that suggest that 'spread infectious diseases, that refugee claimants are often bogus, and that terrorists may gain entry to western nations disguised as refugees' (Ibid). Furthermore, a report titled 'Islam in Europe' reveals that 71% of all the news and stories on immigrants in the Norwegian media in 2009 were found to be problem-focused (reported by Esses et al, 2013). This inevitably shapes the public perception of immigrants and exacerbates the divergence between the 'imagined immigration' and 'real immigration'.

The fact that they will unlikely return home anytime soon and with their increasing number living outside refugee camps, the refugees started

to be considered as here to stay rather than non-permanent guests. This compelled the government to meet refugees' needs and provide them with opportunities of integration (Kirişçi, 2014). Meanwhile, Turkish people became increasingly irritated about certain rights that 'guests' obtained in the field of education and health (Nielsen, 2016). Moreover, 'Syrians were no longer viewed as the victims of a horrible civil war, but as people who disturbed the peace and harmony of communities, and were taking advantage of the Turkish government' (Ibid). Another study suggests that three factors affect perception of Syrian refugees: demographic/ethnic transformation in the region, sectarian factors that increase doubts towards refugees and economic burden perceived by local people (Nevruz & Çukurçayır, 2015). For İçduygu, exacerbated by the 'sense of competition' in certain regions, certain social and economic aids and possibilities provided for the Syrians brought about a range of bottom-up reactions from the society (2017). The critiques of social groups that declare themselves to be in need of economic aid, that object to the privileged treatment for Syrians and that believe that they are threatened by various religious and ethnic identities were the early examples of the politicization of refugee crisis (Ibid).

Studies have also noted that the mainstream media in Turkey have reproduced discriminatory discourses on Syrian refugees (Doğanay & Keneş, 2016). These discriminatory discourses have been observed to be based on the existence of refugees as a security threat and an economic burden, objectification of refugees by emphasizing how much money was spent for them, sentimentalization of the reaction against refugees and the emphasis on 'illegal refugees' that portrayed all refugees as illegal (Ibid; Erdoğan, 2017). Moreover, the metaphors used by the media for refugees have been observed to be functional for discriminatory and racist discourses. For instance, in the news coverage about the collective entry of refugees into Turkey, they were depicted as a threat or danger by means of metaphors such as 'influx', 'flood' and 'wave' (Keneş, 2016). On the other hand, in the news coverage where economy-related metaphors were used, refugees were either portrayed as an economic burden through words such as cost, expense, bill and spending, or presented as useful

commodities that contribute to the economy by lightening employers' burden through adjectives such as undeclared, uninsured and cheap (Ibid).

Like in the conventional media, refugees are often described by discriminatory language in the social media as well. A study that analyzes Turkish social media users' representations of Syrian refugees in four different social communication platforms (Ekşi Sözlük, İnci Sözlük, İTÜ Sözlük and Uludağ Sözlük) reveals that a vast majority of relevant entries reflect a negative social representation of Syrian refugees (Özdemir & Özkan, 2016). In the content of such entries, Syrian refugees are labeled as 'so called victims of war, beggar, bindle stiff, coward, traitor and bully' (Ibid). Another study that analyzes tweets and pictures with the #refugeesNOTwelcome hashtag that became very popular when refugees were so visible in European media reveals that negative discourses about male refugees in particular predominantly depicts them as 'rapist', 'terrorist' or 'coward deserters' (Rettberg & Gajjala, 2016).

Last but not least, the way that the refugees are framed in conventional and social media is affected by government's discourses and foreign policy. According to a research of Freedom Research Association based on media review (digital and local) between 2011 and 2016, the framing of Syrian refugees in various media organs is based on foreign policy and the future of Syrian regime rather than the humanitarian and sociological dimensions of the issue (Erdoğan et al, 2017). Moreover, main themes in the news coverage on Syrian refugees changed over time from 2011 to 2016. They were dealt with as 'the future of the Assad Regime' in 2013-2014, while the main discussion matter shifted to 'Turkey-EU Visa Liberalization Negotiations' in 2014-2015 and 'Turkish citizenship' in 2016 (Ibid).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, focus group interviews were employed as the data collection method. In total three interviews were conducted, each with a 10-person focus group. Each interview lasted from 60 to 75 minutes. The groups were made of women aged 26-60 years, men aged 26-60 years and

youth aged 18-25 years. Of all 30 participants who reside in Istanbul, 16 were men and 14 were women. Participants were selected based on quota method to make sure that the groups be representative in terms of socio-economic status, political party identification and educational background. The quota distribution is as follows:

Focus Groups	Number of Participants	Date	Political Party Identification
Women aged 26-60 years	10	June 12, 2017	4 AKP / 3 CHP / 2 MHP / 1 HDP
Men aged 26-60 years	10	June 12, 2017	4 AKP / 3 CHP / 2 MHP / 1 HDP
Youth aged 18-25 years	10	June 16, 2017	4 AKP / 2 CHP / 3 MHP / 1 HDP

Table 1. Focus Groups

Before the focus group interviews, the participants filled an information form where they were asked 23 questions regarding the media platforms that they follow, their general point of view on the ASRIs and ASRIs’ demographic structure. During the interviews, the participants were asked questions in parallel to those in the information form regarding their opinions on the ASRIs -particularly on Syrian refugees-, the rights that they think ASRIs have and their imagination of co-existence in the future. In all three interviews, the discussion focused on Syrian refugees. Moreover, four examples of unfounded news were picked from the website ‘teyit.org’ and the participants were asked whether they ever heard about these news, what they think about it and whether or not they think these news were accurate.³

The data collected from the information forms and the records of the focus group discussions were analyzed. The concepts used during the content analysis generated through free reading of transcriptions and then all texts were critically coded. The concepts employed in the coding are as follows:

³ “Türkiye’de yaşayan Suriyelilerle ilgili internette yayılan 6 yanlış bilgi.” Date of access: (22.07.2017) (<https://teyit.org/turkiyede-yasayan-suriyelilerle-ilgili-internette-yayilan-6-yanlis-bilgi/>)

Encounter – Interaction: In this research there are two main concepts that define the relations of the participants with the ASRIs and particularly with Syrian refugees. First one is ‘encounter’, which refers to the situation where relations remain limited and superficial despite co-existence in social life. Concourses with Syrian refugees in public transportation vehicles -particularly metrobus-, neighborhoods and schools are typical examples of encounter. Second one is interaction, which refers to the social situation where participants have deeper personal relations with the ASRIs in their business and private lives. Friendship in the neighborhood or working place can be evaluated within the context of interaction.

Speculation and Rumor: These concepts are employed, in case participants’ discourses on the ASRIs are based on hearsays.

Empathy: Empathy is employed to refer to the situation where participants, without having a personal interaction, try to establish an emotional tie with the ASRIs by sympathizing with the conditions that they live in. For instance, the case of a participant who would like Syrian refugees not to be in Turkey but still express sorrow is evaluated within the context of empathy.

Perception of Security: In this research, the conception of security is twofold. First, it refers to the discourses of participants who feel under threat in their living space. Second, security becomes a concern also for those who think that job opportunities are under threat with the arrival of refugees. The following quotation is coded for both conceptions of security:

‘Well, we, too, face problems in terms of jobs, both men and women. Since they are employed with lower wages, we might remain jobless. I am quite discontented about that. Another issue is that when they move to a neighborhood, they can get crowded quite easily, which disturbs local people. I feel bothered, for instance, in our building (...) we cannot walk on the streets.’ (Woman, 36)

Nationalism: The concept of nationalism is employed, when the participants express their opinions on the ASRIs, whether positive or

negative, by using nationalistic references such as motherland, country, defense, history and military.

‘Our soldiers went there to fight but they are here and enjoy everything sitting by the sea. I am okay with taking care of their children but the adults shall go to their country and fight.’ (Woman, 35)

Distinction Between Man and Woman/Child ASRIs: This concept is employed, when participants divide ASRIs to two groups, men and women/children, and have different opinions for each group.

Perception of Guilt: In this research perception of guilt is twofold. First one refers to the ‘petty crimes’ such as robbery and fraud, whereas the second one refers to the serious crimes such as kidnapping and stabbing.

De-Humanization: The concept of de-humanization refers to the case, where participants separate ASRIs in Turkey from human characteristics and values, and consider them as inferior and barbaric.

Perception of Injustice: It refers to the case, where participants state that the ASRIs have supposedly more rights than Turkish citizens.

Political Criticism: It refers to the participants’ critical approach towards national and international policies on the ASRIs.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

According to the data collected from the information forms, participants made a clear distinction between Syrians and other ASRI groups. This distinctive approach manifested itself during focus group discussions as well. The attitude towards Syrian refugees is observed to be more negative than towards other ASRI groups (Afghan, Uzbek, African etc.). In this section, participants’ perceptions of Syrians and the ASRI and the factors that shape these perceptions are analyzed.

1. Media and Perceptions of ASRIs

In order to evaluate the effect of media consumption over the their perceptions of ASRIs and particularly Syrian refugees, participants were asked questions both in the information form and during the focus group

discussions regarding their media preferences. Participants' answers to these questions were compared to their opinions and discourses on the ASRIs. In both group-based and individual-based analysis, no major discrepancy was observed between participants' news sources. According to the information forms, all participants follow the news. The group made of youth follows the news less frequently, whereas the group of middle-age men is the one that follows the news the most. Moreover, most of the participants stated that they followed the news through conventional (particularly newspapers and evening news bulletins) and social media (digital news portals, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, social communication platforms and Whatsapp) and that almost all of their news sources were local ones.

In the analysis of the collected data, no major correlation has been noticed between the perception of ASRIs and media preferences (conventional or social). Nevertheless, reliability of the conventional media has been observed to be remarkably higher compared to that of social media among participants. Therefore, it can be concluded that the conventional media, though indirectly, plays a bigger role in shaping the perception of ASRIs. For instance, during the discussion with the group of middle-age men, a piece of unfounded news has been shown to the participants and they were asked to comment. A participant that had expressed his negative opinions on Syrians made the following comment:

- (...) *The news can be unfounded, if it is on the internet* (Man, 35)
- *Where should it be published in order for you to rely on its accuracy?*
(Moderator)
- *If it is from a newspaper or news bulletin on TV, it may be accurate*
(Man, 35)

Although no major correlation has been noticed between the media preferences (conventional or social) and the perception of ASRIs, media representations of Syrians in conventional and social media that were dwelled on the literature review have been observed to be parallel to the concepts that the participants use in their discourses. These concepts will be analyzed in detail below.

Besides, another important finding of the research is concerned with the concept of media literacy. Media literacy refers to the readers’ capacity of critically approaching to the news considering the limitations inherent to its sources. Even though media literacy does not directly affect participants’ perceptions, it is considered as an indirect factor since it triggers critical judgment.

The effect of media literacy manifested itself, when participants were shown unfounded – stimulant news. Youth and middle-age men questioned the source of the news and took the possibility into consideration that it might be fabricated. As for the middle-age women, the tendency to take the presented news as accurate has been observed to be higher, regardless of socio-economic status, party affiliation and educational background. The fact that no other factor including interaction can explain this reveals the indirect effect of media literacy.

Unfounded – Stimulant News shown to the Participants		Media Type	News Source
1	<i>‘Syrians get the test tube-baby treatment for free’</i>	Conventional Media	Newspaper
2	<i>‘Syrians join the queue in front of PTT offices to receive their salaries’</i>	Social Media	Twitter
3	<i>‘Syrians can attend any university without any precondition’</i>	Social Media	Twitter
4	<i>‘Syrians line up in Gaziantep to acquire citizenship’</i>	Social Media	Twitter

Table 2. Unfounded – Stimulant News shown to the Participants

More precisely, young participants take a critical approach towards unfounded and stimulant news considering that social media may be used for manipulative and provocative purposes. Moreover, during the focus group discussion a young participant checked the accuracy of the news through smart phone and made public that the news was unfounded. Among four unfounded and stimulant news listed above only second news was unanimously considered ‘may be accurate’ by young participants. But they preserved their critical approach even during the discussion of this news. The fact that the source of headlines is social media damages the credibility of their content in the perception of young participants, which means that the focus group made of youth is more competent in terms of

media literacy. Likewise, according to the data collected from the information forms, young participants use social media much more than the participants of other focus groups. For example, the opinions of two different participants whose perceptions of ASRIs are poles apart are as follows:

'If we took social media seriously, we would fight each other.' (Man, 19)

'This is a tweet. Nobody can know if it is accurate or not. I could have tweeted this as well.' (Man, 20).

A similar opinion was expressed during the discussion in the focus group of middle-age men as follows:

'Internet is a waste bin of news. People believe anything they see in Facebook, (...) even things that are totally irrelevant.' (Man, 44)

Speculation and Rumor: This research indicates that speculations and rumors heard from third parties are as an important news source as media. It has been observed that participants develop their perceptions of and opinions on Syrians and other ASRIs based on rumors and speculations. Particularly during the discussion in the group of middle-age women, speculations and rumors were often referred to as sources of opinions, whereas in the groups of middle-age men and youth opinions were rather based on encounter and personal experience.

'(I heard that) their expenses were charged to our utility and water bills and TL 100 was deducted from pensions. Retirees worked so hard to get this pension, why do you deduct TL 100 from my pension?' (Woman, 33)

Furthermore, the participants in their discourses evidently reproduce common media representations that dehumanize Syrians, such as those that portray them 'diseased' or 'disease-spreading' (Esses et al, 2013).

'I believe they spread disease. I am not sure but there are rumors and we are afraid when we go to the hospitals.' (Man, 35)

Encounter – Interaction: In each focus group, it has been found out that regardless of other factors like party affiliation, socio-economic status and educational background, interaction is the most important factor that shape participants’ approach towards Syrians (see Table 3).

Person	Perception	Gender	Age	Education	Profession	Socio-Economic Status	Party Affiliation
1	Positive	Female	36	University	House Wife	x>3000	CHP
2	Negative	Female	34	University	Finance Manager	2400>x>1800	MHP
3	Positive	Male	19	High School	Part-Time	2400>x>1800	AKP
4	Positive	Male	19	High School	Waiter	x>3000	HDP
5	Positive	Male	47	University	Self-Employed	3000>x>2400	AKP
6	Positive	Male	42	High School	Driver	2400>x>1800	AKP

Table 3. Participants who have been in interaction with Syrian Asylum-Seekers, Refugees and Immigrants

It has been found out that the participants that are in interaction with Syrians are more positive about coexistence with them and approach towards news or rumors about them more critically than those who just have an occasional encounter. For instance, below is the prudent reaction of a 42-years old male participant who presents himself to be in close interaction with Syrians towards claims brought up during the focus group discussion that they are ‘cowards, traitors and deserters’:

‘I don’t agree with any participant here. This is a civil war, namely not a war with foreigners. So they are fighting each other in their country and people tell them to fight. With whom? This is a civil war and fellow citizens kill each other. So they are here because they need to. When the war is over, they will all go back. Moreover, there are Syrians in our

building and we have some very good relations. Their child started primary school here and became the top student.’ (Man, 42)

The opinion of a 19-years old male participant who is in interaction with Syrians regarding the claims that Syrians have increased the crime rate in Turkey can be taken as another example:

‘(...) Rape, robbery, murder were reported in the news also five years ago. I don’t believe that Syrians have changed our ethnic structure a lot. There has always been crime. The murderer of Özgecan was a Turk. Although it is launched in the news that Syrians do certain things, we know that Turks or Brits do these as well (...). I don’t believe that it’s all about Syrians. Kurds racketeer in the streets as well. And so do Turks, Armenians... A participant has pointed out that some Syrians’ living standards are so high. Well, why not? This is very normal (...)’ (Man, 19).

During the discussion in the focus group of middle-age women, a 36-years old participant who is in interaction with her Syrian tenants shows empathy towards them and, referring to the pictures of poor Syrians in social media, made the following statement:

‘I seriously told my husband that we should adopt a (Syrian) child who is genuinely in need. We discussed it lots of times and I want it very much but can’t persuade my husband. He doesn’t want it because he thinks he will discriminate.’ (Woman, 36)

2. Factors other than Media and Perceptions of ASRIs

It has been observed that the participants that are not in interaction with Syrian refugees have more security-related concerns. As conceptualized in the section of research methodology, security concerns stand out in two key areas: living space and job opportunities. While there is no evidence that encounter has a positive impact with regard to such security concerns, one can even argue that it has a negative impact. It has been found out that in cases where no interaction is available the participants tend to support negative judgments and opinions on Syrian

refugees based on rumors and speculations. Moreover, the positive impact of interaction can be observed in the expression of security concerns as well.

Security Perception: When asked about their opinions on ASRIs, participants often voiced their security concerns in all discussions.⁴ Perceived security threats were voiced in each group with different frequencies. The group of middle-age women was the one that voiced both types of security concerns the most. As for the middle-age men the concerns about the security of the living area stood out while youth predominantly focused on the unemployment problem.

A young male participant who was looking for a job said:

'I graduated and am looking for a job but there are not as many job opportunities as in the past. They (Syrians) are everywhere. They often pick a quarrel. Conditions of health and working are getting worse.'
(Man, 19)

Concerns regarding the security in the living area as expressed by two participants are as follows:

'(...) I encounter them (Syrians) too often. When it's dark at night, who knows what might happen (...)' (Woman, 23)
'They (Syrians) are very crowded and are everywhere both day and night. Most of them don't work and hinder our work as well. Culture is different. Compared to Turks they are more of bandits' (Woman, 35)

Another participant voiced his concerns regarding both life security and job security. For him Syrians are a threat in many ways:

'Most importantly, they increased the unemployment rate. They certainly created unrest both for moral and security-related reasons. I am not positive about them whatsoever.' (Man, 33)

Perception of Guilt: Some participants took the security concerns a step farther by declaring Syrians potential criminals. Although the group of

⁴ In a study supported by the Marshall Fund and carried out through interviews in 16 cities and 1018 participants, 84% of the participants stated that they were concerned about refugees coming from Syria, whereas only 14% of participants stated that they didn't have such a concern (2015).

youth almost never brought up this issue, six of ten middle-age women linked Syrians with petty crimes like robbery and fraud. While linking them with some serious crimes, a participant said:

'(...) instead of others, one should focus on Syrians, I believe. Stabbings, kidnappings... Many things happened after Syrians had arrived.'
(Woman, 34)

During the discussion in the group of middle-age men, a participant claimed that Syrians were not fined or charged if they commit crimes and even the participants who are in interaction with Syrians did not object to this argument. The conversations that link Syrians and other ASRIs with the most serious crimes were held in this group.

'Lately, Sultangazi was full of riot police. Two Afghans disturbed a girl in the street and a Turk who saw this suddenly came down and stabbed them. How come can I let my daughter get married with those people?' (Man, 44)

'Afghans are unregistered; look at the Reina attack and what happened thereafter. It is dangerous for the country that so many foreigners live here and that most of them are unregistered. In the case of a murder, or robbery, you can find the suspects immediately if they are Turkish citizens. If not, you can not.' (Man, 60).

Nationalism: It has been found that nationalism is one of the factors that shape participants' perception of ASRIs and particularly Syrians. Interestingly enough, both empathy towards Syrians and its anti-thesis were framed through nationalism and national historical symbols. During the discussions in the groups of youth and middle-age men, it was suggested that Syrians, as a part of the Ottoman Empire, were coherent with Turkish society. A young participant, for instance, referred to Syrians that fought together with Turks in Gallipoli War:

'Until a century ago, which is a very recent history, we were living in each other's pockets. They were rule by a governor, since their land was conquered by Selim I in 1517. So we were living in each other's pockets until they separated in 1920. They also fought with us in Gallipoli so I am happy that we help them.' (Man, 19)

A female participant, on the other hand, accused Syrians of being 'cowards, traitors and bullies' while criticizing the opportunities provided for them:

'Our soldiers go there and fight while they are enjoying everything at the seaside. Well, we can take care of their children but they must go there and fight.' (Woman, 35)

Distinction Between Man and Woman/Child ASRIs: Another interesting issue brought up in each focus group's discussion as a factor that shapes perceptions of Syrians is the distinction between men and women/children. It has been observed that participants are mostly more tolerant towards women and children ASRIs and the opportunities provided for them.

'(...) They take the Syrians to the boats and kill them. That child, they are of course welcome; what can a child do in a war (!) However, powerful adult Syrians shall not come here and steal the job that my fellow citizen needs, this is what I say.' (Man, 44)

The accusations of 'coward, traitor and bully' that are mostly directed towards man ASRIs, too, indicate the fact that participants develop obviously less empathy towards them.

'I am sorry for the children but, of course, not for those who can fight but came here instead. Children, women can't fight of course but I am angry with 20-22 years old who left their country and came here' (Man, 18)

Injustice: During the discussions in all focus groups, particularly in those of youth and middle-age women, the perception of injustice was emphasized. Interestingly enough, a 23-years old female participant who expressed her negative opinions on ASRIs stated that people's negative views towards Syrians would change if the problem of injustice were solved. Participants believe that Syrians were given more rights than Turkish citizens have and this perception was found out to be a major

reason for the negative approach towards them. For instance, a participant said the following:

'(...) I am so angry towards Syrians and I don't feel for them because they are in our land and live in higher standards than we do. They are all rich, I have seen, experienced. In our neighborhood, too, they are Syrians. They are begging with old and dirty clothes but we don't believe. They put on airs with what they took from us. If things continue to happen like this, we will be begging in the near future.' (Woman, 37)

During the focus group discussions, injustice was not addressed one-dimensionally. Participants discussed injustice, wherever they believe Syrians have more rights than they do in realms that are important in their daily life. For instance, a participant who takes the metrobus everyday claimed that Syrians could take it free of charge and added:

'They take the metrobus very often because it is free of charge for them. I see them in metrobus, buses; I mean everywhere. Jellied, as well dressed as me, as young as me, but they enter free of charge. Why?' (Man, 20)

Both youth and middle-age women discussed injustice within the context of education, although the content of the discussions varies, as elaborated below in the section of rights. Moreover, it has been observed that even though for youth perceived injustice is very high, they preferred to discuss it not within the context of Syrians but more generally of the Turkish-foreigner dichotomy. During the discussion of injustice in education, this became even clearer:

- May I ask something? In terms of admission to the universities, are only Syrians or other foreigners such as Greeks etc. too ahead of us? (Man, 19)

- In fact there is no need to particularize this. Not only Syria... Whenever a foreigner comes to our country, they always have advantages that get them ahead of us in the admission to the university. I have seen so many Syrians. (Woman, 23)

Young participants who are university students stated that the ASRIs and particularly Syrians are much more easily accepted to the

universities than they are and have larger scholarship opportunities. In the group of middle-age women, a participant whose daughter was preparing for university entrance exam explained perceived injustice in education as follows:

'(...) Just as my daughter must work hard and prepare for the exam, let their children do the same!' (Woman, 40)

Being in interaction with Syrians seems to be effective in critically approaching towards perceived injustice as well. A young participant who has Syrian friends reacted towards perceived injustice expressed by other participants as follows:

'The system was not good before either. Injustice was always there, even before they arrived. I don't believe that something will change. Syrians arrived and now we are talking about injustice? Injustice was always there.' (Man, 19)

Political Criticism: National policies on immigration and immigrants were often criticized by the participants in the group of middle-age men, whereas such critiques were voiced to a lesser extent by middle-age women. As for youth, they barely made political criticism during focus group discussions. When personal profiles of the critical participants are analyzed, no major correlation was noticed between the tendency to criticize and party affiliation, socio-economic status and educational background. In both groups, the critiques are based on perceived injustice and the lack of socio-economic provisions for the ASRIs.

'In our country they are privileged. If we went to their country, they wouldn't give us one forth of what they get from us, let alone the half of it. The state exaggerates and I believe that we experience injustice.' (Woman, 43)

Participants came up with international political criticism as well. As per the data collected from the information forms, most participants do think that Turkey has done well in order to meet the needs of Syrian

refugees and that other 'Western' states have failed to do so. In all focus group discussions, European states' approach towards Syrian crisis was harshly criticized, as the following dialogue indicates:

- '- The entire Europe spent three billion dollars and we spent 25 billion dollars, says the President. If what we spent is 25 billion, what good was three or six billion dollars going to do? Would it be enough? (Man, 44)*
- Even though they had promised to help!' (Man, 42)*

De-Humanization: During the focus group discussions, a couple of participants developed a de-humanizing and derogatory discourse towards Syrians and linked them with serious crimes. What is striking in these discourses is that de-humanization goes often hand in hand with 'imagined ascriptions' and generalizations. Below is the de-humanizing statement of a 49-years old female participant regarding Syrian ASRIs:

'They reduce the quality. Until I get to the bridge, they settle in five-six places. One of them definitely disturbs you. The aid that they get has never been offered to us (...) They receive at least TL 1500-1600 per capita and still get to the streets instead of finding a place to live in order to make people feel for them and give them something. A friend of mine bought a nice dress and gave it to them. A week later or so she saw them with the same old cloths. They say 'you better didn't buy'.' (Woman, 49)

In this statement, the de-humanizing expression 'they reduce the quality' is combined with a couple of different claims. First, the participant humiliates Syrians accusing them of begging although they receive a salary of TL 1500. Secondly, she consolidates the de-humanizing feature of her discourse by emphasizing on perceived injustice by means of so-called rights provided for Syrians. A 33-years old male participant based his de-humanizing discourse on socio-economic status:

'Our country is in a tough spot anyway; uneducated creeps shall go back. But if there are doctors, professors, businessmen with a lot of money, they shall stay. (Man, 33)

'(...) They reduce the quality of our lives. They may have increased theirs. The quality of our lives is decreasing to the extent that they increase theirs.' (Woman, 23)

Despite the fact that they developed a de-humanizing discourse, youth stated that being Syrian is not solely sufficient to be a good or bad person. For instance, when asked whether they would like to have a Syrian neighbor, a participant who made negative comments on Syrians during the entire discussion said:

'I think, that would vary from person to person. A Turk can be a bad person too. A Syrian too... There is no problem, as long as he/she is a good person.' (Man, 18)

Collective Memory: The final point that needs to be emphasized is that during all focus group discussions participants often refer to the Turks living in Germany. As a part of the collective memory, the experiences of Turks who migrated to Germany in the 1960s and 70s were frequently brought up. Interestingly enough, the references to the experiences of Turks in Germany were used both to show empathy towards Syrians and to criticize the rights and opportunities that Syrians allegedly enjoy in Turkey. During the discussion on workplaces and restaurants around Aksaray and Fatih, a 19-years old male participant supported the initiatives of Syrians, reminding of the Turkish restaurants in Germany:

'There are Turkish restaurants in Germany too. So Europe provided Turks with such an opportunity. So what is wrong if we give them the same right?' (Man, 19)

'It's always the same. Turks living in Germany are so too. Because the state subsidies each child born, they have more children there or in France or Netherlands than they would do here.' (Woman, 49)

Except from the group of middle-age women, referring to the experiences of Turks living in Europe not only tip the scales in Syrians' favor during the discussions but also showed how important past experiences matter for the perception of a similar phenomenon.

3. The Rights Assumed to be provided for Syrians

In the second part of focus group discussions, participants were asked what right they thought Syrians were provided. The following table shows participants' answers distributed by their group.

Focus Groups	Middle-Age Men	Middle-Age Women	Youth
Card - Financial Aid - Salary	Card + A state paid salary of TL 1200-1500	Card + A state paid salary of TL 1100	Card + A state paid salary of TL 1000
Education	Unconditional education in any school – open admission	Unconditional education in any school – open admission	Higher scholarships
Food		Additional financial aid for food	
Health	Free pharmacy and hospital services	Unlimited health services	Priority and free service at the hospitals
Job Opportunities – Insurance		They can be doctor, policemen and civil servants. Before they were uninsured but now they are.	They can work in the textile sector without insurance
Transportation	Right to have Turkish license plate – free public transportation	Free public transportation and private minibuses	Free public transportation
Taxation	Tax immunity	Tax immunity while starting business	Lower taxes
Accommodation		Housing aid from TOKI	Free housing from TOKI

Table 4. Rights Assumed to be provided for Syrians

As Table 4 shows, rights assumed to be provided for Syrian refugees vary from one group to another. It has been found out that the answers of the group of middle-age women are the farthest ones to the reality. Furthermore, the tendency to falsify or challenge the answers was the lowest in that group. In other words, these answers that are not even close to the reality were confirmed by most of the participants in the group. During the discussion on whether or not Syrians have insurance, a participant gave the following striking answer: *‘They are insured by the life’* (Woman, 33).

During the discussion in the group of middle-age men, although many unreal claims were made, counter-arguments were asserted and

those claims were falsified. The following dialogue can be taken as an example:

- *I know that they don't pay taxes. (Man, 42a)*
- *Do you mean, when they start a business? (Moderator)*
- *Yes. (Man, 42a)*
- *As I just mentioned, I have Syrian neighbors and they do pay taxes.*

(Man, 42b)

When it comes to the group of youth, the participants referred to various rights and this caused a dispute within the group. Even though they referred to the same type of rights as other groups, it has been found out that the youth's answers regarding the rights provided to Syrians were the ones that were much closer to the reality. The assumptions that middle-age women and men put forward without an unfounded stimulus - such as the right to be admitted to any university without any condition - were considered as myths in the discussion of the youth. Below is the dialogue between two young participants (one is positive and the other is negative towards Syrians) regarding the right of unconditional admission to the university:

- *Can any student coming from Syria be admitted to any university he/she wants? Is there a measure for this? (Man, 20)*
- *According to this news, yes. (Moderator)*
- *Then it is in fact problematic. (Man, 20)*
- *This is unfounded news. A provocation (!) (Man, 19)*

As explained above, the rights that the participants assume were given to the Syrians comply with the perceived injustice and political critiques. It has been also observed that if a participant's tendency to believe in the accuracy of unfounded news increases, if he/she assumes that what is at stake in that news is a right provided to Syrians.

4. Imagination of a Common Future with Syrians

In the final part of the focus group discussions, the participants were asked whether or not they imagine a common future with Syrians. The following table lists the questions posed to the participants:

1	<i>Shall Syrians go back to their homeland?</i>
2	<i>Shall the ones stay who would like to stay?</i>
3	<i>What would you think of a Syrian neighbor?</i>
4	<i>Shall Turks and Syrians marry with each other?</i>
5	<i>Shall Syrians be given citizenship?</i>

Table 5. Questions regarding the imagination of a Common Future with Syrians

To the question ‘*Shall Syrians go back to their homeland?*’, majority of the participants in each group stated that they would like them to go home once the civil war in Syria is over.⁵ When the same question is reformulated and posed as follows: ‘*Shall the ones stay who would like to stay?*’, majority of the middle-age men and women gave a negative answer. As for the youth, a considerable number of participants stated that they saw no harm, if Syrians stay in Turkey provided that certain conditions are fulfilled.

‘They shall go back. Unemployment, health problems... They don’t only increase the unemployment but all the money in our pockets goes to the Syrians. Nothing is accumulated in the pocket of Turkish nation. They are spending the money that we would spend, the money of our children.’
(Woman, 34)

It should be noticed that in all three focus group discussions, the participants who agreed that Syrians would be able to stay if they want to made the educated/uneducated and/or contributing/noncontributing distinction between the Syrians.

‘Those who are educated and have a profession shall stay.’ (Woman, 49)

⁵ In a study supported by the Marshall Fund and carried out through interviews in 16 cities and 1018 participants, 73% of the participants stated that Syrians had to go home, whereas only 8% of participants expressed their desire for legal arrangement that would allow Syrians to stay here (2015).

'If they think they would be contributing to our society, behave like us, of course they can stay.' (Woman, 19)

Neither middle-age women nor middle-age men seem to be positive about a Syrian neighbor. Particularly, middle-age men usually refer to the question of security to justify their preference not to have any neighbor from the ASRI groups. As for group of the youth, rather than the question of foreignness the participants highlighted the humanitarian dimension of the subject. A participant who supported the idea that Syrians had to go back to their homeland answered that question as follows:

'I don't make a distinction between people on this matter. I don't say I don't like to have a Syrian neighbor but I don't like to have a bad person as my neighbor. Just because of the bad people in my neighborhood, I moved to another area. So my neighbor can be a Syrian as long as he/she is a good person.' (Woman, 23)

When they were asked whether they would allow their children to marry a Syrian, most of the middle-age women and men gave a negative answer. A considerable number of the young participants, on the contrary, said that they would confirm such marriages. Herewith they also criticized ethnic discriminations that they thought were common in the society.

When it comes to the question of citizenship, it has been observed that all participants in the group of middle-age women are negative about it. While middle-age men are, too, predominantly skeptical about it, youth approached to this issue from a more moderate perspective. The most prominent pre-conditions set by the youth for the Syrians to obtain Turkish citizenship areas follows: learning Turkish, marrying Turks and being educated and qualified. Here there are three important finding that should be underlined. First, the proposal of citizenship put forward by the participants is presented as a solution for the problem of perceived injustice. They think that obtaining Turkish citizenship Syrians would lose the privileged position given to them in the area of education and taxation and thus the problem of perceived injustice would be resolved. Below are given the statements of two participants with different party affiliations

and approaches (first one is positive and the second one is negative) to Syrians:

'So, if they obtain citizenship, the terms will be equal.' (Man, 19)
'You are a Syrian but you have a Turkish ID, then you are equal to us. It's so simple.' (Woman, 19)

The second finding is that from the conditions set by the youth in the focus group discussions, it follows that they do not want a multi-cultural future but rather a future in which Syrians would be assimilated.

The third, and the final, finding is that the participants often utilized the experiences of Turks in Germany and emigrated from Bulgaria in their imagination of a common future. Some participants proposed that the pre-conditions set by the German government for Turks to become a full German citizen be applied as a standard for Syrians to obtain Turkish citizenship. Besides, the experiences of Turks that emigrated from Bulgaria to Turkey were often referred to as a precedent for the adaptation issues of Syrians in Turkey.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The general conclusion of all focus group discussions with 30 people is that the participants' perception of Syrians and other ASRIs is predominantly negative. Syrians were described as a threat for people's living area and working opportunities and participants often brought up the potential crimes that they may commit. The discourses of participants include nationalistic elements and are in favor of positive discrimination for women and children. Furthermore, participants remonstrated with Syrians that they believed had more rights than ordinary Turkish citizens and engaged in political criticism against that. Despite the common tendency towards dehumanization, experiences and memories of Turks living in Germany led participants to reconsider their position regarding Syrians and other ASRIs.

It has been found out that as opposed to the common opinion, participants' preference of conventional or social media does not have a major impact over the different perceptions that they developed. The parallels between the media representations emphasized by the earlier studies and the discourses of the participants are thought-provoking, however to draw a conclusion from these parallels requires further research. It has been also observed how important media literacy may be to filter out information that may affect the perception of ASRIs. Therefore, it is more of an issue to improve and promote media literacy.


The data collected from the focus group discussion points to the importance of interaction for the formation of perception of ASRIs. In each group, the perception of the participants that are in interaction with ASRIs has been observed to be clearly different from that of others. It has been found out that these participants do better in showing empathy and approaching critically towards news on ASRIs and are evidently more positive for a common future with ASRIs than the rest of participants. The most important conclusion to be drawn from this research is that the effect of interaction should be profoundly investigated by a further study with a larger sample and that the results of such a study should be taken into consideration in the policy-making processes.

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