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## **ANALYZING THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF SYRIAN REFUGEE INTEGRATION AT THE URBAN LEVEL THROUGH EVERYDAY LIFE EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS**

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# Analyzing the Multidimensionality of Syrian Refugee Integration at the Urban Level Through Everyday Life Experiences and Perceptions

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## Abstract

Turkey, hosting the largest Syrian refugee population in the world, has experienced a sharp increase in Syrian refugees preferring to live in cities rather than camps. Therefore, Turkish cities and their local residents have become a natural part of the process whereby Syrians are emplaced. This tendency necessitates examination of Syrian refugee integration at urban level from both the local resident and Syrian refugee points of view, given that they share the same living environment. It is not only the everyday life experiences and encounters of the two societies that shape the process, but also their perceptions, feelings and reactions. Based on the bilateral and subjective nature of this process, this paper investigates the multidimensionality of Syrian refugee integration at urban level, in which different dimensions entangle and different actors, places and processes impact the situation. Within this framework, this investigation, employing a field study in the Altındağ District of Ankara, Turkey, uncovered the everyday life experiences and perceptions of both the Syrians and Turkish residents of the area under study through semi-structured in-depth interviews. Inductive thematic analysis helped explore the different and intertwined themes of integration. The findings of the study displayed the multidimensional, context-dependent, subjective and perceptual characteristics of the process and revealed legal and organizational, socio-economic and socio-cultural integration as the three primary dimensions of integration. Adequacies and deficiencies in the organizational and legal framework, the economic structure, the housing and labor markets, social relations and communication tools have had a significant impact on the integration of Syrian refugees in the area. The experiences and perceptions of each society, the central, local, institutional and non-institutional actors and their interactions, encounters, tensions and struggles have contributed both positively and negatively to the process.

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# 1. Introduction

Turkey, hosting nearly 3.7 million Syrian refugees, is one of the countries most influenced by Syria's internal turmoil. The country adopted an open-border policy in the early period of Syrian mobility and accepted Syrians as "guests under temporary protection" (Icduygu & Nimmer 2020). This legal status determined the framework of rights enabling Syrians to access health, education and institutional aid, but it did not guarantee their citizenship. Additional regulations introduced working conditions for registered Syrians and employers hiring Syrian refugees (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022). Moreover, Turkey expanded its institutional capacity in related ministries, including the Ministries of Interior Affairs, Health and Education, in terms of providing basic services to Syrians. With the contribution of the EU and UNICEF, some regulations and programs were prepared and implemented to ease Syrian refugee access to aid, healthcare and education, some of which specifically targeted the children or women within the refugee society (Narli 2018). These policy developments at national level and their implementations at local level, together with an increase in the number of Syrian refugees, led to fluctuation in the perception, feelings and reactions of the Turkish community from being supportive to discriminatory (Açıklan et al. 2020; Kahraman & Güngördü 2022).

In the early period of the migration process, Syrian refugees mostly congregated in the border areas and the temporary accommodation centers in Turkey. The rapid increase in their numbers, the push factors in these centers, which mostly related to their physical condition and safety problems, and pull factors of the cities, such as opportunities to work and access to public services, directed Syrians to live in cities (Kahraman 2022b). The number of Syrian urban refugees exceeded 3.5 million in 2022 (DGMM 2022). As the length of time spent in Turkish cities has increased, discussion on the Syrian refugee integration process has warmed up. Although many studies have already examined Syrian refugee integration (e.g. Icduygu &

Nimer 2020; Sunata & Tosun 2019; Şimşek 2019), it is still worth investigating the integration process at urban level.

In the global migration literature, previous studies focused on the role of national policies and implementations (Brubaker 1992), their policy-oriented influences at local level (Pennix 2003; Scholten 2013), and the everyday life experiences of refugees (Phillimore 2020). The European Commission (2003) has highlighted the duality of the process, in which both the receiving and refugee societies have their own roles and responsibilities. Starting from the bilateral nature of the phenomenon and the subjectivity of the local and refugee societies in the process, this study aims to explore the multidimensionality of Syrian integration at urban level from the experiences and the perceptions of both sides of the process, which has remained rarely studied. In order to comprehend the entire integration process, it examines how different factors are entangled with each other and how different actors, places and processes impact Syrians' everyday lives.

To do this, the primary data of this study was collected from fieldwork in the Syrian refugee-magnet districts of Altındağ District in Ankara, Turkey. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with Syrian and Turkish residents of the area studied constitute the data of this qualitative study. Inductive thematic analysis helped explore the themes of Syrian refugee integration, thereby reflecting the multidimensionality of the process. Within this framework, the study covers three major sections: Firstly, it reviews the literature on the multidimensionality of refugee integration. Then, it presents the methodological framework and the fieldwork, and discusses the findings revealed in the fieldwork in reference to the existing integration literature. The last section, emphasizing the significant findings of the study, offers proposals for different policy domains and further studies.

## **2. The Multidimensionality of Refugee Integration**

There is no consensus on the definition of integration. The European Commission (2003) defines integration as a “two-way process,” stressing the mutual rights and corresponding obligations of both immigrants and the host society. Employing this definition, migration and integration policies, the institutions and modes of implementation of the host, the rights and responsibilities of refugees, and the relationship between the two societies come to the fore in the process of integration. In addition to the duality of the process, refugee integration is a multi-dimensional term that connotes different meanings in relation to the context (Ager & Strang 2008; Kahraman & Güngördü 2022; Phillimore 2012). Scholars discuss multiple dimensions of refugee integration, including organizational, economic, social and cultural integration. However, in order to discuss the entangled and complex relations of these dimensions, this study attempts to review these dimensions under the umbrella of legal and organizational, socio-economic and socio-cultural integration.

The legal and organizational dimensions of integration define the legal status of refugees and point to the structural grounds for access to the labor market, housing, healthcare and education (Valenta & Bunar 2010). This dimension, by highlighting the migration and integration policy framework of the nation (Köser-Akçapar and Şimşek 2019; Lacroix 2013), identifies the rights and responsibilities of access to employment, housing, public services and resource allocation (Hynie 2018). The legal status of migrants and the regulations targeting refugee groups influence integration (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al. 2021; Şimşek 2020). Getting citizenship from the receiving country, in terms of legal rights achieved, provides long-term settlement opportunities for refugees and contributes to their sense of belonging to the receiving society (Ager & Strang 2008; Şimşek 2020).

The economic dimension of integration includes refugee access to the labor and housing markets, engagement in business activities, and their livelihoods and economic resources. This brings refugees' rights to work, shelter and benefit from resource allocation (Betts et al. 2017) into the discussion, which mostly depends on the legal status of refugees. Employment, as an important determinant of integration, helps the formation of feelings of security and economic independence (Stewart & Mulvey 2014; Şimşek 2020) and expectations of a future in the host country, whereas unemployment leads to social exclusion, slows down integration and hampers social interaction (Phillimore and Goodson 2005). However, undocumented refugees, having no right to engage in the labor market and access to institutional donations, mostly take part in the informal market to survive. As with many of the registered Syrian workers, they experience exploitation in the informal economy and are exposed to long working hours, low wages and working without social security (Akar & Erdoğan 2019). Civil society organizations and local benefactors are the major sources of livelihood (Kahraman 2022b). Grace et al. (2017) and Şimşek (2020) have explained the effect of economic resources in gaining access to affordable housing and education, constructing social bridges with the host society, and developing expectations regarding integration with the receiving society. Access to housing as an economic factor (Ager and Strang 2008; Philips 2006) also affects the social dimension of integration. However, decent, safe and affordable housing is, most of the time, not easily accessible for refugee societies (Şimşek 2020). Previous studies (Kahraman 2022a; Rashid 2021; Şimşek 2020) have also mentioned the role of business ownership in contributing to the host country's economy, economic integration of the refugees, and socio-cultural interaction between refugee and receiving societies. The provision of ethnic goods and services by refugee entrepreneurs generates opportunities for cultural exchange, communication and the establishment of a socio-cultural bridge between societies (Şimşek 2019). There are also some negative thoughts that perceive refugees as a source of unequal competition through biased

resource allocation (Akar & Erdoğan 2019) and as producing increases in prices in housing and the daily market. These perceptions, by firing up the discontent of local citizens, tension between the two societies and discriminatory attitudes in the labor and housing market towards refugees, have negative impacts on refugee integration (Fozdar & Hartley 2014; Şimşek 2020).

The socio-cultural dimension of refugee integration mostly refers to social networks and the social capital produced within these networks, refugee social relations, cultural exchange and cultural similarities with local citizens, the activities and services provided by civil society organizations, and ethnic concentrations in the refugee resettlement process. Refugee networks help foster social bonding, a sense of belonging in refugees' new living environment (Lewis 2021), cultural exchanges and the sharing of knowledge and experiences within the refugee community (Rottmann & Kaya 2020). They also make a significant contribution to ensuring access to rights and resources, including the livelihood, employment and business development of refugees (Cheung & Phillimore 2014; Bloch and McKay 2015; Phillimore 2012). Peaceful and friendly social relations with the native society empower the social integration of refugees (Ager & Strang 2008) and communication between the two societies (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022). Cultural communalities, including language, religion, ethnic and historical roots and food (Hynie, 2018) ease the dialogue and interaction between societies. Places of everyday encounter provide communication opportunities and also enable cultural exchange (Kahraman & Güngördü, 2022). On the other hand, discriminatory and unwelcoming attitudes, prejudices, and negative perceptions and connotations of refugees as threats to the social and economic order and national identity, together with a language barrier, hinder the establishment of peaceful and healthy relations and the sense of being socially accepted and, consequently, lead to the social exclusion of refugees (Açıklan et al. 2020; Akar & Erdoğan 2019; Şimşek 2020). Additionally, civil society organizations, by organizing socio-cultural events and training activities, play a significant role in the construction of social connections between societies

and/or within the refugee society itself (Sunata & Tosun 2018; Şimşek 2020). The spatial concentration of a refugee community, or even simply living in an ethnic settlement, provides socio-economic benefits for refugee communities such as accessing refugee-based goods and services, job opportunities, donations and the support of refugee networks (Fozdar & Hartley 2014; Mazumdar et al. 2000; Logan et al. 2002). Despite the advantages of living in ethnic settlements for refugee integration, such settlements provide closed systems, resulting in the isolation of the refugee community from the larger part of the receiving society (Alhusban et al. 2019; Hebbani et al. 2018).

### **3. Research Methodology**

This study investigates the multidimensionality of Syrian refugee integration at urban level. To do this, it delves into the everyday life experiences, perceptions, feelings and reactions of both Syrian refugees and the local society. A field study was conducted to reveal the opportunities, barriers, actors, places, encounters, relations and other dynamics of daily life that contribute to the multidimensionality of the integration process. This section summarizes the characteristics of the area under study and describes the fieldwork.

#### **3.1. *The Area under study***

The fieldwork for the study was conducted in the top refugee-magnet district of Ankara, Turkey. Ankara, as one of the most popular destinations of Syrian influx since 2011, accommodates 100,000 Syrians, which is the tenth largest population in the whole of the country (DGMM 2022). The existence of state institutions, agencies and services, civil society organizations, associations focusing on Syrian refugees, industrial districts, employment and business opportunities, and refugee-magnet neighborhoods constitute the unique potential for the massive influx (Kahraman 2022b). As the years have passed, the formation of ethnic



neighborhoods, where Syrians are concentrated and Syrian social networks have developed, has attracted more refugees (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022).

The study area included four refugee-magnet districts in the Altındağ District of Ankara, which has been known to house a real concentration of ethnic groups. It has received waves of both rural migrants from Anatolia since the 1960s and international immigrants since the 2000s. Rural migrants arrived in the area to access the labor market of the Sıteler Industrial District, which is within walking distance of the studied area. Similarly, Syrian refugees have been attracted to the site to seek jobs and housing opportunities. Moreover, to meet the daily needs of Syrian refugees, and as a result of tax exemptions granted to Syrians under the temporary protection regime, small-scale ethnic businesses and shops selling Syrian products emerged and increased very rapidly in the districts.. After the demolition of many houses in the area as part of the urban renewal act of the district municipality, many local residents left the area. Thereafter, Syrians, including both registered and unregistered groups, have become the majority population in the area. According to the estimation of neighborhood mukhtars, 10,000 local residents and more than 60,000 Syrian refugees were living in the area in 2021.

In the studied area, most of the Syrian refugees occupied worn-out houses, the major part of which were illegally constructed by the local residents. These low-quality dwellings, rented to Syrians much above their actual value, met the basic need of housing, through their availability and affordable rents compared to the other residential sites of the city (Kahraman 2022a). In this way, despite their low architectural and infrastructural quality and size and deficiencies in basic indoor facilities, they provided an opportunity to accommodate overcrowded Syrian families in the resettlement process.

### 3.2. *The Fieldwork*

This study, based on a qualitative research approach, was conducted in May-June 2021. It explored the perceptions, feelings, experiences and subjective evaluations of refugees and local residents on the topic of integration. Overall, 34 face-to-face, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 Syrian and 15 local residents living in the area. The qualitative design of the study facilitated a broader exploration of the process of integration and provided a deeper insight into contextual realities by gathering narratives, real-life experiences, and diverse and detailed information on different dimensions of Syrian integration (Braun & Clarke 2006) that it may not be possible to explore within the constraints of more structured methods. The interviews revealed the perceptions and varying considerations of the respondents and helped the researcher understand the attitudes, reactions, thoughts and interpretations of both societies on the issue of Syrian refugee integration (Terry et al. 2017). This provides the opportunity to comprehend the whole process in its entirety, which uncovered the multidimensional, subjective, contextual and dynamic aspects of the integration process, and both the similar and opposite perspectives of the two societies regarding Syrian refugee integration.

The interviews started with seven Syrian refugees and eight local citizens who were interviewed in previous field studies in the area. Then they continued with twelve Syrians and seven locals who are the relatives, friends and neighbors of the first group of respondents. Although there were fourteen further contacts who could have increased the sample size, they were reluctant to spare time for interviewing. The interviews conducted in Arabic with the assistance of two Syrian interpreters lasted approximately an hour.

The sample of both groups covers a variety of residents with different demographic, ethnic and economic backgrounds who live in the area under study. The entire sample was composed of 13 female and 21 male respondents, aged between 21-72. The respondents were all Sunni

Muslims. The sample included employed (6), unemployed (6) and non-working female (7) Syrian, and employed (5), retired (4) and non-working female local citizens (6).

In the first round of the data analysis process, the interviews of all respondents were transcribed. Inductive thematic analysis was conducted to reveal meaningful patterns and the themes and categories of integration. After the patterns were explored from the transcribed data set, manual coding was used to generate themes and to group the themes as dimensions of integration (Terry et al. 2017).

## **4. Findings and Discussion**

The study's analytical procedures revealed various integration themes that are grouped under three entangled dimensions of integration, legal and organizational, socio-economic, and socio-cultural. This section discusses these themes and dimensions of Syrian refugee integration.

### **4.1. *Legal and Organizational integration***

Under the temporary protection regime, Turkey determined the legal status of Syrians, the conditions of entry and exit, and access to social rights, services and work permits (Icduygu & Nimer 2020). As Şafa-Ayvazoğlu et al. (2021) discovered, those Syrian respondents who participated in this study defined Turkey as a generous country that provides the right to reside in the country and access to social welfare services. On the other hand, Turkey's temporary protection regime provides limited options for settlement in a third country (Baban et al. 2017) and limited access to basic rights (Şimşek 2020). Furthermore, it does not secure Turkish citizenship for Syrian nationals. None of the Syrian respondents had Turkish citizenship. They all believed that their legal and economic conditions would improve when they become citizens. Many studies support the notion that granting citizenship to refugees contributes to refugee integration (e.g. Şimşek 2020; Açıkalin et al. 2020). On the other hand, local respondents showed their discontent when talking about possible citizenship for Syrian

nationals. Many thought that the Syrians should return back to their homeland after the Syrian conflict was over, and some believed that it would be better to plan their return immediately. Recai said that: *We always helped them but Syrians, today, dominate our neighborhood. If you ask for citizenship, then this is a red line. It should not be easy. Can we get citizenship if we migrate to Europe, for example?*

A refugees' right to work is another domain of Syrian legal and organizational integration that also shapes economic integration. The regulation relating to work permits for registered Syrians determines the conditions for acquiring a work permit and for hiring Syrian workers (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022). However, engaging in the formal labor market is a big challenge for unregistered migrants (Şimşek 2020). Additionally, there is growing unrest and reaction among local citizens based on the perception of distortion in the socio-economic balance in the labor market. This discussion will be detailed in the following section.

Syrian respondents also identified the right to access welfare services, including health and education, as rights crucial to their integration. Similarly, contrary to their reaction to Syrian engagement with work, all the local respondents agreed that Turkey should provide healthcare services and compulsory education for Syrian migrants. However, they added the precondition of not prioritizing Syrians over Turkish citizens in the provision of such services. Similar to the findings of Güney (2021), they perceived the provision of such services as necessary to be considered human and a Muslim. Leyla explained that: *I don't want Syrians to get citizenship and take my place at work and access financial support. However, hospitals should be open to them when they need medical care. What can a mother do when her kid is ill?*

Furthermore, civil society organizations, in addition to financial and social support, provide counseling services to guide Syrians about their rights and responsibilities in the country. In this study, all Syrian respondents benefitted from such organizational channels, including national and international civil society organizations, and formal and informal charities. They

defined these organizations and their services as crucial to survival in Turkey. The discussion on this aspect will be continued in the following sections.

#### **4.2. *Socio-economic integration***

The area under consideration provides many opportunities and constraints for the socio-economic integration of Syrian refugees. It provides cheap rental accommodation for both residence and business, an industrial district for refugees to reach the labor market, and civil society organizations and charities that support livelihoods and social life (Kahraman 2022b). First of all, the rundown housing stock and evacuation of many dwellings after the site was declared an urban renewal zone, allowed many Syrian refugees to access housing while undergoing the process of resettlement (Fozdar & Hartley 2014). Despite contributing to the socio-economic integration of Syrian migrants, some respondents also indicated some constraints on access to housing. These constraints were rent increases and the difficulties experienced while looking for a house to rent. Housing rents have quadrupled within nine years in the area. Extreme increases in rent, as an additional income source for homeowners renting their houses, created an economic burden for both Syrian and local tenants who lived in the area. When their feelings were asked about increases in rent, Syrian respondents declared that although rent in the area cost e more than its actual value, it was still more affordable compared to the rest of the residential areas of Ankara. Additionally, none of the Syrian respondents referred to discrimination in the housing market. However, some local tenant respondents defined the increase in rent as a consequence of Syrian migration to the area and the consequent opportunist behavior of homeowners. As discovered in early enquiries in the area (Kahraman 2022a), some local homeowner respondents talked about their unpleasant experiences with Syrian tenants who damaged their dwellings, did not pay rent for months and/or disappeared without informing them. These experiences harmed the dialogue between the two societies and the route to breaking down prejudices.

Second, Syrian entrepreneurs found opportunities to establish small businesses and engage in commercial activities. These businesses, selling Syrian products and services, not only helped economic integration (Rashid 2021; Şimşek 2020) but also contributed to the area's low-cost of living (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022) and the empowerment of a Syrian sense of belonging to the area. Samed explained that: *I got used to this neighborhood. I am working here, shopping here, living here. You cannot imagine how you can feel when you eat your hometown's bread in a country where you had to move to.*

The opinions of local respondents to Syrian business activities in the area under study can be divided into four groups. Some local tradesmen were pleased to enlarge their consumer portfolio with the resettlement of a Syrian population in the area. But many local vendors mentioned their discontent at the availability of cheap Syrian products replacing their products in the daily commercial market. Another group, including some local customers, believed that the availability of Syrian products provides both different tastes and an alternative to the usual products, leading to cultural exchange between the two societies (Kahraman & Güngördü 2022; Şimşek 2020). Finally, group four, the dissidents complained about the smells of Syrian products dominating the site, which is different to what they are accustomed to.

Third, Siteler Industrial District, which is near to the area, welcomed many Syrian workers with low levels of education and skills to its furniture manufacturing sector. Employers remarked at their contentment to have Syrian workers. Many stated that they fulfilled their responsibility to hire Syrian workers who were searching for jobs so that they can take care of their families. However, as claimed by Güney (2021), some Turkish workers voiced their resentment about unfair competition in the labor market and blamed Syrian workers for reductions in wages since they accept working flexible hours with low wages. Some local respondents also criticized the opportunistic behaviors of local employers, who became more demanding after hiring Syrian workers. Ahmet explained that:

*I'm a furniture worker. I have no problem with Syrians. I also have some Syrian coworkers in this atelier. They're working for their bread. However, after hiring Syrian workers, my boss started to demand long hours of work per day without increasing my wage. The reason for this unfairness is not only Syrians but also employers who want to earn more and pay less.*

Another source of discomfort among local workers was that some blamed Syrian workers who do not have work permits but have consent to work without social insurance. At first glance, this appears to provide Syrian migrants with opportunities to work and earn money to look after their families in Turkey, and it may appear to be a step towards the economic integration of Syrian refugees. In fact, this is the only option for unregistered Syrians who constituted almost half of the sample. However, it trapped Syrian workers, especially those that are unregistered, into informality (Kahraman 2022b), which created a pseudo feeling of integration.

Finally, the distribution of governmental and non-governmental aid contributed to the livelihood of Syrian refugees. Registered respondents benefitted from governmental institutional cash allowances. However, the budget of those that are unregistered, representing the majority of Syrians living in the area (personal interviews with neighborhood mukhtars, 11.05.2021), mostly depends on aid from civil organizations and/or benefactors. Many Syrian respondents, including the unregistered ones, received aid (cash, food, clothing and furniture) from more than one source. They stated that local area residents and other Turkish citizens living outside the study area were benevolent, helping them in their quest for economic survival. From the local respondents' perspective, this resource allocation was one of the reasons for their resentment. They supported that the unequal distribution of financial aid in the district prioritized Syrian refugees. They also believed that Syrians who are not working

(Güney 2022) or taking any responsibility are awarded aid, even though they themselves also have serious economic problems.

#### 4.3. ***Socio-cultural integration***

The investigation into the socio-cultural integration of Syrian refugees explored various actors, places and the relationships of Syrians with their co-ethnics, local citizens, institutions and civil society organizations operating in the area. First, social networks were detected as crucial actors for the integration of Syrian society. Such networks are composed of family members, relatives, friends and other co-ethnics living inside or outside the area. These networks, guiding Syrians from the beginning of the migration process, were active in location choices from country to neighborhood levels (Kahraman 2022b; McAuliffe & Jayasuriya 2016). As well as providing financial and mutual support, such networks acted as sources of information about developments in the country, city and area (Trevena et al. 2013). Syrian respondents mentioned that these networks increase their feelings of solidarity, loyalty and not being alone. Social media tools such as Whatsapp, Facebook and Instagram are becoming a natural part of everyday life (Crawley & Hagen-Zanker 2019) and are expanding their networks (Kahraman 2022b). Some respondents also emphasized that fake social media rumors were misleading them in their daily life. Omar said that: *The information about anything in the neighborhood circulates within a minute in WhatsApp groups. However, some news circulated in groups mightn't be true. So, we always try to verify the news from other groups.* Some respondents also mentioned the shrinking trust relationships between Syrians, which is now mostly limited to within their families. They explained the deterioration in trust relations as a result of the existence of provocateurs and malicious groups. This deterioration led to a decrease in the frequency of regular gatherings and face-to-face relations. Saad said that: *Now, everyone feels safe and secure in this area. Therefore, they may show their actual personality. There are ill-*



*minded people here. We prefer to live our life within our family. I'm keeping my family away from other Syrians.*

Second, the area under consideration is the space in which Syrian refugees and local residents encounter each other in the area. Although the local population has diminished dramatically since the beginning of the Syrian influx, the two societies share the same residential area, labor market in Sitaler Industrial District and the commercial streets of the district. Therefore, they have direct contact with each other. Syrian respondents declared the supportiveness and positive attitudes of local residents towards themselves, starting from the early period of their migration to the area. As revealed in previous studies in the field (Kahraman 2022a), some philanthropic locals continued to provide financial support and free-of-charge dwellings to some Syrian respondents. Respondents declared that positive relations with locals improved their perception of social inclusion, sense of belonging and being safe in Turkey (Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al. 2021). They added that a shared belief system makes living in Turkey easier (Kahraman 2022b; Rottmann & Kaya 2020) in terms of practicing and living their religion. However, they complained about the perception of Turkish citizens that any foreigner involved in illegal activities is Syrian. Abdirahman clarified that: *Some groups among Turks blame Syrians for every incident that occurred in the city. We don't belong to criminal organizations. Every foreigner is not Syrian. Every Syrian is not a criminal.* Local respondents, verifying the existence of peaceful relations and their welcoming manners at the beginning of the process, also explained the reasons for the tension between the two societies that has developed over time. They, firstly, identified the security and safety problems that they perceived to be created by Syrians. They mentioned two major incidents that occurred in 2016 and 2021, which shaped the formation of this perception. The former incident began with Syrian shops being set on fire and the injury of some Syrian people. It continued with Syrian attempts to counterattack, which was prevented by the police (Erman 2017; Kahraman & Güngördü 2022). In 2021, at the

conclusion of a quarrel in the street, two Turkish youngsters were stabbed, one of whom died. Then, the locals, protesting the incident in large groups, and vandalizing the Syrian stores and properties, were stopped by the police (BBC 2021). Some local respondents explained that some Syrian people were warned not to go out of their homes by the police. After a while, the area was pacified. Some local respondents mentioned their security-related concerns in relation to the existence of Syrians in the area (Açıklan et al. 2020). On the other hand, Syrian respondents did not want to talk too much about the incidents but explained that they have good intentions and are harmless. Today, the district seems to be at peace and it has regained its vitality. The police officers in the area verified this information. They added that police controls increased in the area (Personal interviews with police officers, 10.07.2021).

Local respondents stressed another source of unrest relating to the unfair competition in the labor market and everyday business that was detailed earlier in the section on the economic dimension of integration. This is also strengthened by the locals' perception of unjust resource allocation organized through institutional and non-institutional channels. These two reasons influenced the relationship between the two parties to integration in their working and living environments. Local respondents alleged that these reasons inflame the tension between societies. Finally, they pointed out the differences in lifestyles between the societies. Reflecting on daily life practices, Nuran clarified that:

*I have seen that we are not the same although we are all Muslims. I cannot put the bread and the used toilet paper in the same trash bin, but they do. I cannot eat that smelly food, but they live with those smells. I cannot eat with my fingers, but they eat without spoons. Some Syrian men wear long shirts like dresses, this is also not the way our men dress. The women are all made up although they have veils covering their faces. But I should say that the homes of some are very clean, that you may*

*smell the extreme odor of soap before you enter the house. This is also too much for my home cleaning routines.*

Contrary to the explanations of some local residents about their concerns, there were also some respondents emphasizing the need to look at the process from a humanitarian perspective. They described Syrian migration as a necessary act of escape from war. They were pleased to help Syrians when they are in need. They added that there are provocateurs trying to destroy peaceful relations between the two societies. Disinformation was circulated on social media, especially about the causes and effects of incidents between locals and Syrians, which increased the tension in the area. This finding also demonstrates the influence of social media in the circulation of news, which is also a significant tool of communication, socializing and social networking in the area.

Civil society organizations and municipality centers operating in the area act as hubs, providing social and educational support and an environment for integration. Refugee-oriented organizations organize vocational training courses and skill development and literacy workshops for Syrian refugees. Language courses in Turkish aim to ease communication between the two societies. However, the representatives of these organizations and centers stressed the decreasing tendency for involvement in such language courses since the area turned into an ethnic district where Syrian refugees maintain their daily life without any need to speak in Turkish. Within this framework, some local respondents pointed out the availability of doctors, NGO representatives, teachers and vendors who can speak Arabic to help Syrians. Moreover, many Syrian respondents expressed the comfort of sustaining their everyday life by communicating in Arabic when in the area. Therefore, contrary to the findings of previous studies (Açıklan et al. 2020; Akar & Erdoğan 2019; Şimşek 2020), language does not seem to be a barrier to integration for Syrian refugees at neighborhood level until they leave the area. Nevertheless, many local respondents supported the idea that Syrians should be required to

know Turkish; to initiate a dialogue with Turks, to establish sincerity and to break down prejudices towards refugees through improved communication.

Another channel of social integration is the Quran courses that mosque associations provide for Syrians, as they do for all other residents who want to learn the Quran and the basics of religious doctrine. Some Syrian respondents send their young girls, those who are not enrolled in formal education or not yet married off by their parents, to these courses (personal interview with neighborhood muhktars, 10.08.2021). These courses replace the formal educational environment of those girls who are unregistered or not allowed to go to school by their families. These courses provide a space for social interaction for girls who spend most of their time at home (Kahraman and Güngördü 2022). Moreover, mosques, as the religious centers of Muslims in the area, host mostly male prayers five times a day. Syrian male respondents mentioned that the mosques, where such congregational praying activities are performed, offer settings to socialize with other Syrian men. Mohammed explained that: *I miss my land, my old days in Syria. Thank God that we have our own community here. When I go to the mosque I feel that I am not alone and I feel secure. Praying, chatting with friends and seeing the congregation empowers this feeling.* Respondents added that they mostly prefer to go to the mosques that have Syrian imams guiding the daily praying activity as it is easy to communicate with and ask questions to those imams without a language barrier.

Finally, the investigation into this dimension of integration uncovered the future expectations of both Syrian and local respondents. Many Syrian respondents explained the relationship between the duration of their extended stay in Turkey and their expectations for the future. As between four to nine years of living in the area passed, the sample internalized the idea of staying in Turkey permanently and setting future expectations for themselves and their families. Therefore, the length of their stay made Turkey the place where their plans for the future would actualize. On the other hand, in line with the findings of Şafak-Ayvazoğlu et al.

(2021) and Şimşek (2020), their temporary legal status hindered both the development of some respondents' expectations in the country and attachment to the place in which they lived. Rayhan stated that: *We have spent nine years here, but we may have to leave Turkey tomorrow. Who can guarantee my stay here? Under these circumstances, how can I set plans for the future?* On the other hand, local respondents perceived the long stay of Syrians as a part of a government strategy to grant citizenship to Syrians to ensure the sustainability of political power.

Additionally, the majority of the Syrian sample expressed their desire to get Turkish citizenship, to have an official and regular job with social security and to own a house in Turkey. Several participants explained their future plans for their children's education. There were also respondents who intend to return to Syria as they miss their homeland and their families/relatives, and they believe that they belong to the land of Syria. Many of them defined activities for urban renewal as a threat to their long-term resettlement and their future plans in the area (Kahraman 2022b). They expressed a fear of being forced to evacuate their dwellings in the near future. When local respondents were asked about their expectations for the future, many of them expressed the desire to improve their living conditions, to have better earnings and to live in a better house. Homeowners stated their excitement at urban renewal since they expected to have a new and more comfortable house after the demolition of the old properties. However, tenants, comprising the major part of the local sample, when faced with the prospect of renewal, shared the same feelings and fears as Syrians on being forced to leave the area. With regard to their future expectations regarding the Syrian refugees, half of them thought that Syrian refugees should return back to their homeland. Many others intended to leave the area, regardless of whether Syrians continued to live in the area or not, because of its social deterioration and physical decay.

## 5. Conclusion

The Syrian refugee population in Turkey, constituting the largest refugee population in the world, mostly live in the cities rather than designated accommodation centers. Therefore, a discussion on the integration of Syrian refugees has gained an urban connotation that needs to be evaluated within this context. This study aimed to explore the multidimensionality of Syrian refugee integration at the urban level from the everyday life experiences and the perceptions of both Syrian refugees and local citizens. It was designed as an empirical study conducted in the ethnic districts of Altındağ, Ankara. This study, adopting a qualitative research approach, collected raw data through semi-structured in-depth interviews from within both societies. Inductive thematic analysis revealed various themes and multiple and entangled dimensions of Syrian refugee integration at the urban level.

This study found that Syrian refugee integration is a complex and dynamic process, involving various actors, places and processes that are intertwined. The findings not only defined integration as a multidimensional phenomenon, but also a two-way, subjective and contextual process. The local and refugee societies had their own experiences, feelings and perceptions that shaped this process. This study discussed Syrian refugee integration under three major dimensions: legal and organizational, socio-economic, and socio-cultural integration. The legal and organizational integration of Syrian refugees primarily depended on the temporary protection regime and the rights granted to Syrian refugees. This framework provided the respondents with a life in Turkey and access to its welfare services and labor market. Civil society organizations, as institutional agents providing counseling and training services and financial aid, facilitate Syrian refugee's service-based, socio-economic and socio-cultural integration. However, despite the extended duration of the Syrian refugees' stay in Turkey, which enabled them to set plans for the future, ambiguities in their legal status, citizenship and residence in the country restricted their future expectations about employment, home

ownership and children's education, with the idea of permanency, therefore, being critical for the integration process. Additionally, the growing unrest and reactions of the local citizens, due to the provision of legal rights to Syrians and the perception of unfair competition in the area of work, with a one-way implementation of measures prioritizing Syrians, hampered dialogue between the two societies and social cohesion in the area under study.

For Syrian socio-economic integration, access to housing, the labor market, business opportunities, services and the donations of civil society organizations and charities is crucial. First, prior to the renewal phase in the area, the districts provided a housing stock, albeit rundown. The availability of this stock for Syrian refugees to hire, and the affordability of rents in the area, created opportunities for the resettlement of Syrian refugees. Although the pre-renewal phase of the districts provided opportunities to establish a life in the area, a precondition for integration, the renewal activities in the area were also considered a threat to long-term resettlement and, consequently, the integration of Syrian refugees. Second, the area's locational proximity to an industrial district, the working opportunities for both registered and unregistered Syrians in the labor market, and the ethnic concentration in the area, provided business opportunities for Syrian entrepreneurs and contributed to their engagement with working life. Third, governmental and non-governmental aid also provided financial support for the livelihood of refugees. On the other hand, the rapid increases in rent and unpleasant experiences in the housing market due to the opportunistic behavior of homeowners, as well as the improper behavior of Syrian tenants, negatively influenced Syrian integration. Reduced wages and the long working hours imposed by opportunistic employers, a Syrian acceptance of working under these conditions, and the unregistered status of many, led Syrian workers to become involved in the informal market, which provided an opportunity for making a livelihood in the area. Moreover, the negative perception of local citizens towards the Syrian refugees, due to competition and tension between the two societies in commercial activities,

the labor market and resource allocation, created barriers to a dialogue between the two parties, and therefore to Syrian integration.

In terms of socio-cultural integration, social networks of Syrians providing financial, mutual and information-based support, and social media tools that eased communication and circulation of refugee-related information within the Syrian community, improved feelings of solidarity, loyalty and not being alone. As a result of the ethnic concentration within the area, and with the help of institutional representatives and Syrian or Arabic-speaking vendors in the daily market place, language was not a barrier in everyday life and for Syrian integration within the area since it is possible to sustain social and economic relations and access public services and aid in Arabic without the need to speak Turkish and. Fake information circulated on social media, shrinking trust in the relationship between Syrians, and the presence of provocateurs and malicious groups in the area, had a negative impact on Syrian integration. On the other hand, the support humanitarian perspective and positive attitudes of some local residents, providing financial support and free-of-charge dwellings, smoothed Syrian social integration and helped Syrian refugees feel safe in Turkey. Contrary to this, the negative perceptions of locals, who deemed Syrian refugees as responsible for illegal activities and security-related incidents in the area, and the tension between the two communities based on economic competition, interrupted peaceful relations between Syrian refugees and the local population. Additionally, locals perceived that cultural differences in style of dress, hygiene practices and cuisine created prejudices and obstructed social similarity. They also saw speaking a common language as a facilitator to initiating mutual understanding, dialogue and sincerity between the two communities, and in breaking down prejudices towards Syrian refugees. Finally, civil society organizations and municipality centers, acting as hubs of socialization and education through the provision of vocational and skill development training courses, and mosques



offering Quran courses and congregational praying activities, contributed to the socio-cultural integration of the different gender groups within the Syrian community.

To conclude, contrasting adequacies and deficiencies in the organizational and legal frameworks, as well as the economic structure, the housing and the labor markets, social relations and communication tools have had a significant impact on the integration of Syrian refugees. The experiences and perceptions of each community and the central, local, institutional and non-institutional actors, as well as the interactions, encounters, tensions and struggles within the area, have contributed both positively and negatively to the process. Policies for integration that refer to the different dimensions of the integration process may play a significant role in overcoming integration-related problems in the different domains; including engagement with the labor market, access to housing, education and health services, and the interaction between the local and refugee societies. Such policies may also improve the sense of belonging and the hopes of Syrians affected by uncertainties about the future.

Further studies may address Syrian refugee integration in different contexts, at different levels and within different groups, such as Syrian women, children, the elderly, workers and ethnic groups. Another group of studies may delve into the changing actors, places, drivers and constraints of integration over time, so as to reflect on the dynamism of the process. It is also worth examining the relationship between refugee-oriented national policies and how their local manifestations influence both the local and refugee societies in terms of integration.

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