


◆ **Research Article**

Syrian Forced Migration and Social Cohesion Process in Türkiye

Bushra BEEGOM R. K.**

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to understand the challenges of war-persecuted asylum seekers accommodated in Türkiye. Firstly, the core purpose of the research is to understand the level of social cohesion of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkish society. Secondly, the study investigates ways Syrian culture could be welcomed into Turkish social life. Additionally, it investigates the contributions given by asylum seekers to Turkish society and the major barriers they face when working with the host society. Another major part of the study examines the extent to which the bureaucratic and political institutions of Türkiye support their social cohesion and subsistence. The study consists of a review of the relevant literature concerning Syrian asylum seekers. It is based on the conventions with Syrians living in Türkiye and input from many experts working on the issue. The major findings revolve around the socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic complexities that must be navigated as part of the social cohesion process between the Syrians and the Turkish host society.

****Corresponding Author:** Bushra Beegom R. K. (Asst. Prof.), University of Kerala, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Sociology, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India ✉ bushrabeegom@keralauniversity.ac.in

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1 Introduction

An influx of Syrian asylum seekers (legally under temporary protection status) into Türkiye began to occur in 2011 because of the civil war. It continued for some years, albeit in recent years, the number of incoming migrants has dropped considerably. In the initial stages, the local people of Türkiye greeted Syrian asylum seekers by showing their famous “Turkish hospitality” and they tried to reflect the values of the “Hijra and Ansar-Muhajir Brotherhood” (Önkal, 2020), which was adopted by the prophet Mohammed (571-632) and his companions at particularly hard times. By the passage of time, an increasing number of the population and longer stays in Türkiye, Syrians living in Türkiye have become a hot topic.

There are many reasons for the influx of Syrian asylum seekers to Türkiye. The similarity in geographical and climatic conditions makes them more attracted to Türkiye. Türkiye hosts the world’s largest asylum seeker population with 3.7 million Syrians under temporary protection and over 33 thousand asylum seekers from different countries under international protection. The largest share of Syrian asylum seekers is living in Istanbul (539.697 people), with the next most populous communities in Gaziantep and Hatay. Kilis is the city where Syrians are most concentrated, at 42.4% of the population. The geo-strategic location of Türkiye is an important factor that contributes to the country being known as a land of asylum seekers. Şanlıurfa and Gaziantep are two of the places in Türkiye with the greatest concentration of asylum seekers. According to the statistics, as of 2022, Şanlıurfa hosts around 430,124 Syrian asylum seekers, while Gaziantep hosts 462,697 and Hatay 433,875 (Presidency of Migration Management, 2023).

There are two legal types of the legal status of Syrians in Türkiye: those who have been granted citizenship and those under temporary protection. The proportion of registered Syrians under temporary protection to the Turkish population is 4.25 percent. As of December 2022, 221,671 Syrians, 125,563 of whom are 18 years old and over, and 96,108 children, have acquired Turkish citizenship (Anatolian Agency, 2022). Half of them are under the age of 18 years old. Issuing citizenship to Syrians has also become a big debate in Türkiye. All these statistics show that Türkiye has an extraordinary migration process experience. In this article, the social cohesion process of Syrians will be discussed.

2 Methodology and Research Area Description

This research has revealed several sociocultural and economic dimensions concerning Syrians in Türkiye. Even though many comprehensive studies illustrate the driving factors of asylum seeker influx into Türkiye and social cohesion to Turkish culture, this research tried to interpret the major studies undertaken thus far to establish an emerging picture and context. Our study put forward the following objectives:

- To understand the nature of integrating Syrian asylum seekers into Turkish Society.
- To enumerate the major challenges of Syrian asylum seekers in the host society.
- To study the bureaucratic support provided by the Turkish Government to asylum seekers.

The study follows a descriptive research design and qualitative method. Additionally, our research incorporates some opinions of the experts in the area of migration and data acquired from our field visits to areas dominated by Syrian asylum seekers. For example, the researcher visited some of the houses of the asylum seekers and observed the pattern of living and the infrastructural facilities possessed by Syrians. A literature review will be done, and observations will be discussed in this paper.

3 Literature Review

According to the “Syrian Barometer” (2021) report, the degree of “solidarity’ towards Syrians in Turkish society has experienced a transition from an earlier state of fragile social acceptance to a situation of tolerance in the current period. Although most people want Syrian asylum seekers to return to their country, they reckon they will stay here. Also, local people living on the borders are

greatly concerned about Syrians. According to this study, Syrians were listed as the country's 'most important problem' by almost 60 percent in 2022, while in 2020, only 52.3% saw it as the second most important problem. A combination of economic problems, a very high number of immigrants, and instability will likely cause major problems in the future. The study assesses the social distancing of mainstream Turkish society and the politicization of such issues as Syrian asylum seekers. However, all these factors may catalyze and generate a different identity consciousness among asylum seekers in the future. Earlier, Turkish society defined Syrians as the "oppressed, victims", but now they have become perceived as a source of concern and anxiety among the natives. According to this study, 80 percent of the Turkish people say there is no similarity between them. Those who live on the Turkish border also say that they are not similar in any way. Similarly, the same opinion was recorded in the places where the Arabs live. Earlier, the Syrians also believed that they were similar to the Turkish people, but later when they started to live together, they started to change their attitudes. The study indicates that the social distance between the two societies is increasing in terms of social interaction in some regions. The study also indicates that communication between the two populations is not increasing significantly.

Many Turks also believe that Syrians live off the aid provided by the Turkish government. According to the Syrian Barometer 2021 study, the most important concern of Turks about Syrians is that Syrians may take away their jobs, raise the crime rate in the country, disrupt public services, and create social identity issues in the future. They believe this would undermine their country's economic security and it will disrupt the cultural foundations. They also estimate that the arrival of Syrians will increase theft, smuggling, and prostitution. In terms of work, they assume there is also a risk that they will lose their jobs.

Syrian Barometer shows that the high influx and higher concentration of Syrians in some areas (as well as economic problems in association with that) become a high concern among the natives. At first, Syrians who came to Türkiye were kept in camps. But since then, the camps have been abolished and the government has given them the facilities they need to live in parts of Türkiye. Most of the Syrians now live in the border cities of Kilis, Sanliurfa, Hatay, Gaziantep, and the metropolitan areas of Istanbul and Ankara. Most people are concentrated in metropolitan cities because there are more job opportunities. In some regions of Türkiye, the number of locals and Syrians is the same proportion.

Migration is a phenomenon that affects both migrants and host communities alike. Türkiye is now trying to use the term 'social cohesion of Syrians' with the Turkish society rather than using the term 'social integration.' Social cohesion is described as the outcome of a combination of harmonious interaction activities among a group of people living in proximity, purposely advancing the interest of all those involved (Cheong et al., 2007). Türkiye has a long history of hosting migrant populations from all around the world. That is why the country currently has different ethnic variants of the population.

Syrian university students have a higher tendency for social integration, though they still face issues like marginalization, exclusion, and stigmatization by the host community. A study conducted by the Migration Policy Application and Research Centre at Harran University (which was supported by the European Union Education and Youth Programs Centre), used in-depth and semi-structured interviews to collect data from young participants between 18 to 30 to understand the actions and narratives of participants. This study reveals that the local young population considered migration a negative phenomenon since they perceived it as associated with difficulties in living conditions, language barriers, and social exclusion (Gülerce, Şahin, & Hadi, 2022). Again, natives have some irritation towards the migrants as some of the migrants are said to lead an idle life in Türkiye while the Turkish army is still fighting in Syria, and some local people ask why they did not fight for their country in a time of need. The locals accuse the Syrian migrants of abandoning their country instead of fighting with the perpetrators. Yet despite these issues, Syrians who got citizenship in Türkiye want to continue their life here as Türkiye is providing them with all the facilities that are received by the native population. By granting citizenship to Syrians, the Turkish state deserves worldwide attention.

4 Obstacles to Social Cohesion

The economy is the most important topic in the case of migration. Many people fear that the migrants may take away their jobs or cause a wage decline. Most of the native Turkish population believes the Turkish government is spending a lot on the Syrians. But most of the funding is geared towards meeting the most basic needs, such as food and clothing. The funding is via the Emergency Social Safety Net program, administered by the Turkish Red Crescent organization with assistance from partner organizations. Around 230 Turkish Liras are transferred to each migrant's bank account every month - particularly to single women, elderly migrants who have no one to take care of them, single parents with at least one child below the age of 18, families with disabled members, families with more than four children and families with a large number of dependent family members.

The fact that many of Syrian immigrants cannot speak the Turkish language is becoming a major obstacle to social cohesion. In this way, they do not bother to learn Turkish because it is easy to communicate with other Arab speakers who reside in Turkey. This often alienates the Turkish people and causes misunderstandings and prejudices about the Syrians, as they seem uninterested in linguistic and cultural cohesion. In fact, this is where the importance of language education lies, particularly in remote regions and villages. Gülerce and his friends' study revealed a very important statement made by an immigrant who said that three of the four shops near them belong to Turks and just one to a Syrian. Because they do not know the Turkish language, most of them have to buy goods only from the Syrian shop. They would have gone to other shops if they knew the language (Gülerce, Şahin, & Hadi, 2022, p.218). Hence, the government should look into this matter very seriously and formulate new plans for developing or opening language learning centers in both the main and remote regions. After spending some time in Türkiye, some people returned to their homelands only because they could not speak the language. On the other hand, however, those who came here when they were children have managed to master the Turkish language and are getting along with the Turkish culture.

Syrian migrants were first accommodated in temporary shelter centers (known as camps) in the Turkish cities on the Syrian border. After a period, most of the camps were closed and the migrants left the camps and started to live in the cities in Türkiye. Migrants generally came from Syrian cities like Rakka, Deir Ez-Zor, Al-Hasakah, Aleppo and Oamishli and they settled in Turkish border cities such as Hatay, Kilis, Gaziantep, Sanilurfa and Mardin due to the accessibility, cultural similarities to some extent and kinship ties with local people. Due to the large number of immigrants gathered in these parts, unemployment and economic problems started to rise here. Similarly, health, sanitation, drinking water, waste disposal, education, demand for essential items, etc. began to be severely affected. As the number of people increased in the border areas, the houses did not become enough for accommodating the asylum seekers. Some people live in rented houses and others share a room with others because they cannot pay the rent.

Gülerce and Bozkurt (2022), in their article on "Globalization and Forced Migration the Case of Turkey" present their overview of the migration experience of Syrians living in Türkiye for more than ten years. They evaluate cross-border migration as a byproduct of the globalization process. However, some forces are quite resistant to this aspect of globalization. An example of this is Islamophobia, which has reinforced the exclusionary attitudes of anti-migration groups towards Muslim migrants.

Saferworld Workshop Summary (2016) explicitly says that people under temporary status still have some ambiguity about their future lives. Syrians are generally concerned about their long-term prospects in Türkiye. In some families, the research observed that half of them received citizenship and half of them did not. Syrians are aware of their rights and they know everything through social media. They also differ in their needs as they come from different parts of Syria, and their dialects differ. They need proper social services such as opening a bank account (preferably without encountering the many administrative hurdles) and they also need to get a residence permit. Coordinated effort from the part of the government is very essential for them as most of them are less educated, particularly women. Due to having encountered an entirely different social system, they need to get assistance for each and every need. The majority of the Syrians in Türkiye believe that they are in better living conditions. They use personal connections to search for their livelihood and other activities. Coordination between different wings of bureaucracy is essential for

implementing a plan. If they are not communicating with each other, things will not work as perceived.

Another major challenge pointed out is the difficulty in getting work permits. If the asylum seekers do not have a work permit, they cannot work. If they are legal, they can do work and earn money. But unfortunately, some employers exploit the workers if they do not have a work permit. They can utilize them for longer hours without giving adequate payment for their work. This sometimes makes Syrian asylum seekers vulnerable to exploitation. Child laborers are working in some sectors like textile and other shops. This is a very serious issue that has to be taken care of by the authorities. Safer World Workshop Summary (2016) argues that currently, there is no dramatic upsurge in the rate of criminality in areas with high numbers of Syrians. However, there is the potential for ghettoization, criminality, and even radicalization to increase in the future if social integration efforts fall short of providing asylum seekers with a sense of belonging and purpose.

Changing the psychological distance between Syrian people and the host society is essential. They judge themselves as a people who have nothing to say of their own or they evaluate themselves as a lost generation. It can form or lead to a kind of 'ghettoization,' alienation from the host society, and the risk of involvement in the crime. As Türkiye looks forward to integrating them into Turkish society, steps should be taken to mitigate the negative collective emotions that have afflicted some of the Syrian migrant population.

The Turkish government has provided several initiatives to help Syrian asylum seeker children and youth get an education. The most notable step, which began in 2014, was the development of Temporary Education Centers (TECs), which are public schools that educate Syrian children and youth in Arabic. The Turkish Ministry of National Education trains and certifies Syrian teachers who work in TECs, which provide free education from kindergarten through high school. In addition to TECs, the Turkish government has constructed several Language and Education Centers (LECs) where Syrian asylum seekers may learn Turkish. These Turkish government-run facilities provide Turkish language education, vocational training, and other skill development programs. Although the government has embarked on many steps toward providing education for Syrian asylum seekers, many still lack access to this public resource. Syrian migrants also experience linguistic obstacles and prejudice when seeking education. There is still a need for government assistance to facilitate Syrian children to develop a greater engagement with the Turkish language, with a particular need for more inclusive policies to enable this (Atabay & Kirmanoglu, 2020).

Additionally, language issues are one of the most significant obstacles Syrian asylum seekers face while seeking healthcare in Turkey. According to Balcı and Sevimli (2017), linguistic issues posed a substantial obstacle to Syrian asylum seekers seeking healthcare in Turkey. While Turkish is the major language in Turkey, many Syrian asylum seekers do not speak Turkish well, making communication with healthcare practitioners problematic. This language barrier can be especially difficult for immigrants seeking specialist medical care, which may need complicated medical terminology that they are unfamiliar with.

While Turkish nationals are automatically insured by the country's national health insurance system, Syrian asylum seekers are not. While the Turkish government has attempted to provide free healthcare to Syrian asylum seekers, healthcare expenditures can still be high, particularly for individuals who require specialist medical treatment or have chronic health concerns. Thus, the cost is a significant barrier to healthcare access for Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey (Akkaya-Kalaycı & Göktaşlar, 2019). Another issue is the standard of treatment provided to Syrian asylum seekers. While the Turkish healthcare system is usually considered to be of high quality, there are worries that Syrian asylum seekers may not always receive the same level of care as Turkish nationals. This might be due to a lack of knowledge of the Turkish healthcare system or a misunderstanding between Syrian asylum seekers and Turkish healthcare practitioners.

Covid-19 Pandemic has another impact of the social cohesion of asylum seekers living in Türkiye. Turner and Gülerce, in their study, investigated how migrants' daily habits were affected by their dependence on mobile phones and the internet during the pandemic. They specifically looked at issues such as educational difficulties, digital inequalities, feelings of isolation and disconnection, and other psychological and social factors that impacted migrants (2021). Educational difficulties, for example, could have arisen due to limited access to online learning resources or difficulty in adapting

to remote learning methods. Digital inequalities may have exacerbated these challenges, especially for those lacking access to reliable internet connectivity or devices. Feelings of isolation and disconnection are also common among migrants, and the pandemic may have intensified these feelings due to social distancing measures and restrictions on travel. These factors, along with other psychological and social factors, could have had a significant impact on migrants' well-being and their ability to cope with the challenges of the pandemic.

5 Women Asylum Seekers & Migrants

The problems experienced by asylum-seeker women should be studied separately. Because there are widows as a result of war, some women cannot find their husbands, and how these women will start their lives in a new society in a completely isolated situation remains a big question mark. When women travel to an unknown place with their children, they pack everything they have and give all the money and gold they have to the people on the way. Since they arrived illegally, again, many problems await them. Several asylum-seeker women, who try to adapt to their new lives after the forced migration and cannot hear from their lost spouses, experience various grievances due to the uncertainty and the problems this situation has brought (Gülerce, 2020). The major question remains about how these people can make a living, especially when they arrive without documents. The major age group of asylum seeker women is 19-54. Hence they are young and capable of participating in the workforce. Many women do not have any jobs and typically remain housewives, if they are married. Some other women work as teachers, albeit for low wages, hairdressers, dressmakers, beauticians, farm workers, nurses/midwifery, etc. Women who remain jobless can become susceptible to abuse. Hence it is very important to rehabilitate them in terms of occupation or income to reduce the risks.

Some of the asylum seeker women came with their family members, but some of their relatives are still in Syria. However, they communicate with them through mobile or the Internet. Earlier, when they were in temporary shelter centers, they regularly received health check-ups but now, when they resettled in independent apartments, they are not regularly utilizing health services. The number of breastfeeding mothers was also high at the time of migration. As a result, the government implemented various healthcare policies for pregnant women to protect their babies. As they come from different social settings, they need psycho-social support. Children under the age of 12 also need specific support. The host society needs to go in-depth and study the requirements of the most vulnerable asylum seekers (i.e. women and children), as they may not be in a good position to speak about their real conditions.

6 Results and Discussions

Our research has revealed the presence of several complex and interrelated factors influencing the level of integration of Syrian asylum seekers. At the outset, there is the issue of migrant status and settlement. For example, Syrians are under both temporary and international protection participating in the labor market along with host citizens and utilizing the opportunities available to them. Syrians with temporary protection also have access to basic services like education and health care, although several challenges remain concerning factors such as service and cost. Most of the Syrian asylum seekers are continuing their education. Study materials and textbooks are all provided by the government and NGOs working for the welfare of asylum seekers. Those with temporary protection status have to get permission from the government if they want to travel from one place to another. Some Syrians have found the bureaucratic application procedures very difficult, which has hindered their opportunities. The major contributor to this is likely to be a lack of communication skills in the Turkish language. Research has shown the language barrier to be one of the main hurdles for integration. Many people cannot speak Turkish even after ten or twenty years of immigration. Linguistic differences are becoming a bone of contention for many. In an interview with the news agency Haber Turk, Carol Batchelor, the UNHCR representative for Türkiye, raises the following points: "If you want to help Syrians, teach them Turkish. They must absolutely learn your language to be able to work, have education and meet their daily needs" (Batchelor, 2014). There are in fact

many languages teaching institutes in the country. An appropriate utilization of language education may enable many immigrants to mingle with the Turkish people and facilitate cultural encounters.

Regarding education, the Turkish government provides this as a free service to all its citizens. Additionally, our research review has shown the need for prioritizing linguistic integration in the system. It was a first-hand experience for many Syrians that most of the Turkish people did not know Arabic. Our research also observed that many organizations in Türkiye provide frequent awareness programs and workshops for understanding the problems the immigrant Syrian population faces. Such regular programs and events could help the local people to develop an empathetic understanding towards the Syrians. These programs provide better opportunities to learn about other cultures, their lifestyles, music, food, etc. Our research also observed that university students better understand Syrian migrants and tend to hold fewer prejudices.

Regarding employment, farming is the primary occupation of most of the Syrian population in Türkiye. However, they also engage in other occupational sectors such as construction, shoe making, and retail. In some places, even the asylum seekers are the owners of factories, and they give employment to hundreds of Turkish citizens. Thereafter also, many companies registered with the help of local semi-official organizations like the Chambers of Trade and Commerce, Development agencies, etc. This shows that these companies have great potential for empowering and integrating people economically and socially into mainstream society. Hence these kinds of companies should also be promoted to instill confidence and strength in Syrian asylum seekers.

Although there are so many differences between them, it can be seen that the Syrians have established a close relationship with the Turkish people. They watch Turkish movies and listen to Turkish songs. They know Turkish traditions, also. These observations show that while migrating to a new country, Syrian asylum seekers have adopted many cultural characteristics of the Turkish people since arriving in Türkiye. They like to adopt Turkish cultural elements in their life. It cannot be denied that the similarity of religious beliefs plays an important role in the socialization and cohabitation of the two nations. For example, research carried out by Karkın & Yazıcı (2015) and Apak (2015) describes that Yıldız (2013) confirms that asylum seekers consider Turkish people as close friends. At the same time, they keep their own cultures alive. 98 percent of Syrians do not live in camps. Only a small percentage of Syrians, i.e., those who do not want to go outside or those who are single or elderly women, live in camps.

7 Conclusion

The Turkish government, along with its populace, has bestowed upon asylum seekers a multitude of benefits unparalleled by any other nation. In contrast, numerous countries tend to perceive asylum seekers as burdensome entities. However, due to having adopted a different policy, the Turkish Government is a good example to many other countries in embracing the sociocultural diversity of asylum seekers. However, studies on Syrian asylum seekers are still needed to help integrate them more into Turkish culture. Primarily it is very important to solve their communication problems. Regularly conducting programs for them will help them gain a lot of confidence, access to public services, and become more capable. Leaving the political dimension aside, civil society organizations can solve such problems well. New activities can be carried out if a group of women from the grassroots level is organized among them. If small loans can be given to women through small credit systems by the group themselves or through banks, this will help to ensure financial security in families and help women stand on their own feet. If there are any communication-related challenges for the Syrians, they must be rectified and that would be helpful for the integration of Syrians in the long-term perspective. Another aspect is to make them aware of the ongoing developments, opportunities, and access to public services and to resolve any misinterpretations. Our research concluded that the integration of Syrian asylum seekers did not happen completely as many impediments like language and cultural dissimilarities exist. The government of Türkiye has been trying to implement many programs for asylum seekers. But simultaneously, due to the growing number and concentration of asylum seekers in some places, barriers have arisen to more interaction with the host society and the guests. Migration in border areas is not solely because of civil war. Economic and cultural factors interplay, but economic factors act as a catalyst that couples with other factors and aggravates the vulnerability. It is also evident that asylum seekers are not having

adequate knowledge about the importance of cultural integration. Hence to enhance the level of cultural integration, we have offered some recommendations as follows.

8 Recommendation

To augment the pattern of cultural integration.

1. More opportunities should be created in the Government and at the non-Governmental level for more interaction and other cultural activities.
2. There should be more language learning/supportive centers established.
3. Provision for credit-based or small bank loans to help asylum seekers start small enterprises.
4. Measures should be taken against hate speech and steps should be taken to reduce anxiety and stress levels among the host population.
5. Include asylum seeker women in decision-making at the grassroots level and within the administrative hierarchy of Türkiye.
6. Strengthening access to all basic services should be ensured for asylum seekers.

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