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Mediatization of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Polarized Politics, Ruptured Society

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**SOCIOLOGIA
E POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS**

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Abstract

The tragic Syrian War, among its devastating impacts throughout the region and the globe, had also resulted in displacement of Syrian people from their homelands and had them seek refuge in the neighboring countries and to a lesser extent to other parts of the World. Turkey has been the major recipient of Syrian refugees, which has eventually become the top country with the total number of refugees hosted. An unprecedented experience of hosting more than four million Syrian refugees, has been creating turmoils at the social and political levels, adding further cracks and deepening the existing divides in Turkish politics and society. The demographic, economic, political and social consequences of this experience have especially been detrimental to the secular-religious divide in Turkey, turning the pre-existing rift between the ruling religious conservative government and the secular Kemalist opposition. Currently the Syrian refugee issue is overwhelmingly an ideological battle between these two political poles as well as its aforementioned dimensions. This research attempts to reveal the approach of these two poles towards the Syrian refugee issue and how they instrumentalize the refugee issue for political leverage. In light of the historical divide on the axis of seculars and religious conservatives the research employs a media analysis of two newspaper outlets that are strongly aligned in respective ideological positions. How do the different segments of Turkish society react to the Syrian refugee issue; what political agenda do the ruling and opposing parties lead to instrumentalize the presence of refugees; what is the role of the media in promoting the political agendas and fuelling an ideological battle?

Keywords: Syrian refugees, political polarisation, media representation, secular Kemalism, religious conservatism

Abstrato

A trágica Guerra da Síria, entre os seus impactos devastadores na região e no globo, também resultou no deslocamento do povo sírio das suas pátrias e levou-o a procurar refúgio nos países vizinhos e, em menor escala, noutras partes do mundo. A Turquia tem sido o principal receptor dos refugiados sírios, que acabou por se tornar o país de topo com o número total de refugiados acolhidos. Uma experiência sem precedentes de acolhimento de mais de quatro milhões de refugiados sírios, tem criado tumultos a nível social e político, acrescentando novas fissuras e aprofundando as divisões existentes na política e sociedade turcas. As consequências demográficas, económicas, políticas e sociais desta experiência têm sido especialmente prejudiciais para a divisão secular-religiosa na Turquia, invertendo a clivagem pré-existente entre o governo conservador religioso no poder e a oposição secular kemalista. Actualmente, a questão dos refugiados sírios é esmagadoramente uma batalha ideológica entre estes dois pólos políticos, bem como as suas dimensões já mencionadas. Esta investigação tenta revelar a abordagem destes dois pólos em relação à questão dos refugiados sírios e a forma como instrumentalizam a questão dos refugiados para uma influência política. À luz da divisão histórica no eixo dos seculares e conservadores religiosos, a pesquisa emprega uma análise mediática de dois jornais que estão fortemente alinhados nas respectivas posições ideológicas. Como é que os diferentes segmentos da sociedade turca reagem à questão dos refugiados sírios; que agenda política é que os partidos no poder e em oposição levam a instrumentalizar a presença de refugiados; qual é o papel dos meios de comunicação social na promoção das agendas políticas e no fomento de uma batalha ideológica?

Palavras-chave: refugiados sírios, polarização política, representação mediática, kemalismo secular, conservadorismo religioso

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Prologue: Turkey Welcoming its Syrian Siblings or Turning into “a Huge Refugee Camp”

In just a few weeks time into the uprising in Syria that started in March 2011, Turkey started receiving first groups of Syrian refugees from its southern borders. First refugee camps have already been set in the bordering towns as early as May 2011. Turkey and Syria had already had a mutual agreement in place to waive visa requirements since 2009. Together with the official announcement that Turkey would open its borders to the incoming refugees, this eased the bureaucratic pathways of Syrians to enter Turkey. The open border policies that granted incoming Syrians a "temporary protection" continued with short periods of interruption up until 2015-16 when several bombings and terrorist attacks took place including the İstanbul Airport attack, October 10 Massacre in Ankara, and Suruç bombing¹. From here on, the border controls have been tightened, often limiting or entirely rejecting entries of Syrians and leaving them to camp along the other side of the border. Turkey also abandoned the free visa policy for the Syrians in 2016. Besides the increasing bureaucratic obstacles, physical barriers in the shape of a wall across the Syrian border have started to be constructed within the same year, and by June 2018, 764 of the 911 kms Syrian border has already been sealed off. The long Syrian border had been frequented not only by the Syrian refugees going in and out but also, ISIS militants and Kurdish militia forces over the recent years, therefore the construction of the wall served several security purposes for the Turkish state².

We should note here the special status of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Turkey is a signee of the 1951 Refugee Convention³ in Geneva, albeit employing a geographical limitation as its refugee status is granted only to citizens of states in the European continent, and provides a "temporary conditional status" to foreigners in the country who come from outside Europe and seek asylum from third countries. In 1967, Turkey as a signer of the 1967 “Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees”⁴ in New York, retained the right to restrict the use of refugee status to the European countries’ citizens. Due to the geographical limitation, the incoming people from Syria who arrived after 28th April 2011 are granted temporary protection (Bastaki, 2018, p. 77).

¹ Montague, Z., Rosen, K. R., & Williams, T. R. (2017, January 1). Recent terrorist attacks in turkey. *The New York Times Company*.

² Pamuk, H. (2017, March 3). Walls, drones and mines: Turkey tightens border as Syria incursion deepens. *Reuters*.

³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1954, April 22). *States parties, including reservations and declarations, to the 1951 Refugee Convention*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d9ed32b4> (accessed on 3 July 2021)

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (1967, October 4). *States parties, including reservations and declarations, to the 1967 protocol relating to the status of refugees*. UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d9ed66a4> (accessed on 3 July 2021)

The bureaucratic ambiguity around the term "temporary protection" was naturally reflected on the public sphere by commonly referring to the displaced Syrians as "guests" that strongly underlines their temporary status despite its welcoming sound. The "guest" as a term to define the refugees have first been used by the government officials and also been adopted by a majority of the media channels. Besides implying the temporariness, it also indicates the boundary set by the hosts. In Turkish social codes, a guest should never overstay; should not have high expectations and be content with whatever is offered; should not abuse the goodwill of the host and act as if she/he is in her/his own house⁵. AKP's (Justice and Development Party) use of this term aimed to refer to the Turkish hospitality to those who are in need, as well as to point out the fact that, once "cruel Assad" is taken down, refugees will be sent back home in peace. However, the vagueness of the term is problematic in its legal aspects as it does not refer to the refugees' legal status and rights at all (Koca, 2016). The legal ambiguity around this legal status not only led to an inherent integrational issues across the society but also had tangible consequences for how the Syrian refugees experienced their relocation to their neighbouring country as the "the guest label enabled that government to vary its treatment across refugee groups in line with considerations related to foreign policy and ethnic politics" (Abdelaaty, 2019, p. 7-8) as well as the nature of their reception in the Turkish society replacing the rights-based approach towards refugees with an ambiguous, uncertain and volatile mercy of the hosts.

It was not until October 2014 that a detailed regulation for temporary protection was put in place in legal terms defining the conditionalities and granted rights, however the duration of this protection remained undefined adding to the uncertainty around the issue both from the Syrian people and Turkish state's perspective.

Overall, the issue of Syrian refugees in Turkey added more fuel into the fire within the escalating domestic polarization in Turkish politics and increasing social tension between the seculars and religious conservatives. My interest in the topic stems from my personal experience as an ordinary Turkish citizen, who witnessed the gradual rise of street-level social tension in the last decades in a society where every political action increasingly started to divide the people and distort the usual daily encounters. I have completed my entire education in Turkey attending several schools and universities in three of its most cosmopolitan cities, namely Ankara, İzmir and İstanbul. I started my university education in 2001 at a time when there had been relatively more political freedom and far less friction between people who had different political opinions. In about a decade, we have already started to feel the sharpening politics and slowly growing social frictions. Then the first Syrian refugees began to arrive in Turkey in 2011. It was a moment that coincided with what many people and scholars believe was the irreversible turning point in terms of the social cohesion in Turkey (Castaldo, 2018; Düzgit, 2019; Saraçoğlu and Demirkol, 2014).

⁵ There are various Turkish idioms about guests such as: "A guest eats whatever she finds, not what she wishes", "A guest should know that she is a guest", "One is not considered a guest after the 3rd days of stay" etc..

Therefore Syrian refugees have indeed found themselves in a deeply divided society whose reactions to their presence had strong foundations in their ideological positions. To my observation, the increasing presence of the Syrian refugees in Turkey and the varying degrees of friendly or hostile reactions they received on a daily basis, also highlighted, from a local's point of view, the significance of what it means to live in a sharply divided society. It was as if the effects of the social rift had been reflected towards the refugees through a magnifying glass and demonstrated in plain view how the people in Turkey actually feel towards each other. This is why, in this dissertation, I will attempt to explain the refugee issue in parallel with the socio-political rupture in Turkey.

Introduction

The tragic consequences of the Syrian War, that had started to escalate after the 2011 internal conflict, have been felt not only in Syrian territory but also spilled over across the region and the globe. While the war attracted several regional and global actors as well as superpower states to the region, Syrian people found themselves under fire coming from all directions. Starting from the first weeks of the conflict, millions of Syrians have been displaced from their homelands over the course of the war that is still ongoing. Turkey, with its peculiar conditions as a host country, had naturally been the major fleeing destination for Syrians as a result of its open border policy for incoming Syrian refugees during the initial years of the war. This research aims to understand the general political and social context which defined the characteristics of Turkey's involvement in the Syrian War and how this context determines the public attitudes towards the Syrian refugees. The analysis involves the investigation of the existing social and political tension between the modern seculars as opposed to the religious conservatives whose ideological rift forms the main domestic political axis in recent Turkish politics. These two ideological positions are represented by the main opposition party CHP (Republican People's Party) and the ruling AKP respectively and their political stance regarding Turkey's involvement in the Syrian War as well as the refugee issue are at complete odds. The idea of integrating the socio-political environment of Turkey, as a hosting country, in our analysis comes naturally upon recognizing the discourses around the refugee issue are a result of the "hegemonic political agendas and pre-existing processes of simultaneous politicization and mediatization" as put forward by Krzyzanowski et al. (2018, p.3) regarding the 'refugee crisis' in Europe. Along the same direction, I believe that the reception of the Syrian refugees in Turkey should be studied in line with the underlying socio-political context. For this purpose, materials from the highly politicized media outlets operating in Turkey provide us immense revelations regarding the political positions of these two poles not only because they display the discursive strategies about the Syrian refugees in general but also providing us the relation between their ideological standings and the way they instrumentalize the Syrian refugee plight towards their wider political agenda.



Turkey Regional Map (Source: <https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/turkey-map.htm>) (accessed on 13 August 2021)

The main focus dimensions of this research are (1) the Syrian refugees and (2) the political and social polarization in Turkey. Firstly, I argue that the attitudes towards the Syrian refugees are largely pre-motivated in relation to one's political position against the other side due to both the contemporary rivalry between the seculars and religiously conservatives as well as the historical contestation between these two. In the analysis of this first argument we will be able to see why the refugee issue in Turkey sparked different feelings and reactions from each fragment of the society. Secondly, by reversing the first argument, I investigate what more we can learn about the social and political rupture in Turkey by looking at the approach taken towards the Syrian refugee plight. Therefore we need to ask: How does the Syrian refugee issue argumentatively reflect on the wider political rivalry between the two political parties and two opposing segments of the society? How does the issue of immigrants go over and beyond to the boundaries of the historical contestation of the centre and periphery? What is the meaning of the Syrian refugee issue in relation to the ongoing quest for cultural domination, public spaces, political power and national wealth?

Turkey's social and political reaction to the influx of Syrian refugees and the fluctuations of its approach over the course of the ongoing Syrian War is closely related to its foreign policy agenda, national security concerns, as well as its domestic political and social tensions. Therefore in order to understand the current conditions and status of the Syrian refugees in Turkey, it is important to understand

what Turkey seeks in its international affairs, what sort of domestic politics is at stage and what social cleavages separate its own people. This type of an analysis will provide us with various political strategies that instrumentalize the Syrian refugees in accordance with wider political ambitions. As much as we would hope to analyze the issue of Syrian refugees within the scope of its humanitarian and legal framework (Abdelaaty, 2019; Koca, 2016; Yanaşmayan, 2019) it remains deeply nested within a highly complex local and international equation, and quite sadly, it is often regarded as merely a variable that needs to be optimally calculated in order to capitalize on certain political prospects by the involved actors. This complex equation is often regarded as the "Syrian refugee crisis" in global political jargon and has been the subject of intense negotiations and hot debates both in the Turkish domestic political stage and between the EU and Turkey – thus inherently identifying the Syrian refugees as political objects.

Beyond how the Syrian War escalated and how the refugees mobilized away from the conflict in their homeland, there have been several other elements, which I will discuss further in this research, that made the matters surrounding the refugee plight in Turkey even more complex. First of all, the reception of the Syrian refugees was such an intricate component of the newly defined regional political orientation of the Turkish state that it is not possible to analyze the open border policy of AKP without reference to the volatile regional power balance between various state and non-state actors. Turkey's unprecedented levels of engagement in the Middle East and ambitious political prospects in the region involved erratic reactions to Assad's rule in Syria; the Kurdish problem within and outside its borders; several reconsiderations of its international alliances namely with the EU, the US and Russia; and the rising threat of ISIS. Hosting the globally largest number of refugees has rhetorically legitimized and strengthened Turkey's actorship in the Syrian War and the region in general. The reluctance of the Western countries to share the "refugee burden" with Turkey raised Turkey's hand in several international topics including but not limited to its several military operations within the Syrian territory, the negotiations with Europe as well as Turkey's insistence on establishing a safe zone in Syria along with the securitization of Turkey's southern borders against the ISIS and Kurdish militia (Bastaki, 2018; Eralp et.al., 2107; Tas, 2016) -the latter of which had immense domestic repercussions in terms of the ongoing Kurdish conflict. The regional context and AKP's unpredictable and proactive engagement in the Middle East affairs had also been a topic of hot debate in the domestic politics in relation to the Syrian refugees.

Secondly, the rising political polarization in Turkey between the secular Kemalist CHP and the ruling Islamist populist AKP (Justice and Development Party) and in parallel with the growing social tension between the Westernized modern seculars and the religiously conservative Islamists have come to define the political and social reaction to the incoming Syrian refugees. The ever growing fear of the modern secular elites of Turkey regarding the rise of an Islamist government in expense of the ideals of the founding Kemalist principles of the country, has further increased with the AKP's Eastern oriented new international policies and the incoming Syrian refugees most of whom are Sunni Arabs. Therefore the historical cleavages between the two opposing political and social poles in Turkey determined what

segment of the society would be more hostile or more welcoming towards the refugees. There is a vast amount of literature on the duality within Turkish society and politics on the axis of secularism and religious conservatism. Mardin's historical analysis of this duality in his famous work¹ has been widely discussed by many other scholars. The works of scholars such as Heper, Karakaş, Çarkoğlu and Toprak have been largely built on the critics of Mardin's analysis of the center and periphery duality in Turkey all of which are worth studying in order to understand the current social cleavages of the Turkish society (Çarkoğlu and Toprak, 2007; Heper, 1988; Karakaş, 2007).

Thirdly, the mediatization of the Syrian refugee issue has been equally problematic, in parallel with the insurmountable political and social rift. The highly politicized nature of the media outlets⁵ has also resulted in partisan handling of the topics related to refugees. On the one hand, we have several pro-government media outlets which approached the issues to justify AKP's stance in the international and domestic politics surrounding the matter at hand. On the other hand, we have marginalized media outlets that are funded or supported by the opposition parties and movements which tend to hit back on AKP due to its international political failures and its favouring approach towards the Syrian refugees.

The main focus of this research is to understand how the unique political and social conditions in Turkey determine the political and social reactions to the Syrian refugees. In order to investigate this, first, I will be briefly providing an international context in relation to the Syrian War and the Syrian refugees. Then I will move on to analyze the AKP-CHP polarization in Turkey with its historical background, and argue that sharply constructed domestic politics especially between these two parties turn the refugee issue in Turkey into an instrument for political leverage, which also arguably sealed the fate of the local elections period of 2019. In relation to the political polarization, I will move on to investigate the historical roots of the social rift between the modern secular and religiously conservative segment of Turkish society, which seems to be the main axis of debate regarding the Syrian refugees, on a daily basis in Turkey's streets. The following section will be a media content analysis of two newspapers, namely *Yeni Şafak* (New Dawn) and *Sözcü* (Spokesman) - one pro-government and one pro-CHP - in order to visualize how the media outlets, as powerful intermediaries between the political and social spheres, choose to handle the matters related to Syrian refugees. This section will provide us important insight as to what type of agenda setting, framing and representation strategies are employed by the two opposing newspapers as well as demonstrate several aspects of the arguments discussed in the preceding sections in the form of news contents. We will see that these two newspapers' perspectives on the refugee plight in Turkey will not only showcase various elements of the political agenda of the two rival parties but also reveal the historical social codes that lead to social acceptance or outright rejection of the Syrian community. In the analysis of these two newspapers, I will resort to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a method to demonstrate fundamental differences of the language these newspapers use in order to depict their approach to the Syrian refugee issue. Relying on the CDA as a method will ensure analyzing the news reports with their social and political pretexts and within the existing power relationships between

the two opposing socio-political poles that I will attempt to describe. As a heavily tested methodology in media content analysis, CDA is practical to be employed on text and speech as well as objects, implications, and images in order to reveal the underlying discursive sources of a social phenomena. The CDA analysis of the news reports, thus, will connect our analysis of the social and political context with the Syrian refugee plight. I will then conclude the research with a general discussion section.

1. Dreaming of Ottoman Times in the Middle Eastern Swamp: Syrian refugees between Pan-Islamist Utopia and Kemalist Nostalgia

This chapter will attempt to illustrate the historical background of the deep secular and religious divide in Turkey and how the Syrian refugee issue has become a heated topic in between these two poles on the political stage. I will argue that AKP have instrumentalized the Syrian refugees in Turkey in order to cement its new expansive approach to Turkey's regional policies as well as designing an Islamist nationalist ideology as opposed to the established secular Kemalist ideology while the secular opposition have problematized the over ambitious Middle East interventions of the Turkish state along with hosting millions of Syrian refugees.

1.1 A Brief History of the Deep Crack

There are several historical sources of social cleavages in Turkey that are almost permanently embedded in various aspects of daily life. In some aspects, the multitude of the lines that divide the society intersect in unexpected ways, creating unique subdivisions that one can only witness in Anatolian lands and this adds to the cultural richness of the country. However, in many other aspects and especially in certain critical moments, the social divide deepens and cracks against each other in enmity. Ethnic divide between the Kurds and Turks; religious rupture between Alevis and Sunnis or between secularists and Islamists; political conflict between the left-wing and right-wing are some of the most persistent sources of polarization although there are countless other orientations that are cross-cutting these major social veins resulting in a very complex collage of an extremely fragmented society.

ATATÜRK VERSUS ERDOĞAN: TURKEY'S LONG STRUGGLE

By Elliot Ackerman

July 16, 2016

A "The New Yorker" article headline. Main topic is the tension between secularism and religious fundamentalism in Turkey⁶

For the purpose of this study, depicting the political and social polarization between the secularists and Islamists seems to be more relevant as it explains the ongoing political antagonism between the AKP and CHP as well as the social tension about the Syrian refugees more clearly than other

⁶ Ackerman, E. (2016, July 16). Atatürk versus Erdogan: Turkey's long struggle. *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/ataturk-versus-erdogan-turkeys-long-struggle> (accessed on 5 July 2021)

ruptures in the society. The historical perspective will enable us to understand the strategic reasoning of the AKP rule in its active engagement in the Syrian War and open border policies towards the Syrian refugees as well as why these policies are met with opposition by the Kemalist secularists at the social and political level. In its essence, the Syrian refugee issue is deeply nested in the overall political struggle between the Kemalist foundations of the Turkish Republic and the new ideological paradigm that has been gradually brought by the AKP that transformed the state institutions towards a new strategic orientation, often referred to as an Islamist nationalism or neo-Ottomanism as opposed to the secular Kemalist nation state (İnal and Nohl, 2018, p. 13). This strategic shift and the resistance to this change, hugely determine the approach taken by the social and political actors to the Syrian War and the refugee plight. The presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey provides both poles some effective political tools to hit out at the opponent, all the while instrumentalizing the refugees for political leverage. Therefore, for instance, it is not at all possible to explain the unwelcoming attitudes towards the refugees in pure xenophobic terms or conclude that the more emphatic perspective towards the refugees are solely out of "Turkish hospitality" (Carpi and Şenoğuz, 2018). I will argue that, in fact, one of the most dominant factors in this matter is the domestic political stance of the actors which seem to have overwhelmingly polarized on the axis of secularism and Islamist nationalism embodied in the CHP and AKP respectively. Politically aligned media outlets also play an important role in polarizing public opinion by instrumentally mediatizing the refugee issue in line with the political agendas of these parties.

In its most refined analysis, the ever present rift between the secularist and religious segments of the society since the foundation of the Turkish Republic was in fact a heritage from the late Ottoman Empire's modernization efforts. Although the founding principles of the Republic were vastly in contrast with the preceding empire and signify a historical discontinuity, the executive bureaucracy and military personnel were largely kept intact. The ruling elite simply kept its political position within the new disposition of governing apparatus (Heper, 2001, p. 681). The major exception to this, apart from the imperial house and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, was the group of religious elites who not only lost their political incentives, but also more strikingly, their influence within the public sphere. Adopting a very peculiar form of secularism, Turkey started to strictly keep control of the religious practices in the public sphere rather than excluding the state's involvement in religion (Albayrak, 2019, p.5; Merryman, 2013, p. 36).

The ruling elite cadre of the newly founded secular state initiated a fast-paced set of reforms that was essentially a Western-oriented modernization program. The reforms were top-down in their nature and were implemented in an authoritarian attitude - led by a strong leader embodied in Atatürk and a parliament that only had his CHP - often resorting to the use of brute force against any form of a social backlash. The main concern was the established religious elite and institutions at the local and national level, and they were subject to intense skepticism from the governing body (Haynes, 2010, p.6).

The dichotomy between the ruling elite that imposed a top-down Westernization process and a

largely rural and inherently conservative religious segment of the people was the main point of social friction during the early years of Turkish Republic. Despite the emergence of a middle working class that is well-aligned with the Western ideals of the ruling elite, Islamist tendencies that are deeply nested within the society could not be wiped out solely with state's interference. This was especially the case in the rural areas or towns that are further away from the political centre (Kotil, 2020, p.46-48). Until the transition to a multi-party system in 1946, Western-minded executive power remained unrivalled at least on the political stage. We will see that the duality in Turkish society on the axis of the secularists versus Islamists has constantly brought in a social friction that is still ongoing today, and that this social friction is a dominant element of how the Syrian refugees in Turkey are treated across the different segments of the society.

Şerif Mardin, famously and perhaps rather linearly, conceptualized this dichotomy as the center vs. the periphery (Mardin, 1973). The center consisting of the bureaucratic and military ruling elite backed by a purposefully designed set of institutions versus the rather autonomous periphery consisting of the more traditional and conservative segment of the society that is currently represented through political Islam. Although the dichotomic representation is argued to be rather simplistic and it remains debatable the extent to which these two poles were homogeneous or even harmonious (Güngen, 2005, p. 2-4), it is still referred to as an adequately explanatory approach to understand the roots of the current polarization between the secular and conservative segments. It also explains the continuity of the longstanding social cleavage between the center and periphery up until today, where the conservative religious AKP rule is regarded as a revolution by those that had been kept away from the circles of the central ruling elite both in economic and political terms.

It is important to recognize that the central ruling elite of Turkey, by essentially owning the key institutions of the Republic at the military and legal level, have always been in the commanding position over Turkish politics. Even after the multi-party system was in place in 1946, the representation of the periphery within the parliament did not, in effect, mean much as the shadows of the Kemalist army had been reigning over the parliament at all times frequently suspending it by military coups, and judiciary institutions effectively controlling the legislation procedures (Düzgit, 2019, p.18-19). The transformation of Turkish Islamism into a party like the AKP is, therefore, the result of a continuous friction of the conservative segments with the secular principles of the republic. For Tuğal, this friction resulted in an organic crisis of the state and the dominant ideology that was no longer able to represent the society (Tuğal, 2009, Chapter 2). The organic crisis indirectly causes the appearance of new actors. More than a voluntary act of transformation, AKP is a natural result of that continuous friction and a “passive revolution”. In a way, the Islamic mobilization is the reconstruction of the hegemony in response to this organic crisis. The following simplified timeline of Turkish politics on the axis of center and periphery, and the political actors that represent the secular elite vs rural conservatives may showcase the historical relation between the two sides that defined several critical aspects of Turkish politics up until and

including the AKP's rise to power.

One-party state: the Republican People's Party (1923–1945)	Nationalization	<p>Secular Kemalist nation builders (Republican People's Party)</p> <p>Centre vs periphery</p> <p>State vs church (religion)</p>	<p>Victims of secular nation building and sectors remained outside its reach</p>	<p>Secular nation builders (Kemalist military-bureaucratic elite)</p> <p>Cross-class coalition of the Republican People's Party</p> <p>Embryonic secular bourgeoisie</p>	<p>Popular sectors (poor peasants)</p> <p>Landed provincial-rural notables</p>
Transition to multi-party politics: the rise of two-party system (1945–1960)	Democratization preceding industrialization	<p>Urban vs rural</p>	<p>Republican People's Party</p> <p>Democrat Party</p>	<p>Secular nation builders and urban elite</p> <p>Cross-class coalition of the Republican People's Party</p> <p>Secular bourgeoisie</p>	<p>Popular sectors (peasants and working classes)</p> <p>Cross-class coalition of the populist centre-right</p> <p>Landed provincial-rural notables</p>
Predominance of populist centre-right parties (1960–present)	Widespread industrialization, urbanization	<p>Employers vs workers</p>	<p>Republican People's Party</p> <p>Democrat Party, Justice Party, Motherland Party, Justice and Development Party</p>	<p>Secular nation builders and urban elite</p> <p>Cross-class coalition of the Republican People's Party</p> <p>Secular bourgeoisie</p>	<p>Popular sectors (peasants and working classes)</p> <p>Cross-class coalition of the populist centre-right</p> <p>(Embryonic) conservative bourgeoisie</p> <p>(Landed) provincial-rural notables</p>

The HIGH–LOW DIVIDE in TURKEY

“The High–Low Divide in Turkish Politics and the Populist Appeal of the JDP.” The Justice and Development Party (AKP) in Turkey: Populism, Personalism, Organization, by Toygar Sinan Baykan, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 61–105.

As also can be observed in this timeline, there is a huge historical background to AKP's currently very powerful position in relation to the founding secular principles of the Turkish Republic. After winning the 2002 elections, the AKP government operated conformably under such a structure up until 2011. Between 2002 and 2011, AKP led a surprisingly EU-oriented policy stepping up the membership negotiations and reforming its institutions along the way as well as promoting its achievements as the true democratization of Turkey. The powerful institutional structure of the Kemalist Turkish State gradually dissolved in order to comply with the EU laws and regulations (Esen & Gumuscu, 2016, p. 1581). As a result of the democratization process in line with the EU accession negotiations, the military's involvement in politics have been hampered and the judiciary reforms diminished the key Kemalist institutions' shadow over the executive power (Keyman and Gumuscu, 2014, p.39-40). The pre-2011 years of AKP is referred to as the "conquest of the state" period. The period is so significant that at some point the AKP leaders defined the post-2011 period as the Second Republic. The "conquest" was translated into the populist political discourse as the victory of the people (previously peripheral conservative segment) against the Kemalist ruling elite (secular and Western-oriented). Led by Erdoğan, a strong pragmatist leader⁷ who acquired a very solid support base over the years in power, AKP established a highly authoritarian governance model continuously fed by populist policies and discourse,

⁷ Genc, K. (2020, April 16). Erdogan's Way. *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-08-12/erdogans-way>

maneuvering expertly through temporary tactical alliances with Kurds, nationalists and certain religious sectarian groups depending on the conjuncture (Düzgit, 2019, p.25-28).

2011, which also is the year that the Syrian conflict arose and the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey has come to the fore, marks the end of the rather mild political situation in Turkey and the beginning of increasingly authoritarian ruling of AKP (Castaldo, 2018, p. 12-13). Based on the dichotomy of center and periphery, upon eliminating the key obstacles on its way, AKP had no real domestic opponent in terms of executive power, therefore went on to consolidate its support base by consulting to the same notion of the people vs. the elite and took on CHP as the main opposition in its "Us and Them" rhetoric (Düzgit, 2019, p.22-23). As AKP gradually consolidated its New Republic project, it also reduced its efforts to reach a consensus with other groups and completely refused to dwell in any kind of dialogue with the CHP, as a political representative of the Kemalist establishment. After this point, EU negotiations were also gradually stalled. Western alliances of Turkey deteriorated and an ambitious neo-Ottomanist discourse was adopted to revitalize religious leadership among the Muslim countries much to the dismay of the opposition, who were irritated to see their hard-built secular civilization collapse (Al-Ghazzi & Kraidy, 2013, p.2344).

The Syrian War coincides with this period where AKP's and Erdoğan's power is largely unrivalled within the domestic political stage. Therefore, as I will demonstrate, Syrian refugees have found themselves in a unique political environment where the ruling government actively supported border policies that enabled the inflow of refugees in spite of a certain level of concern and discontent in the society as well as among several of the opposition parties, mainly CHP. While the Syrian War kept escalating over the years since 2011, AKP has been enjoying its solitary hold of power in Turkey, winning one election after another, still resorting to a hegemonic populist discourse that assigns itself the duty to protect the people vs. the elite. Lack of a powerful domestic opposition combined with the self-assumed regional leadership role laid out sufficient conditions to actively engage in regional politics especially in the Middle East.

Thus, the Syrian War unfolded as the perfect opportunity for AKP's new ambitions. Along with the new international agenda, incoming Syrian refugees have been warmly welcomed with open border policies. Saraçoğlu and Demirkol (2014) argue that such foreign policies are of critical importance at the domestic political stage "building and consolidating a nationalist project" and claim that the new international strategies pursued by the AKP are "intricately related to the party's quest to build a new kind of nationalism and a new conception of the nation". The new nationalist concept of AKP, also referred to as an Islamist nationalism, can also be considered as an attempt to achieve an ideological hegemony within the state discourse (Saraçoğlu & Demirkol, 2014, p. 302). This may be conceptualized as the latest step to reinforce its power in controlling the state by asserting itself to determine the official state discourse.

Is this the end of Turkish secularism?

Radical Islamist ideas are not only winning out in Turkey, but getting cheerful approval from the last remnants of the secular establishment.



People gather for evening prayers outside Istanbul's famous Hagia Sophia on July 10, 2020 in Istanbul, Turkey. - Burak Kara/Getty Images

An article from Al Monitor about the opening of Hagia Sofia to worshipping, as a mosque⁸

At this point, the counter position of this new ideology as opposed to Kemalist nationalism should be clear. AKP's new kind of nationalist ideology relies on the Muslimhood and Ottoman heritage. This new nationalist concept maps out a wider geography of influence for the Turkish state to act, justifying these actions on the Islamic brotherhoods and Ottoman cultural heritage. Although this is not necessarily an imperialistic approach but rather a new international policy framework, it still defines the concepts of national interest and mission from anew as much as it seeks to transform the national identity at the expense of the Republican Kemalist definition of the Turkish identity. The ambitious engagement of Turkish state in the Syrian War and its ramifications in the domestic political and social spheres (such as hosting Syrian refugees and strengthening hegemonic ideology of AKP, setbacks in Kemalist ideals of modernization etc), thus, attracts wide range criticisms from the secular wing, while AKP vows to not go back to the "the Kemalist's "defensive" stance in foreign policy and 'its regional policy of

⁸ Tremblay, P., (2020, July 22) Is this the end of Turkish secularism?. *Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East*. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/07/turkey-is-secularism-dead-after-akp-hagia-sophia-decision.html> (accessed on 7 July 2021)

non-involvement" (Saraçoğlu, 2018, p. 20) especially with its eastern neighbours. As the AKP's strategy backfired in many fronts of the international relations during the Syrian War and the failure in attaining its ambitious goals in the region swallowed its hopes to extend its influence by capitalizing on the turmoils of Arab Spring, the political opposition's remarks against Turkey's new orientation intensified. As we will also see from some news articles that are going to be analyzed, CHP often blamed the AKP's foreign policies for "sinking Turkey in the swamp of the Middle East"⁹ quite in disgrace to what Atatürk intended to avoid while founding this nation.

Therefore, while we try to make sense of the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey, I suggest that we should bear in mind the domestic tension arising from the historical political struggles between the secular Kemalists and the religious conservatives as well as their current political positions within the hugely transformed statewide institutional arrangements. Moreover, we need to consider their current level of integration and acceptance of the Syrian refugees within the Turkish society in relation to the ideological battle between the two sides.

The peculiarity of the Turkish case regarding the refugee plight should also be highlighted since it differs significantly from the European experience of refugees where the actors seem to be reversed as in AKP - a right wing populist party- "which, contrary to the European context, selectively includes refugees in its definition of 'the people' based on an understanding of religious nationhood and Ottoman heritage" (Yanasmayan, 2019, p. 41) in parallel with its Islamist nationalism ideals, is the responsible ruling party for the refugee population in Turkey. CHP on the other hand - a center-left social democrat party, is in a position to take on a role that, in the European context, normally a right-wing populist party would apply.

Here it might be relevant to put the ideological positions of these two parties in context as these classifications might confuse readers when compared with the European context. Aydoğan and Slapin draw attention to the uniqueness of the Turkish political parties' left-right alignments and argue that this is mostly due to the long CHP history of the Turkish Republic and its close ties with the military and beurocracy over these years. They present findings that the "nominally center-left CHP employs more populist rhetoric typically associated with right wing parties in the West, and vice versa" and that ideology in Turkish seems to be reversed (Aydoğan & Slapin, 2015, p.1). More strikingly, they borrow the findings of expert surveys that suggest the left-right divide in Turkey is more about the rift between religious- secular divide rather than a socio-economic one as is mostly the case in Europe (ibid. p.4). This is also the case considering the support base of AKP and CHP, whereas in Europe leftist parties tend to

⁹ Chp Bilim Platformu Politika Notları. (2019, March 22). *CHP bilim platformu'ndan "sarayin yanliş göçmen politikasinin faturasini vatandas ödüyor" başlikli politika notu.* <https://bilim.chp.org.tr/Haberler/23/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu-75005.aspx><https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu> (accessed on 7 July 2021)

have more support from the poorer segments of the society and fewer from the wealthy, in Turkey poor districts overwhelmingly vote for the right wing AKP. CHP's support base still remains largely constituted by the wealthier middle and upper middle class segments. These statistics follow a traditional path over the division of center vs. periphery since the early republic. (ibid. 7). In addition to this analysis, one should also consider AKP's hugely debated Islamist tendencies in its ideology, that scholars refer to in many different ways such as: neo-Ottomanism (Volfova, 2016), pan-Islamism (Özkan, 2014), or Islamist nationalism (Tobing & Nurwijoyo, 2020) etc. These peculiar ideological positioning of these two political parties also extend the Syrian refugee plight in Turkey to the grounds of an ideological battle that can be said to take place over the secular-religious axis. While CHP and its support base fear from further Islamization of the country through a demographic change and ideological consolidation, AKP embrace the refugees as Muslim brothers and sisters along with reasserting their Islamist agenda that naturally assign itself its assumed role and responsibilities in the region. Therefore the question of the Syrian refugees becomes a multi-faceted issue with several ideological notions attached to it. Generally speaking, and this would rather be a subjective statement, one could argue that majority of people who are strictly against hosting Syrian refugees have also ideological concerns about the Turkish state, and the reaction towards the refugees carry elements of a total rejection of the Islamist ideology of the AKP rule making it difficult to categorize as xenophobic, racist or far-right anti immigration stance. The closest conceptualization could, in my opinion, be a secular Islamophobic elitism considering the tension between the center and periphery that rests largely on the same principles and concerns. In this perspective, the perceived threat of Islamization that the secular elite feels can be regarded almost identical regardless of whether the subject is Syrian or Turkish. Yel and Nas point out that "Islamophobia should not solely be regarded as a phenomenon, which originated and still operates mainly in the West. Rather, the case of Turkey encourages one to critically negotiate the boundaries of visual culture, which is invested with particular strategies of power that reproduce the images of Islamic lifestyle as undesirable signifiers of culture." (Yel Nas, 2014, p. 567). These discussions about the social tension between the center and periphery and its ramifications on the Syrian refugee issue will be detailed further in the next chapter.

This makes it difficult for the opposition parties to bring in arguments that would not directly clash with the ideologically attached support base of the leading AKP. Therefore, it is noticeable that the CHP intends to debate foreign policy mistakes and the negative consequences of having refugees loudly while keeping the ideological confrontation implicit to its arguments rather than directly opposing it. We could also argue that this peculiar Turkish setting brings down the social tension regarding the discontent to host refugees to much lower levels compared to the European experience of populist anti-immigration politics. However, the Syrian refugee issue remains to be a major topic of the political battle between the two poles not only due to the aforementioned ideological ramifications but also in relation to the social and economic concern it generates in the public opinion.

In fact, although the refugee issue have not been a major issue for AKP's electoral success in the general and presidential elections as well as the referendums prior to 2019, CHP's strategy seems to have paid off during the local elections of 2019, in which CHP's coalition has overthrown AKP mayors in several big cities including İstanbul, Ankara, Antalya and Adana owing partly to their successful problematization of the refugee issue. WFP's social cohesion index (p.3) documents the deteriorating relations between the Syrian refugees and host community during this election period in parallel with the two significant factors: "the economic slowdown in mid-2018" that resulted in competition for jobs between two communities and the "return of the political discourse on refugee returns". CHP and their partner party in their current coalition, İyi Party (Good Party), strengthened their position in favour of sending back the Syrian refugees that are legally in temporary protection in Turkey. As a thematic solution to the refugee problem in Turkey, these two parties suggest taking a step back from the over ambitious activities in Syria, restart diplomatic communication with Assad and create conditions of voluntary, safe and peaceful return of refugees to their homeland (Yanasmayan, 2019, p.41).



11:00

23 Haziran 2021

Kılıçdaroğlu: Suriyelileri Suriye'ye göndereceğiz

CHP Genel Başkanı Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu partisinin grup toplantısında yaptığı açıklamada, Suriyelileri memleketlerine göndereceklerini söyledi.

A recent article reporting Kılıçdaroğlu's (CHP's leader) statements: "*We will send Syrians back to Syria*"¹⁰

1.1.2. AKP's Religious Embrace and Rising Kemalist Concerns

For AKP, embracing the Syrian people escaping from the heating internal conflict was instrumental for its domestic and international policies. With the aim of a new configuration of the national identity, the involvement in the Syrian War against the cruel regime of Assad was a necessity stemming from its historical responsibility. The open border policy, likewise, underlined the historic religious brotherhood in the region, often with reference to the Ottoman Caliphate as a uniting power among the Muslims of the World. This signalled a powerful image in its region and domestically cooled down potential objections to the ongoing border policies. Syrian refugees have since been frequently referred to as our religious brothers and sisters in the official state discourse of AKP (İnal & Nohl, 2018, p. 7-9). It also served the purpose of legitimizing Turkey's actions towards Assad's rule in Syria -

¹⁰ Kılıçdaroğlu: Suriyelileri Suriye'ye göndereceğiz. (2021, June 23). *Günboyu Gazetesi*. <https://www.gunboyugazetesi.com.tr/kilicdaroglu-suriyelileri-suriyeye-gonderecegiz-93458h.htm> (accessed on 7 July 2021)

domestically and internationally - by utilizing the discourse that Assad and Erdoğan were as opposite as night and day for the sake of the Syrian people. However, AKP's international policies and its stance for the Syrian refugee plight were highlighted by the opposition with varying density depending on the course of the Syrian War and Turkish political context. CHP, as a secular Kemalist and Western oriented party by definition, have frequently problematized the ambitions of the AKP's involvement in the Syrian War, and often directly blames Erdoğan for the conditions of the Syrian refugees as well as their increasing numbers in Turkey all the while problematizing the Islamist approach of the AKP to these regional matters. For CHP, if Turkey pays respect to the national sovereignty of Syria and cooperates with the Syrian state to bring peace to the region, the refugee issue will also be peacefully solved - assuming that the Syrian refugees will go back to their country. A safe return prospect for Syrian refugees is a recurring topic that CHP keeps promoting which addresses the increasing public concern about the presence of Syrian refugees as well as pointing to the failure of AKP's misguided regional policies and actions. Thus CHP's official discourse on the Syrian refugee is mainly based within an international relations framework, albeit often with remarks as to how the failure in international politics worsens the domestic social, economic, political situation, evident from its several policy papers that are published during the pre-election periods of the several public votes in Turkey since 2011¹¹ ¹². Especially in the CHP's 2019 March pre-election policy paper regarding the Syrian refugee issue, there are various headlines that CHP considered problematic in AKP's handling of the Syrian conflict and the refugees. For instance, "Abandoning Kemalist principles of foreign relations, AKP sank into the Middle Eastern Swamp" (p. 2), "Refugee issue is our necrosis and its main culprit is AKP" (p. 3), "In five years refugees accounted up to 5% of Turkey's population", and "Poor people are taking the burden of refugee crisis" are some of the main points addressed in the policy paper. There are also several topics that emphasise the economic and socio-political consequences of AKP's "adventurous policies" in the Middle East throughout the document.

¹¹ Chp Bilim Platformu Politika Notları. (2019, March). *Ensar ve muhacir söylemi suriyeli sığınmaciya derman olmuyor*: <https://chp.azureedge.net/c7bdb9ed5f2e4be9a70e40615d8240de.pdf> (accessed on 20 July 2021)

¹² Chp Bilim Platformu Politika Notları. (2019, March 22). *CHP bilim platformu'ndan "sarayin yanlis gocmen politikasinin faturasini vatandas oduyor" baslikli politika notu*. <https://bilim.chp.org.tr/Haberler/23/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu-75005.aspx><https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu> (accessed on 20 July 2021)

Introducing Post-Kemalist Turkey

Mustafa Akyol speculates on what will be the nature of post-Kemalist Turkey.



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan addresses the members of his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), as he stands in front of Turkey's national flag and portraits of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey, and of himself during a meeting at his party headquarters in Ankara, July 11, 2012. - REUTERS/Umit Bektaş

Al Monitor article¹³

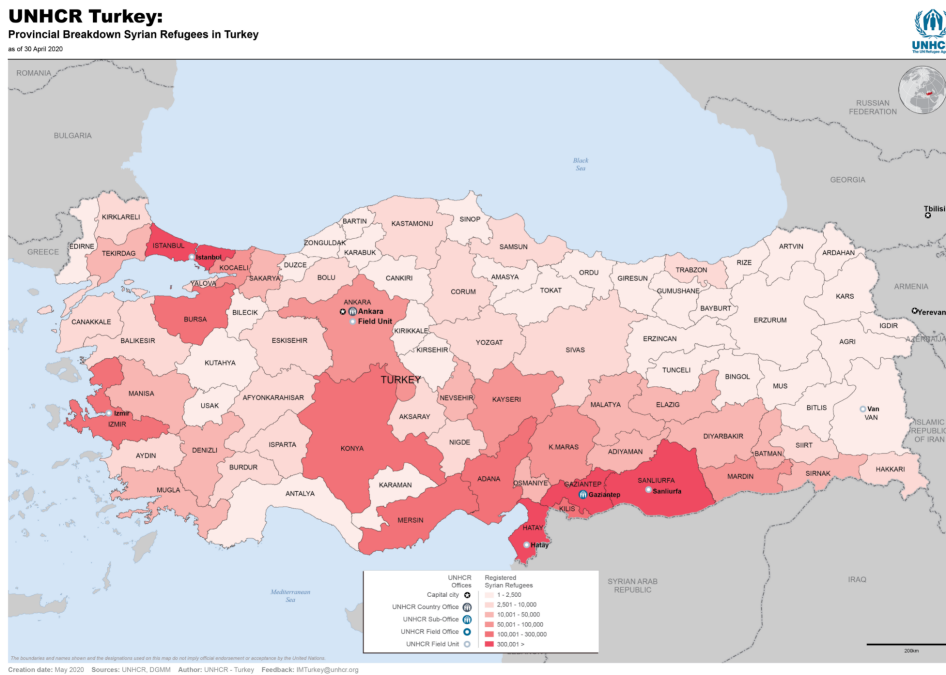
The political debates raised by the CHP's high ranking cadre similarly point to AKP's total failure in the Syrian War and its diplomatic relations. For instance, in CHP's 2015 Election Manifesto¹⁴, Article 12 states: "We will actively support the initiatives to restore the peace environment that is necessary for our refugee brothers/sisters to return safely back to Syria," Announcing CHP's recent policy paper of "25 Suggestions on Turkey's Syrian Politics", CHP's Head of International Affairs, Ünal Çeviköz, urges AKP to stop prolonging the conflict in Syria and engage in peace efforts through dialogue with the Syrian legitimate president. An exclusive CHP report on the However, it is not uncommon to hear public or parliamentary speeches from high ranking CHP members, that clearly have more xenophobic tone, about how Turkey uses its limited resources for refugees rather than its own people and about how there is more refugees than Turkish society, culture and economy can handle etc. Öztürk Yılmaz, CHP's Former Deputy Chairman, criticised the EU's decision to release the second 3 billion Euro financial support package for Syrian refugees with extremely harsh words in June 2018: "EU has

¹³ Akyol, M. (2013, April 5). *Introducing Post-Kemalist Turkey*. Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/04/turkey-kemalism-failing-secularism-nationalism-erdogan.html> (accessed on 20 July 2021)

¹⁴ Chp Seçim Bildirgeleri. (n.d.). *Seçim Bildirgesi 2015*. Chp. <https://chp.azureedge.net/41d1fed67c144d45b4b3d5f770e3e243.pdf> (accessed on 20 July 2021)

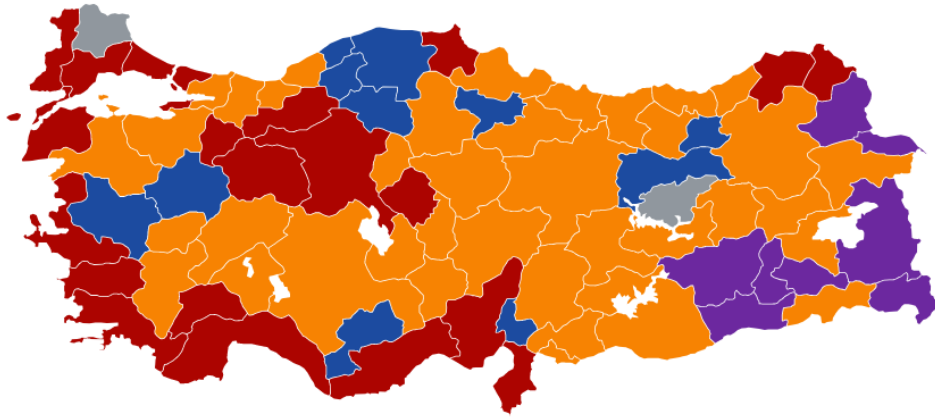
transformed Turkey into a ‘refugee garbage dump’¹⁵. Soon, Syrians in Turkey will even establish new parties, and maybe new blocs in our own parliament.’’ He also targets AKP’s handling of the negotiations with the EU, blaming them for demonstrating the financial incentive that is acquired from the EU is presented as if it is a diplomatic success of its international policies.

CHP have seemingly started to raise more concern before the 2019 local elections period, sensing the growing discontent in the public sphere about the refugees which ultimately sharpened due to deteriorating economic situation in Turkey, turning the refugees into scapegoats as is usually the case elsewhere in the World. This strategy paid off in many towns and cities and CHP was able to take over many significant municipalities back from the AKP mayors. I will be discussing the argumentations of both parties during and after this local elections period in the media analysis section.



Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/details/76073> (accessed on 13 August 2021)

¹⁵ CHP’li Öztürk Yılmaz: AB, Türkiye’yi mülteci çöplüğüne çeviriyor! (2018, June 30). *T24*. <https://t24.com.tr/haber/chpli-ozturk-yilmaz-ab-turkiyeyi-multeci-coplugune-ceviriyor.664188> (accessed on 20 July 2021)



AKP (Orange)/ CHP (Red)/MHP (Blue)/Peoples' Party (Purple)/ Communist Party of Turkey — Independent (Grey)

2019 Turkish local election map (Source:

<https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Turkish-Municipal-Elections-Will-Turkeys-Govern-from-the-Municipality-Rule-Continue.aspx>) (accessed on 2 July 2021)

1.1.3. Conquest of Turkish Media and the Age of Partisan News

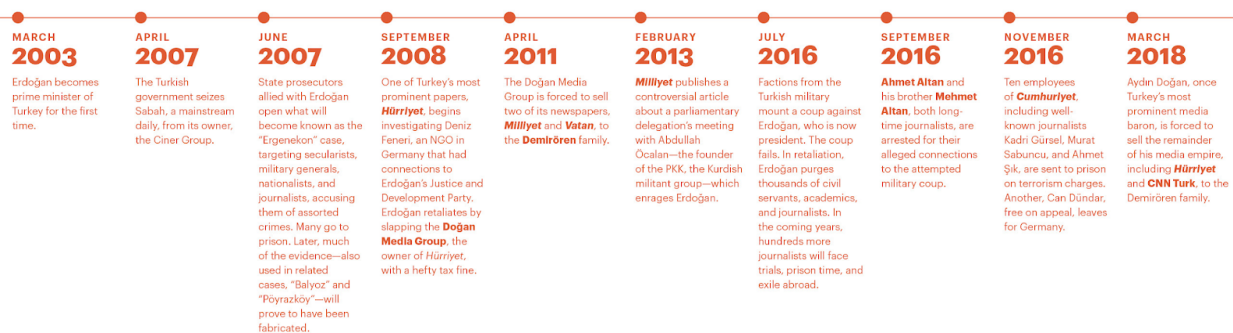
Through the 2002-2011 period of AKP's governance, it was not only the case of key state institutions that were being gradually transformed or eliminated in favor of Erdoğan and the ruling AKP, but also the dominant media outlets have been progressively controlled through economic pressure or ownership. The process of acquiring key media institutions has been a slow and cautious project that operated in the background of the strategic transformation of the state institutions through these years (Coşkun, 2020, section 5). In the initial years of the AKP period, the majority of the press had either directly opposed the new government or had remained distant. Without such support from the media, the AKP's leading cadre knew that they could not hold on to power for too long, as the press influence has seen many coalitions collapse and many governments to fall in the previous decades. AKP, therefore, have developed new pressure mechanisms aimed at breaking the existing monopoly and transforming the nature of the dominant media groups while still keeping a mild political profile. It also pursued a proactive role in gathering AKP-affiliated business people to form new powerful media groups or acquire existing media outlets that will unconditionally support AKP and Erdogan (Arsan, 2015). The process also involved enormous tax penalties on the opposition media outlets; hundreds of trials against opposing journalists and imprisonment; overnight layoffs to many reporters or opinion column writers. Such control of the media and the instruments of pressure is nothing new in Turkish politics. These mechanisms have already been in place prior to AKP, however, the intensity has arguably never been so strong and visible as it has been during the post-2011 AKP period. Akser and Hawks (2012) similarly describe the new state of the media in Turkey as "media autocracy" that operates with five key pressure mechanisms: "conglomerate pressure, judicial suppression, online banishment, surveillance defamation and accreditation discrimination" (Akser & Hawks, 2012, p.302).

It is instructive to mention Hallin and Mancini book “Comparing Media Systems” (2004) at this point, in order to emphasise the strategic importance of media in Turkish politics. Hallin and Mancini demonstrate the findings of their research conducted on eighteen developed countries and establish three different media models based on the sociological, political and economic characteristics of each country, along with their relation to the general characteristics of the media respectively. Among the three models identified in their book, the press in Turkey shares many similarities with the “Mediterranean model”, although the authors do not claim that the groups are homogeneous, and in fact, a country’s media system can contain elements from different models and there are similarities as well as dissimilar characteristics depending on the political and historical context. The Mediterranean model media is characterised by low circulation of newspapers, politically oriented press that often has high political parallelism and a great degree of state intervention over the media sector in general which results in an increased level of clientelism. Besides these characteristics, Turkish media had a unique character in that, the military also had an enormous power on the media outlets especially after the 1980 coup that deliberately depoliticized the media to avoid the resurgence of a left-right polarization that dominated the society during the previous two decades as well as controlled the religiously conservative media outlets (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, 93-128).

By the time AKP achieved a desirable institutional arrangement in 2011, it had already taken control of the mass media in Turkey and to a great extent marginalised the opposition media. It is important to recognize that the acquisition of the mass media was a parallel and necessary process in order to transform the key state institutions and eliminate rival powers. Today, most of the dominant media outlets belong to companies that have very close relations with the AKP, that is not only evident due to their journalism practices but also their overwhelming presence in the public biddings that decide the lucrative agreements of the public-private partnerships. Journalism practices in these media outlets are highly controlled, and in fact, strictly guided by AKP (Corke et al., 2014, p. 3-7).

Turkey's Press Crisis

Since seizing power in Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has raised the pressure on journalists and their employers. A review of the country's recent history reveals a pattern.



Source: https://www.cjr.org/special_report/turkish-press.php (accessed on 2 July 2021)

Given the degree of social polarization and sharpening party politics, media consumption of

Turkish people also became isolatingly limited to the news materials provided by ideologically close media outlets. Recent studies show that people are extremely suspicious of the content presented by the media organizations that are not ideologically parallel with their own political standings. A great majority of the people in Turkey choose to be informed only by their trusted and ideologically compliant news sources and do not trust the news published on the other media outlets (Şencan & Kalkan, 2019, p. 45-55). On one hand we have a pool of media outlets that are closely affiliated with the AKP in terms of financial and political alliance focused on news that promote AKP policies, creating public consent consolidating AKP's support base while demonizing the opposing views and justifying publicly controversial actions taken by the AKP (i.e. military operations in Syria, EU policies, budget debates, political arrests, urban design debates as in the transformation of Taksim Square or Galata Port etc.); on the other hand we have extremely marginalised separate groups of opposition media outlets with limited access to a wider population focused on revealing news content that is being hidden by the mainstream media as well as constantly questioning the AKP government and Erdoğan's policies trying to strengthen the opposition block against the ruling AKP (often by referring corrupt actions by the AKP members¹⁶, questioning public expenditures that benefit businessmen aligned with AKP¹⁷, problematizing foreign relations approach of Erdoğan¹⁸ and revealing his undemocratic practices¹⁹ as well as his enormously growing personal wealth²⁰ etc.). This fits perfectly with the deepening social and political ruptures as well as the partisan news presentation practices of the media organizations.

In their analysis of the mediatization and the politicization of the refugee issue Krzyżanowski point out that the discourse about the “refugee crisis” very much a part of the “changing/shifting hegemonic political agendas and related discourses” as well as “pre existing processes of simultaneous politicization and mediatization of immigration” and underline the interdependence between the mediatization and the politicization processes (Krzyżanowski et al, 2018, p. 3).

¹⁶ Gazetesi, B. (2021, May 26). CHP'li Tekin'den erken seçim çağrısı: CHP'nin cumhurbaşkanı adayı hazır. *Birgun*. shorturl.at/zAGQV

¹⁷ Kaya, B. (2014, October 26). Muhalif işadamlarının mallarına el konulacak. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2014/gundem/muhalif-isadamlarinin-mallarina-el-konulacak-631239> (accessed on 8 July 2021)

¹⁸ Ataş, H. (2021, April 27). Engin Özkoç: AKP'nin yanlış dış politikası Erdoğan'ı soykırım iddiası karşısında sesini çıkartamayacak noktaya getirmiştir. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2021/gundem/engin-ozkoc-akpnin-yanlis-dis-politikasi-erdogani-soykirim-iddiasi-karsisinda-sesini-cikartamayacak-noktaya-getirmiştir-6399867/> (accessed on 8 July 2021)

¹⁹ Ankara'da “diktatör bozuntusu” gerilimi. (2020, December 18). *Deutsche Welle*. <https://www.dw.com/tr/ankarada-diktat%C3%B6r-bozuntusu-gerilimi/a-55990167> (accessed on 8 July 2021)

²⁰ Mahkeme talep etti: Erdoğan'ın serveti ortaya çıkacak. (2018, February 9). *Cumhuriyet*. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/?asperrorpath=/haber/mahkeme-talep-etti-erdoganin-serveti-ortaya-cikacak-923193> (accessed on 8 July 2021)

Regarding the controversial topics related to the Syrian refugee plight a similar scenario takes place where the media outlets have an extremely politicized stance. The pro-government media aims to create public consent, justifies AKP's Syrian policies, promotes AKP's domestic and international measures on the issue and attacks the CHP's stance. In the CHP affiliated opposition media, the Syrian refugee issue is often treated together with AKP's deficiency to manage regional politics, its aggressive interventionism to its neighboring sovereign country and failure to protect the country's own people against the distorting effects of hosting so many refugees to the economic, social and political well-being of Turkey. As, in this study, I will be analyzing the news content of the two opposing newspapers in Turkey -Yeni Şafak and Sözcü - under the circumstances of a deep social and political polarization accompanied by the similar rift between the news agencies, it will be possible for us to visualize not only how the news contents are constructed about the Syrian refugees but also to demonstrate how different social segments perceive their "Syrian guests" and how the political parties instrumentalize the issue towards their political agenda. Therefore the analysis of the news contents will also serve to expose the patterns of the social perception and political utilization of the Syrian refugee plight as "media coverage can have considerable effects on public attitudes toward immigration and the perceived impact of immigration" (Eberl et al., 2018, p. 207).

2. Escaping from the Syrian Conflict to a Culture War in Turkey: Secular Islamophobia vs. Neo-Ottoman Islamist Culture

Şerif Mardin's conceptual understanding of Turkish society is a duality between the secular elites and the religious conservative masses materialized in the clash of "center vs. periphery". To define it as a clash should not be considered as an exaggeration. These two segments have always been extremely separated considering the indicators about their cultural values, involvement in religious practices, worldviews, political alignments as well as their level of education, average income, and lifestyles. The rift between these two sides has the longest and arguably the deepest cleavage in the social structure of Turkey since the Republic of Turkey was announced. In fact, the principles on which the modern Turkish nation was founded, left a legacy to the next generations in the form of two clearly distinct social clusters that are opposite of each other as the night and day, in all their approaches to the major political issues. The approach of these two sides also differ tremendously in relation to the Syrian refugee plight. The objection of the secular segments of the society to the incoming Syrian refugees is largely based on the Kemalist project that designed Turkey facing towards the Western civilization and marginalized its Eastern elements of culture to the best of its abilities from the beginning. Religious conservatives of Turkey, however, have no such concerns with respect to the Syrian refugees, many accepting the Syrian people as part of their own history due to the Ottoman past of the country. These political and ideological positions have a number of social and cultural signifiers that often reduce the terms of the friction to a question of lifestyle where the secular elites enjoy a more liberal and Western lifestyle and the religious conservatives find peace in their devotion to an Islamic lifestyle. Syrian refugees, in this setting, fit right into the latter category, and thus, take on their share within the dynamics of the center vs. periphery equation, albeit without any autogenic social organization that would back them up.

Çağlar and Toprak (2007) identify these two groups with certain attributes in their extensive research. "On one hand, we have urban dwellers of better socio-economic status and education, who do not feel bound by the Sunni religious belief system. On the other hand, we have religiously devout people of lower education and socio-economic status, who feel closer to the Islamists than the secularists." (Çağlar and Toprak, 2007, p.14) Having these diversely segregated communities can be regarded as a natural consequence of the top-down modernization history of the Kemalist Republic. The possibility of their coexistence was also due to a strongly ideological state control down to the daily social life and practices of its people. Yashin suggests that the state's ideologization of the secularism was the main culprit for the peculiar type of Islamic way of living in Turkey in the first place, and discusses that "Islamist policy was the making of the secularists; it was a relational and reactive effects of secularists' othering practices" (Yashin, 2002, p. 42).

Turkey's Kemalists see secularist legacy under threat

A Reuters article headline from 2013²¹

Before going into more details about this social divide and its effects on the lived experiences of the Syrian refugees, I would like to argue that there had been two critical conjunctions in the republic's history regarding this strained coexistence. First one was the period of intensified inner migration from rural parts of Turkey to big cities such as İstanbul and Ankara in the 50s and 60s which may be defined as the first major scale social confrontation between the secular modern people of Turkey and religious conservative rural people. The second conjuncture is the rise of political Islam in the form of AKP. As discussed in the previous section, AKP rule since 2002, has been the turning point in terms of the power balance between these historically unconformable poles of Turkish society. Although there had been several shifts of balance in the hundred years history of the republic, never before had the people of the "periphery" had the total upper-hand in political and social life.

It is essential to provide the background of these two major historical conjunctions in order to understand the modern secular discontent about the presence of the Syrian refugees as I will argue that the social reactions to the Syrian refugee plight, to some sizeable extent, are an extended version of the cultural clash resulting from religio-political and class cleavages between the center and periphery.

2.1 The First Conjunction: “Peasant Invasion” and the Rise of Arabesque Culture

The contrast between the urban dwellers in the major cities in Turkey and the urban migrants that mainly moved from the eastern and southern parts of Turkey was rather stark in the 50s and 60s. This is due to the fact that top-down Western modernization reforms of the Kemalist state have been smoother in the large cities whereas smaller cities away from the political centre and the rural areas remained isolated, therefore the traditional culture that is mostly associated with the Arabic and Eastern influences has been kept in these areas. Moreover these areas were geographically closer to eastern Islamic countries than Istanbul which was the main pillar of the modernization process and the cultural capital. Therefore the sudden urban migration exposed the cultural discrepancies of Turkey's wider population and created an environment for the first big scale confrontation between the center and periphery, modern and traditional, secular and religious, Western and Eastern, or urban and rural. Istanbul, for instance, which had a sizeable non-Muslim local population up until the 50s, has started to lose its Armenian, Greek and

²¹ Pamuk, H., & Solaker, G. (2013, November 18). *Turkey's Kemalists see secularist legacy under threat*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-kemalists-idUSBRE9AG0HQ20131118> (accessed on 22 July 2021)

Jewish communities, who were Istanbulites with urban background, through voluntary and involuntary population movements with a series of major political arrangements such as the population exchange agreements (İçduygu & Sert, 2015, p. 91-92), and the wealth tax regulation for non-Muslims (Albayrak, 2019, p. 9). The incoming migrants on the other hand were largely rural religious Muslims which rapidly homogenized the city in terms of the religion but at the same time brought in deep culture and class cleavages at the social sphere (Duben & Erder).

Erder points out that the Istanbulites, who were accustomed to the cosmopolitan urban life, have found the incoming rural population "weird" in all senses - the way they flocked the city, their settlements, shanty houses, daily practices, lifestyles and occupancies became problematic from the first instant. From the 50s to the 80s the urban rural contradiction was assumed to be the source of all the major problems in the city. (Keyder, 2000, 192-193)

In contrast with the rural migrants, the incoming Turkish origin Balkan migrants through population exchange have found it seamless to integrate within the society wherever they are placed by the state. (ibid, 192) There are also no problematic indications or unwelcome attitudes towards them by the urban locals owing possibly to the fact that due to their place of origins, they did not have the same contradicting cultural elements that "disturb" the taste of their hosts.

The inconsistent approach towards these two migrant groups proves the significance of the cultural factors in social acceptance by the locals. For the purpose of this research, it is interesting to find out that the approach to Syrian refugees has so much in common with the rural-urban contradictions of the second half of the last century in terms of the cultural connotations. In fact, in the 70s, the unfavourable culture of the urban migrants have been defined as the "Arabesque culture" by the urban locals as well as the academic literature named after the most popular music genre among them. (Öncü, 2000, p.128) Going further beyond a musical taste, Arabesque culture is a hybrid form of rural and urban lifestyle, which neither kept the innocence and purity of the country life nor could blend into the sophisticated urban culture. Therefore, it remains archaic, and marginal but at the same time dangerous to the urban fabric, turning the "purebred urban" type into an endangered species. (ibid., 128-129) The drastic demographic and cultural change of the urban spaces, hence, was regarded as "an invasion of the peasants" by the established city dwellers. (Özgür, 2006, p. 179)

Özgür's analysis of the journey of Arabesque music within Turkish popular culture essentially demonstrates the clash between the centre and periphery both in the public sphere and the political stage. Speaking of the early reform efforts led by Atatürk that "affected every sphere of public life" Özgür points out the strategy to eradicate the influence of the East in the Turkish culture: "The pro-Westernism, anti-Easternism, and elitism of the new Turkish regime was important for the sphere of popular culture in general and for forms of cultural expression with Arab, Islamic, or southern Anatolian origins in particular. Efforts went into creating a pure Turkish culture, one stripped of the Arab elements in the old Islamic-Ottoman culture." (Özgür, p. 176-177). Music was one of the main focus of attention as a catalyst

to the formation of a new national cultural identity. Traditional folk music was blended with the Western tunes to create a unique national form of music, composers were supported to receive Western education abroad and radios promoted the new genre while banning the Eastern music as early as 1934. However the Eastern region and the rural parts of Turkey were still keen on the Arabic music which they kept listening to through the Egyptian radio. Later on, when Egyptian movies and music were also banned in the late 40s, as a backlash, a new Turkish music genre started to emerge by translating the Arabic music into Turkish that imitated the Arabic tunes was tremendously popular in the peripheral regions of Turkey. However, only when the urban migrants started to settle in the outskirts of the major cities, this outcast culture became a threatening cultural phenomenon across the urban public spaces in Turkey (ibid, p.178). This musical redux becomes the highlight of the urban-rural confrontation in parallel with the war between the official and popular culture until the "intimate public discourse by the Islamist AKP blurred this traditional republican dichotomy"(Duben, 2011, p. 244) .

Arabesque as a musical genre and as a cultural label, was the opposite of what the Western modern reforms tried to impose in the national Turkish identity and in its origins and nature entirely "Eastern" (Özgür, 2015, p. 177). It, therefore, embodied the core of the cultural clash between the urban secular modern elite of the political centre and the vulgar, uneducated, religious rural people of the periphery in this involuntary coexistence back in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Although in recent years, a transformed version of Arabesque music have gained acceptance and popularity among the urban elite, the other daily cultural aspects associated with the Arab or Eastern culture remains to be a matter of aversion to date, and unsurprisingly, Syrian refugees in Turkey, being majorly Sunni Arabs, are categorically stamped in a similar way that associate them with the certain cultural elements, or in fact, the culture of the rural immigrants of Turkey are condemned due to its resemblance to the Arabic culture. Thus, Syrian refugees' exclusion, mainly by the secular segment of the society, is reminiscent of the story of Arabesque music in Turkey or the Arabesque culture of the rural immigrants both of which were labelled as vulgar and uncomforming with the ideals of a Western modern secular Turkish society. These two stories demonstrate to what extent the cultural issues have been politicized in Turkey.

Kandiyoti suggests that such deepening social and political divide in Turkey has caused a unique process of "'culturalization' of politics and 'politicization' of culture whereby codes of class and status are produced, reproduced and politicized as competing cultural styles, preferences and value orientations" (Kandiyoti, 2012, p.514) and thus, daily life and all kinds of public places became a battleground between the secular and religious lifestyles. The bilateral contest is there when a women in bikini swim at the same beach with a women in hashema (Islamic swimsuit); a pub plays a loud music when there is a prayer; a man with tattoos and piercings sits next to an elderly haji on a bus; a woman in mini shorts takes the same university course with a woman in headscarf etc. The fear of losing one's own lifestyle and to surrender one's own cultural public space to the other side comes into question when these public contestations keep occurring. Yel and Nas similarly concludes that "The particular anxiety which is

associated with the perceived Islamization of various fields within culture has been intended to be legitimized by the Kemalist project of modernization, which presupposed the ‘public space’ as the state’s dominant field of militant laicism.”(Yel & Nas, 2014, p. 570). The urban migrants and religious conservative communities, same as the Syrian refugees, evoke such lifestyle concerns, and fears of Islamization and cultural degeneration among the modern secular elites of Turkey. Increasing numbers of Syrian refugees in public spaces translates into a similar phenomena, for the elite seculars of Turkey, as was the case of the intensive rural immigration to big cities of Turkey. Public and cultural spaces begin to be shared with more religiously conservative communities, and a sense of cultural degeneration and resentment for losing the ownership of iconic localities seem to incite exceedingly negative reactions towards the refugee community.

In fact, we can observe that there are only minor differences between an urban Turkish migrant and a Syrian refugee in a publicly stereotyped definition and both would generally be defined with some common characteristic by the more modern secular segments of the society. Even more interesting is the fact that these stereotypes are extremely similar to some of the anti-Islamist reactions to Muslim populations in several European countries such as France. Bowen (2007) sums up these stereotypes extensively in his analysis of the confrontation between the French way of life and the Islamic lifestyle, which is also relevant for us to understand the Turkish context. According to these stereotypes: the religion is the main motive in their daily practices and they have an extremely visible Islamic lifestyle from dressing to eating; they keep away from alcohol, have lots of kids; women are always oppressed, gender mixing is non-existent, they are highly male-dominant who do not know how to behave with a civic posture to women, often stalk them or sexually abuse; they are ignorant and alien to the merits of civilization etc. The overwhelming similarity between the reception of a Turkish rural immigrant by modern urban locals and the reception of a Sunni Arab Syrian refugee by secular and Westernized elites of Turkey is overly telling as well as the striking similarity with the anti-Islamist cases in Europe. This brings us to the second historical conjuncture between the center and periphery: AKP's rule since 2002.

2.2 Second Conjuncture: Religio-Conservative Backlash and Endangered Seculars

The historical division between the modern secularist segment and the religious Islamist conservatives, as demonstrated above, is currently represented by the two major opposing political parties, namely, by CHP and AKP in an extremely sharp and polarized political environment. It is not only the political stage that is extremely divided but also the ordinary people who are increasingly thinking along partisan lines and living within their separate cosmos that each passing day have less and less of common values or a sense of shared destiny. Along with the increasing partisanship on both poles, a more day-to-day confrontation in Turkish society is what some scholars define as a “cultural war” between the two segments that form opposing camps of cultural values. The culture war, in turn, lays the ground for a sharper political polarization (Düzgit & Balta, 2017, p. 6-7).

It could be argued that there are various recent developments that are causing the deepening social rupture which is built further on the existing historical social cleavages. Rising authoritarianism after 2011 after AKP finally took control of all the key state institutions; Gezi Park demonstrations (Ete and Taştan, 2014, p. 13-33) that united several segments of the opposition against the government; failure of the peace process with the Kurds and the following violent oppression of the Kurdish towns in the Southeast (Tas, 2016); increasing number of refugees during the Syrian War (Erdoğan, 2019) the coup attempt in 2016 following the fallout between AKP and the Gulenist movement²²; several bombings with high number of casualties in 2015-16 either by the ISIS or the Kurdish fractions; and the ongoing economic recession are some of the major events that raised the blaming game between the existing poles in the society and calcified the negative sentiments and social grudges leading to a very strong "Us and Them" division (Eralp et. al, 2017).

The new presidential system that authorizes the president's enormous executive power over the parliament further drew a thick line between those who support Erdoğan to have the executive president authority and those who oppose handing so much power to a single person especially because that person is Erdoğan. Calling on referendums during the critical decisions such as the new constitution reforms in 2010 and the transition to the presidential system separated the wide range of political opinions and demands into just two options: yes or no. This reminds us of discussions on how the referendums serve as a means for populist party policies and further deepens the existing social and political cleavages in a country. (Atikcan, 2012)

Erdogan Is Dividing Turkey Against Itself

A demonize-and-polarize strategy has worked for the Turkish president in the past. But it may ultimately tear his country apart.

Cagaptay, Soner. "Erdogan Is Dividing Turkey Against Itself". *The Atlantic*, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/03/turkey-erdogan-kurds-pkk-isis-syria-coup-gulen/521487/>. (accessed on 10 Apr 2021).

In such a sharply divided society, the Syrian refugee issue has become another major source of social tension given that Syrian refugees arrived in Turkey through active encouragement of AKP. The deepening social grudge against any given AKP policy by the opposition supporters has also been in effect in the issues regarding the Syrian refugees, and the hostility of the secular or opposing nationalist segment of the society grew clearly stronger in comparison with the rather moderate reactions from the AKP supporter base over the years up to date. We will get back to this further in this section, as to why partisanship plays an important role in terms of the growing concern over the increasing Syrian

²² Kilford, C. (2018, May 16). *The Night That Shook A Nation: The 2016 Turkish Military Coup – What Happened and Why it Failed*. CDA Institute. <https://cdainstitute.ca/vimy-paper-no-37-the-night-that-shook-a-nation-the-2016-turkish-military-coup-what-happened-and-why-it-failed/> (accessed on 10 July 2021)

population in Turkey, however, it may be relevant to review the historical background beforehand.

A recent survey that was conducted late in 2017 by Istanbul Bilgi University Migration Studies Application and Research Center finds very strong tendencies in Turkish society to think in partisan lines. It is difficult to fully reflect the social tension/aggression/enmity in the streets with this type of survey, however, the findings give a brief view of how people feel about those that support the same political party and those that support the other parties. For instance, 79% of the interviewed people do not want their daughters to marry one of the supporters of the party they feel most distant from. While 74% stated that they do not want to do business with one of the supporters of that party, the rate of those who do not want them as neighbors reaches 70 percent. This reflects the social distance that people feel against each other. When asked about what adjectives would best describe the people who support the same party or the others, results show that positive adjectives (hardworking, honorable, intelligent, generous etc.) were only reserved for the same party supporters with a ratio of more than 80% for each, whereas negative adjectives (cruel, threat to the country, arrogant, selfish etc.) were used to describe the people of the opposing views again with the rates exceeding 80%. This implies a grudge against the opposing view and a sense of moral superiority over the other party supporters (Erdoğan and Uyan, 2018).

Beyond the rather sensational events dividing the people in opposite poles that is briefly mentioned above, there are also some tenuously growing cultural factors that slowly push the existing poles away from each other. It is possible to read AKP's victory in the November 2002 elections as a backlash of the periphery against the center, a Kemalist & elitist rule that has been in place since the foundation of the republic. The backlash did not only translate into a drastic shift in political power, but also initiated an overall gradual transformation in terms of distribution of national wealth as well as continuous reorganization of public spaces and cultural production. Secular elites of Turkey increasingly felt that the hardfought achievements of the Kemalist Turkish Republic were being dismantled and their Western lifestyle were being constantly challenged by an Islamist government who openly favour the previously peripheral segment of the Turkish society and promote a pious disposition in the organization the state and society.

One effect of AKP's rule naturally has been to reorganize the access to the national resources and bring the previously peripheral capitalist segments, mainly the “Anatolian tigers” – an economic term used to describe the capitalists from small Anatolian cities- towards the center of the economy by significant state incentives. This caused a shift in the national capital accumulation and changed the social class compositions to unprecedented levels. An Islamic bourgeoisie consolidated around the AKP's political power, forming a unity of interest at the expense of the existing elite capitalists (Jarosiewicz, 2013, p. 2).

The emergence of a new middle class and a new bourgeoisie composed of the social segments that were previously peripheral to the economic, political and social life in Turkey have resulted in a clash of cultures much to the dismay of the established middle class and bourgeoisie who had always been the

source of cultural production as well as the consumer of the final products of the elite cultural industry. Along with the shift of capital towards previously peripheral communities, the cultural space slowly had to be shared with the newly emerging segment of the society whose conservative lifestyle and vision is entirely different to the Western and liberal lifestyle of the previously elite/central segment of the population (Albayrak, 2018, p. 1-2). Syrian refugees were soon going to be labelled as a threat to this liberal lifestyle as well. Government's open favoritism of the new conservative lifestyle, that it often describes as "local and national"²³ over the Western lifestyle and cultural practices which it believes that was imposed by the ruling elite prior to the AKP rule (Mutluer, 2018, p. 9), has been translated into the minds of the established middle class and the bourgeoisie as a threat to their way of being and their lifestyle.

Is Turkish secularism under threat?

As elections near, the president has been nicknamed a 'Caliph in waiting,' reigniting the debate over Turkey's identity.



An Al Jazeera article on the New Turkey²⁴

In a broad analysis of what cultural codes are associated with the conservative segment of the society as well as with the Syrian community in Turkey, one can identify several recurring and major topics that are commonly applied. In fact, these associations are not dissimilar to the Anti-Muslim sentiment that is widespread in Europe. As Hamid describes it in the European context, “Muslims are less assimilated to prevailing norms around secularism and the private nature of religious practice” and their publicly visible forms of behaviours such as “workplace prayer accommodations, abstention from alcohol, discomfort with gender mixing, conservative dress” increasingly become worrisome cultural grievances (Hamid, 2019, p. 1-2). Similar forms of cultural objections have already been in place against

²³ “Local and national” is a conceptualization that Erdoğan introduced in which “only Muslim communities were encompassed and Islam was positioned as the basic commonality that defined this nation as a nation rather than Turkishness” (Mutluer, p.9)

²⁴ Amraoui, A., & Edroos, F. (2018, June 3). Is Turkish secularism under threat? *Recep Tayyip Erdogan* | *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/6/3/is-turkish-secularism-under-threat> (accessed on 22 July 2021)

the religiously conservative peripheral segments of the society in Turkey by the Westernized seculars which further increased with AKP's pious dispositions. Incoming Syrian refugees, who were welcomed as our religious brothers and sisters by the AKP, have served nothing but to reinforce these cultural cleavages and attracted hostile reactions from the modern seculars who conceive the refugee policies of AKP as a project of further Islamization.

The New York Times

Youthful Voice Stirs Challenge to Secular Turks



A Muslim couple leaving their wedding in Uskudar, Turkey. Religious traditions are mixed with a modern secularism in Turkey, unlike in many Muslim countries.

Lynsey Addario for The New York Times

The New York Times article about the new Islamic lifestyle vs. Secular Lifestyle²⁵

In relation to the conflict in sharing the cultural and public space, and in light of the Lefebvre's spatial triad concept (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33-39), the secular public spaces of representation, in which a more liberal set of values were rather freely enjoyed by the people who claim to have a more sophisticated cultural taste, have inevitably been transformed in parallel with the increased competition for the same public space. The feeling of ownership of certain public or cultural spaces by the modern secular segments of Turkish society, started to deteriorate. The territorial loss of public spaces also meant that the certain way of Western liberal lifestyle was in danger. Newly emerging neo-conservative trends and lifestyle started to be more visible and showed huge contrast to the culturally hegemonic Western way of life which is generally a source of a social grudge, irritation and botherance. The grievances for the loss of public spaces and cultural degeneration that is said to follow the loss, is demonstrated by Saraçoğlu and Belanger, in a study that examines the impact of Syrian refugees in four different districts of İzmir - a symbolic city of secular Western lifestyle that is historically pro-CHP and Kemalist. They identify that the anti-immigration discourse that keeps rising in these neighborhoods are a result of the sense of losing and

²⁵ Tavernise, S. (2008, October 14). Youthful Voice Stirs Challenge to Secular Turks. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/14/world/europe/14turkey.html> (accessed on 22 July 2021)

be aggrieved, similar to the reactions Muslim refugees face in the European context, but also very much linked to the ongoing ideological ruptures within the Turkish society. They state that the Syrian refugee issue is an extension of the ongoing quest for the ideological and spatial dominance between the social and political actors of the opposing poles (Saraçoğlu & Belanger, 2018, p50). The contest for the ownership of public and cultural spaces have many facets ranging from the universities to public beaches, from shopping malls to residential neighborhoods and from historical sights to symbolic town squares. Moreover, the form of contestation over the public spaces take various forms and brings in many public debates questioning: should the women in headscarf be able to attend university classes or work in a public office; should there be women only beaches for conservative women; should every mall have a praying room; should there be a giant mosque in the Taksim square next to the historic church; why there are increasingly more shisha cafes (frequented mostly by the Islamic bourgeoisie) instead of the nightlife venues; why did we start to attract tourists from Arabic countries while losing the Western visitors etc.

A quick tour in the social media channels would provide us a vast amount of material about how the transformation in the public space translates into the daily language. One of the specific terms used by the secular groups to describe the nature of this undesirable transformation is "suburbanization" - that refers to the "crowding" of the public space with those people who are culturally inferior. The other frequently mentioned term is "Arabization" - that is often used to label the Islamist lifestyle as opposed to their Western and open-minded lifestyle. The latter term is also used for places that are popular with the Syrian refugees or Arabic-origin tourists, both of whose presence are blamed on the AKP's eastern oriented reactionary policies and misguided international relations. In return, the popular public spaces among the secular people are highly disregarded by the conservative communities and labelled as "sinks of iniquity" and places of "moral decadence" that are against any sort of national and religious values inherent to Turkish culture.

Mustafa Cemil Kılıç yazdı: Türkler artık Araplaşıyor mu

Yaklaşık bin yıllık bir süreçte Türkler, hem Arap kültüründen yoğun şekilde etkilenmiş hem de ciddi sayıda Türk topluluğu Arap asimilasyonu ile erimiştir.



An opinion column headline: "Are Turks in the process of Arabization?"²⁶

Taksim (Istanbul) area is a prime example of the drastically transformed public space, which served as a center for cultural and nightlife activities for many years until lately when it is frequented less by its previous visitors that also included mostly Western tourists and expats. Several cinemas, theatres, exhibition venues, bars, cafes and nightclubs have shut down business along its buzzing İstiklal Street and

²⁶ Kılıç, M. C. (2016, February 1). Mustafa Cemil Kılıç yazdı: Türkler artık Araplaşıyor mu. *Odatv*. <https://odatv4.com/turkler-artik-araplasiyor-mu-0102161200.html> (accessed on 22 July 2021)

its surroundings. Instead souvenir shops, shisha cafes and kebab restaurants replaced those. From an elite secular point of view, this transformation translates into a cultural degeneration. For seculars, the elements of a sophisticated cultural composition has been teared apart by some shops and venues that only reflect the taste of an inferior culture devoid of any sophistication apart from its religious components (Activities such as smoking shisha or eating kebab for dinner are considered as signs of Eastern or Arabic culture as opposed to the Western tastes of urban elites).

Quickly scrolling through the “Taksim” topic of the most popular Turkish social media platform “Ekşi Sözlük”, we can see that the recently most favorited comments about Taksim often complain about the changing landscape and demographics of the area as well as the loss of several cultural spaces. One user calls it the “Little Arabia”, while several others mention the controversial demolition of AKM (Atatürk Cultural Center), invasion of Arabic tourists, increasing number of shisha cafes and in general the cultural degeneration of the area which was once the center for art and entertainment. Reference to the groups of young Syrian men walking in crowds and their disturbing presence also seem to be receiving a lot of approval evident from the likes these comments get. “Everywhere you look at are Syrians” seems to be a recurring expression to address discontent about the demographic transformation of Taksim²⁷. Taksim area, although it is one of the most debated public spaces with references to the Syrian refugees and Arabic tourists, is not the only place that a widespread grievance is felt by their “previous owners”. Throughout the social media and in the daily flow of life, a heated public discussion frequently takes place about how several neighborhoods in the big cities of Turkey, shopping malls, iconic town centers, coastal tourist attractions, public swimming pools, urban parks, picnic areas, and even cemeteries are now increasingly occupied by the Syrian refugees or religiously conservative Turks who allegedly transform these spaces in accordance with their peculiar lifestyle that is described by the secular segments as ‘incompatible’ with the nature and history of these public spaces. Once again, we should emphasise that these comments are surprisingly similar whether it is a story about the Syrian refugees, or tourists from Dubai or a case of Turkish conservatives. The social grudge, more often than not, seems to be more about the ownership of public and cultural spaces, an ongoing contest between an urban Western secular segment as opposed to a religious Sunni Muslim segment whether they are Turks or Arabs.

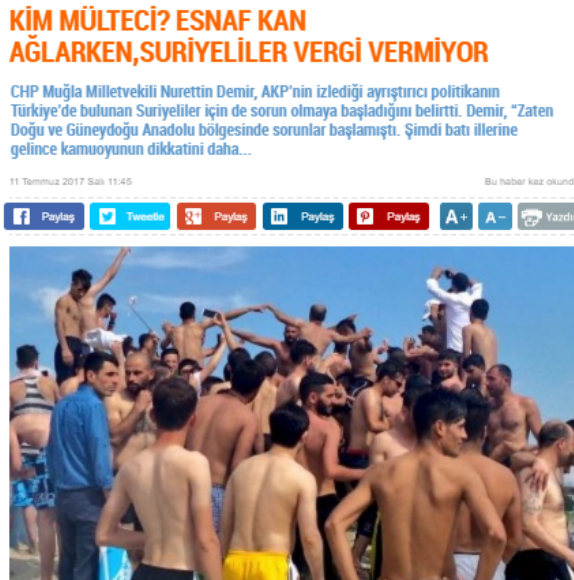
2.3 Syrian Refugees on the Horns of a Dilemma

The sense of being on the losing end regarding cultural and public spaces also plays an important role in the perception of the Syrian refugees. The secularist segment in Turkey blames the existence of Syrian refugees in Turkey on the AKP, same as they blame the "cultural degeneration" in the previously owned public spaces. As Syrian refugees, most of whom are Arabs, started to increase in numbers and became more visible in social life, what more modern Turkish people saw was a step further in what AKP

²⁷ Anonymous. (2014, August 24). *Taksim. ekşi sözlük*. <https://eksisozluk.com/entry/45193291> (accessed on 22 July 2021)

already succeeded to do: "cultural Arabization"²⁸.

The negative connotation about the Arabic culture and countries dates back to the pre-Republic years, when Arab nations “betrayed” the Ottoman Empire through the nationalist-separatist movements as the influence of the central state deteriorated gradually since the late 19th century. Since then, the Arab image in the official history writing has been portrayed as “traitor”, and “uncivilized tribal community”. The formation of the Kemalist Turkish state had been a secular process but the religion was inevitably a part of the national identity construction phase, in which, the image of the “inferior Arab culture” was utilized to form a softer and reformist version of Islam rather than the radical and extremist version of the Arab states (İnal and Nohl, 2018, p.3). While the Kemalist version of Islam problematized the Arabic understanding of Islam as a source for ignorance and backwardness, a new native version of an individual Islamic belief away from the Arabic influence is constructed by the ruling elite along with the persistent othering discourse about the Arabs who are uncivilized and medieval. The historically built hostility and distrust towards Arabs is one of the building bricks of the Turkish national identity and it is still an essential part of it today.



A local newspaper report “Syrians Don’t Pay Taxes” and the image is showing a crowded group of men having fun probably by a waterside or pool. No reference or detail provided about the image in the report.²⁹

In the case of Syrian refugees, who are mostly ethnic Arabs, secularists in Turkey have

²⁸ Soylu, R. (2017, February 22). Istanbul is the New Colossus. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/columns/ragip-soylu/2017/02/23/istanbul-is-the-new-colossus> (accessed on 26 July 2021)

²⁹ Kim mülteci? esnaf kan ağlarken,suriyeliler vergi vermiyor. (2017, July 11). *Ulusal Arayış Haber*. <http://www.ulusalarayishaber.com/kim-multeci-esnaf-kan-aglarkensuriyeliler-vergi-vermiyor.html> (accessed on 26 July 2021)

deepening concerns over the changing demographics of Turkey, the identity loss in the cultural and public spaces, and Islamization of the population. Together with the religiously conservative politics of the ruling AKP, the secularist segment of Turkish society starts to feel that their Western, sophisticated and modern lifestyle is increasingly in danger.

This is not to say that all the discriminatory discourses about the Syrians are revolving around a sense of cultural superiority as there are also factors such as rising unemployment, increasing competition in jobs, worsening economic situation, frequent social conflicts with Syrians, economic and diplomatic backlash due to AKP's international policies, all of which bring about certain problematizations about the Syrian refugees: "They steal our jobs"; "they cost too much to our economy"; "they change our demographic composition"; "they cause trouble and get involved in crime"; "they are the result of the terrible regional politics led by Erdoğan who dragged Turkey into the "Middle Eastern swamp".

'Ortadoğu bataklığı ülkenin içine çekildi'

Hükümetin politikalarının ülkeyi kaosa sürüklediğini söyleyen CHP lideri Kılıçdaroğlu, Kobani protestoları nedeniyle yaşanan olaylar için, "Ortadoğu bataklığı ülkenin içine çekildi. Bayrak ve Atatürk'e saygı duymayanın bu topraklarda yeri yok" değerlendirdi

"Middle East Swamp is brought deep inside our country" Kılıçdaroğlu states while criticising AKP's Syria policies³⁰

We could argue that different segments of the Turkish people have different reasons to be concerned about the Syrian refugees. While secularists see a threat to their social spaces, lifestyle and culture, low skilled labourers face more competition and lowering wages; and while Kurds feel threatened to lose their demographic dominance in the Southeast Turkey due to the placement of a sizeable Syrian population in their region, Alevis population in several Turkish cities fear that "Syrian project" is a Sunification process targeting further marginalization of the Alevis population in Turkey. Regardless of what these concerns are about, the negative discourse about the Syrian refugees are accompanied with fierce criticism against Erdoğan and AKP as well as to their loyal supporters.

At the political party level, the widening divide between people, provides an opportunity to the leaders to consolidate their support base. Moreover, it is arguably easier to generate a political discourse on any of the given topics above when it is obvious who to blame rather than focusing on the actual paradigm and brainstorm on potential solutions that would benefit a wider segment of the society including the Syrian refugees.

³⁰ 'Ortadoğu bataklığı ülkenin içine çekildi' (2014, October 8). *Dünya Gazetesi*. <https://www.dunya.com/gundem/039ortadogu-batakligi-ulkenin-icine-cekildi039-haberi-259402> (accessed on 26 July 2021)

3. Turkish Media's Take on the Syrian Refugees

In this research so far, I tried to display the degree of social and political polarization in Turkey and utilized this analysis to understand the position of the Syrian refugees in this highly complex social structure. I have tried to showcase the main elements of the historical/political divide between the secularist CHP and religiously conservative AKP as well as the deepening social rift between the central and peripheral segments of Turkish society. Consequently, I attempted to describe how these political and social divides determine how some segments of the society are more hostile or unwelcoming than the others towards the Syrian community in Turkey. I have also touched upon the crucial role of the media outlets in Turkey and how the majority of these media outlets are vastly controlled by the AKP and its affiliated partners as well as how the remaining media outlets are marginalized. Therefore, we have at hand, a sharpened domestic politics dominated by the rivalry between AKP and CHP; a deeply divided society due to partisanship; and a highly suppressed media that mirrors the political and social rifts and aims to consolidate the support base of their respective ideological stance.

At this stage of this research, it is also tempting to demonstrate the debates that take place in the Turkish media since they provide us the most clear and straightforward picture of what the two poles of the political and social sphere in Turkey want to make out of the Syrian refugee plight. The media analysis also provides us a simpler tool to understand the growing sentiments towards the Syrian refugees as we can neither consider these news materials unconstrained by their ideologies and political alignments, nor can we overlook how the approach of the media outlets greatly influences the social sentiments towards the refugees. The fact that these political and social divisions are also visibly present in the current state of Turkish media makes it easier for me to demonstrate the previously discussed historical context between the opposing poles in Turkey. For the same reason, the analysis of the news content also reveals that a key determinant of how an ordinary Syrian refugee is perceived by an ordinary citizen in Turkey is the deep socio-political divide within the society.

Therefore in this section, we will move on to discuss the approach of the two opposing media outlets who, as we argued, have obvious political affiliations in the opposite poles- "Yeni Şafak" and "Sözcü". While analysing the news content related to the Syrian refugee issues in these two newspapers, I sought to reflect certain elements of their coverage to the wider political and social areas of conflict that historically exist between the two sides. In this respect, I analysed the news content in several aspects including the representation tendencies of the newspapers in regards to the Syrian refugees; main areas of problematization around the refugee issue; topics and themes that are commonly chosen when mediatizing certain events; the tone towards the Syrian refugees ; and whether the refugee issue is utilized in the blame-game between the political rivals. The acquired data has been documented quantitatively to demonstrate my arguments regarding their respective political stance and also to visualize the main points of debate in the political and social sphere.

3.1 Methodology

As for the analysis of media content regarding the Syrian refugees in Turkey, I attempted to analyze the differing approaches of two different newspaper outlets that are closely aligned with AKP and CHP respectively. How do these newspapers set the agenda in relation to the Syrian refugees; what do they problematize regarding the refugee issue and how do they represent the Syrian community that are seeking refuge in Turkey? The answer to these questions will shed light on the political positions and discursive practices of the two conflicting sides of the Turkish domestic political stage. For the purpose of this research, I have compiled the news and opinion column articles from Yeni Şafak (pro-AKP), and Sözcü (pro-CHP) during the period of the first six months of 2019 (from 1st of January to 30th of June). The reason to choose these two newspapers were firstly their capacity to reach out to their target reader segments and secondly their political alignments.

Yeni Şafak is widely known for its strong pro government political stance that has backed up the AKP government in a lot of the recent critical topics including its power contest with the Gulen movement in the period after 2011 (Toruk & Olkun, 2014, p. 388-389). Yeni Şafak, unlike some other pro-government newspapers, does not try to keep its government support subtle, on the contrary, defends it along the partisan lines as well as it can. This includes strategies of agenda setting and priming of certain topics over the others in parallel with AKP's agenda and attacking the opposition parties and its supporters wherever it is possible. It is also one of the most circulated newspapers that has a clear pro-government stance³¹. Sözcü, on the other hand, is very much like Yeni Şafak in its style and partisanship, albeit it strictly aligns with the CHP. Its reader base is on average 2.5 times larger than Yeni Şafak, however it is one of the newspapers that is marginalized to the extent that it does not have much power to determine a widespread public agenda and instead serves as a newspaper that consolidates the secular segment of the society around CHP.

The reason to choose these two rather partisan newspapers, beyond their circulation capacity, was to outline a clearer picture of both sides' discursive strategies around the Syrian refugee issue. Both newspapers hold their political positions firm and they are usually extremely outspoken when there is a matter of critical public debate. The lack of subtlety in the reports of these two newspapers enable us to see what, in actuality, the two opposing parties are trying to transmit to the public opinion through their media apparatus.

The time frame that I focused on this research is marked by the local government elections that took place on 31st of March, and in İstanbul's case extended to 24th of June due to the repetition of this particular election after AKP's objections. The first six months of 2019, therefore, was a period of extreme intensity in terms of public and political debate across the entire Turkish media about all the critical topics that the political parties deemed relevant for their political leverage in the local elections.

³¹ *Gazetelerin Haftalık Satış Raporu.* (2018, April). Gazete Tirajları. <http://gazetetirajlari.com/HaftalikTirajlar.aspx>

Deteriorating economy, inflation, state-wide corruption, foreign affairs and the Syrian refugee issue were the hottest subjects among all. The intensity of these debates provided this research more material to analyse about the Syrian refugee issue as the main opposition party CHP saw an opportunity to relate several economic and social problems in Turkey to the refugee issue relying on the growing public discontent about the Syrian community in Turkey. This, in turn, has put the AKP on the defensive by having to counter all the arguments raised by the opposition as well as manage the increasing public concern. Also the fact that local municipalities are the main bodies in charge of the regulations and organizations regarding the refugees in Turkey, the Syrian refugee issue has become a key point of political leverage that was inevitably going to affect the outcome of these elections. (Tuncel & Ekici, 2019, p. 52-53)

The news compilation process was manually done on Google's site specific search function with date filters by utilizing the keywords related to Syrian refugees such as "Suriyeli" (Syrian), "Suriyeli misafir" (Syrian guest), Suriyeli mülteci (Syrian refugee) ,and mülteci (refugee). Then the compiled articles have been filtered manually to only contain the relevant articles that were about the Syrian refugees in Turkey. After the elimination of irrelevant news content, I found 214 articles in Sözcü and 153 in Yeni Şafak that served a purpose for this research. Among the content of the Sözcü newspaper, 161 of them were news report articles, 42 were opinion column articles and 11 were interviews. Yeni Şafak had 143 news reports and 10 opinion column articles.

At first, these pieces of content were reviewed and a tentative coding structure was created in order to categorize the articles in terms of their main subject, how they represent the Syrian refugees, their main area of problematization, whether they involve criticism towards the opposing side, the tone used about the Syrian refugees. The aim and the relevance of these coding structures will be separately explained in the below subsections. Upon the second round of reading the articles, the content has been categorized and evaluated on Microsoft Excel where several new topical categories emerged in more detail within each branch of the coding structure. The findings, then, were presented quantitatively in order to display the general approach of the newspapers to the Syrian refugee issue in general. The news articles have also been analyzed qualitatively through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

CDA is a method widely used in media analysis especially after the 80s, however it is developed from Critical Linguistic studies in the 70s. Essentially being an analysis of the relation between power and discourse, CDA's one of the key elements is "the patterns of access to (public) discourse for different social groups" (van Dijk, 1993, p. 249) which I will be applying in the case of the political stance of these two parties and their support base with regards to the refugee issue. The rhetoric and the linguistic elements of the news reports and opinion columns provide us an understanding of the "strategies that aim at the concealment of social power relations, for instance by playing down, leaving implicit or understating responsible agency of powerful social actors in the events represented in the text" (ibid., p. 250). The connection between the CDA and ideology also should be

highlighted here, as the refugee issue in hand, has tremendous ideological pretext in the political environment of Turkey between the secular Kemalists and religious Islamists. Xia and Hamuddin argues that CDA interpret discourse as ideology “because they aroused to characterized the systems of attention, show in language that groups and persons exercise to see themselves, past through of filter information, and understand the meaning of some conversation extend the ideology.” (Xia and Hamuddin, 2018, p. 2). The sharpening political stage in Turkey has resulted in a severe ideological clash that comes to surface in every current political issue. The Syrian refugees are also in the center of this clash and in order for us to understand the varying reactions to their presence in Turkey, we should provide the underlying ideological principles and how these principles affect the political stance of the parties and people.

Fairclough similarly considers the discourse as a social process, connecting it with the text analysis in parallel with the discourse analysis. For him, text and discourse analysis provides researchers a tool to analyze social action. In the end, the texts that are subject to analysis are part of a social act and inevitably reflect what is present in the society because they are intricately connected to the society in which they live. Critical discourse analysis can only be meaningful if it can reveal these relationships between the textual material, the meanings that are created with these texts and the social actions that they promote. Therefore CDA is essentially an “analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis (including language) and other elements of social practices.” (Fairclough, 2001, p. 122-123)

Furthermore, CDA inevitably involves an inherent semiotic evaluation due to the relation of the studied texts, remarks and with the existing social structures, historical divides and specific elements that refer to the symbolic elements of the debates. There are numerous agents and objects of meaning creation in the discourses employed by both the seculars and religious conservatives. Without revealing the historical and symbolic meanings of these rhetorical elements, it would be impossible to demonstrate the underlying meanings of these news materials. This approach attempts to go beyond a mere textual analysis and deals with the historical formation of discourse. The historical approach to discourse considers it as a text in its unique context. In other words, it does not detach the discourse from the context and evaluate it in an isolated space. Thus, it makes it possible for the researcher to reveal implicitly implied current or historically biased statements and prejudiced utterances (Titscher, et al., 2000, p. 165). In this dissertation, for instance, we will see several examples of such historically constructed discursive practices that will help me demonstrate the historical social frictions between the seculars and the religious conservatives that determine their approach towards the Syrian refugees as discussed in the previous sections. Secular concerns such as: the fear of Arabization and Islamization, increasing dominance of Islamic bigotry, cultural degeneration, their threatened Western lifestyle, and abandoning of modern Kemalist values will be implied in between the lines of the news reports either vaguely or strongly. On the other hand, these will be opposed by counter arguments from the religious conservatives implying that seculars have no feeling of solidarity with our religious brothers and sisters, are xenophobic racists and infidels etc.

AK Partili Leyla Şahin Usta: CHP iktidara gelirse inancımızı yaşayamayız



A newspaper report quotes AKP Vice President's Statements: "If CHP comes to power, we will not be able to live with our religious faith"³²

In addition to the CDA, I have documented the newspaper articles in terms of their agenda setting, framing and representation strategies when they report news regarding the Syrian refugees. This will be detailed in the next section. While CDA provides us pretext and historical background context, the strategies of these newspapers provide us an insight about what these media outlets choose to mediate -what they choose to public or avoid publishing-; how they frame the news for their readers - what aspects of the issue they include or exclude in their reports; and what type of image they want to present regarding the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Cumulatively, the overall analysis will reveal how the Syrian refugee issue is instrumentalized by both political axes in relation to their ideologies and political agendas.

Apart from the coding, extensive notes have been taken individually on several of the articles that have provided more relevant insight into the matter which I will be elaborating in "the discussion about the findings" section after the general overview of these articles.

3.2 Overview of the Findings

This section aims to demonstrate the particular approach of both Yeni Şafak and Sözcü newspapers in relation to the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey. As argued previously, the agendas of Yeni Şafak and Sözcü are closely knit with the political agendas of the AKP and CHP respectively, as in the clientalist environment of the Turkish media, they are strongly connected to these parties to the extent that they sometimes merely function as a spokesperson of these parties. Significance of the analysis of two opposing newspapers is that it will help us identify the positions of these two sides in their approach to the various issues that arise in relation to the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey - both in the political stage and social sphere since the highly controlled and aligned media outlets play a key role to transmit messages to the public as a political action and tremendously effective in shaping public opinion.

³² AK Partili Leyla Şahin Usta: CHP iktidara gelirse inancımızı yaşayamayız. (2020, October 18). *Karar*. <https://www.karar.com/ak-partili-leyla-sahin-usta-chp-iktidara-gelirse-inancimizi-yasayamayiz-1590665> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

Therefore, through the analysis of these newspapers, one can collect considerable material on the approach of the governing and opposing parties as well as how they transmit their messages to shape public opinion.

3.2.1 Agenda Setting Strategies

There is a vast array of topics that could potentially be reported about the Syrian refugees in Turkey as it is a multidimensional issue that intricately relates to almost all the social, economic and political sub-domains. What the press choose to mediatize and emphasise among all the possible aspects of the issue provides us strong evidence about their political and ideological stance especially in Turkey's clientalist media tradition. Agenda setting theory suggests that media outlets have a considerable influential power on what topics the public opinion focus on in a given time by their coverage on the issue. In other words, the more an issue is highlighted by the mass media, the more the audience will react to the issue or deem it as significant (Neuman et al., 2014, p193-194). Thus, setting an agenda aims to grasp public attention and increase the importance of the matter in the public domain. It creates an abundance of visual and discursive materials around a matter and initiates a more widespread debate. The visibility and abundance of the news content regarding a certain topic, thus, increases the perceived importance of the matter or its relative importance to the other matters.

Public attention may be drawn by the media to certain issues over the others by several editorial mechanisms such as arranging the news order; granting more space to chosen news, headlining with striking phrases; publishing certain issues more frequently than the other issues, examining several different dimensions of chosen subjects etc. The agenda setting theory first emerged when McCombs and Shaw found a significant correlation between the mass media content and the public choice of the most critical topics in relation to the 1968 presidential elections in the USA (McCombs & Shaw, 1973). Although far from proving a point, they succeeded to draw scholarly attention to the ability of the media to determine the public and political agenda. It does not necessarily make people think in a certain way, but brings certain issues to the public domain more frequently and widely so that the issue becomes more prominent within the public sphere. (ibid. p. 177)

Therefore it is important, for the purpose of this study, to find out which topics are brought into public attention more frequently in these media outlets regarding the Syrian refugee issue. As discussed earlier, the refugee issue we have in Turkey and in the region is intricately related to high level and local politics as well as reflections in several critical aspects of social and economic life. This essentially means that there is a huge amount of news material to be mediatized around the issue, however, we see that many elements are being deliberately overlooked by the media while certain details are brought into public attention frequently, as we will see in the following section.

The articles in these newspapers are sometimes rather short, covering only one topic with a few paragraphs reporting an event. However there are also some articles that are much longer and relate the

Syrian refugee issue to many different topics of discussion. In these cases, I have chosen the most dominant topic of attention while coding the subjects of these articles.

a) Analysis of Sözcü's Agenda Setting Strategies

Analysing the main subjects of these articles reveals that a majority of the topics mediatized by Sözcü newspaper are those that focus on the negative consequences of hosting the Syrian community in Turkey. We see that articles about the number of Syrian refugees (23), criminal or illegal actions allegedly committed by Syrian individuals or gangs (27), local social confrontations and conflicts between the Syrian refugees and Turkish residents (20), integration problems (19), government's alleged favouring of Syrians over the local people through economic and social incentives (15), economic consequences of hosting refugees (14), and calls for policies to send Syrian people back to Syria (coded under deportation, 14) dominates the news and more often than not carry additional negative connotations about the Syrian refugees in general.

Alleged criminal actions of Syrian refugees often relate to other economic or social categories. For instance news reports of refugees that take on unregistered economic activities such as taxi³³ business, health clinics³⁴, abortion clinics³⁵; or gender related offences such as child abuse³⁶, stalking women³⁷ in the street has been frequently brought under the spotlight. There are also news articles that report organized crime by groups of Syrian individuals or gangs³⁸. The official figures, however, suggest that the Syrian refugees (which roughly amount to 4% of Turkey's population) have very low rates of involvement in crime - overall 1.32% of criminal cases involved Syrian individuals in between 2014 and 2017; and

³³ Albayrak, Z. (2019, July 1). Suriyeliler taksici oldu! *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/suriyeliler-taksici-oldu-5207102> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

³⁴ Suriyeli sahte doktor muayenehane açıp çocuksuz aileleri dolandırdı. (2019, May 24). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/suriyeli-sahte-doktor-muayenehane-acip-cocuksuz-aileleri-dolandirdi-4914675> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

³⁵ Atam, H. (2019, January 16). İstanbul'da Suriyelilerin merdiven altı 'kürtaj polikliniği' bulundu. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/saglik/istanbulda-suriyelilerin-merdiven-alti-kurtaj-poliklinigi-bulundu-3151299> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

³⁶ Üvey kızına işkence eden Suriyeli baba tutuklandı. (2019, February 25). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/uvay-kizina-iskence-eden-suriyeli-baba-tutuklandi-3683824> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

³⁷ Suriyeli Türk kıza saldırdı... İlçe ayağa kalktı! (2019, June 18). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/son-dakika-suriyeli-turk-kiza-saldirdi-ilce-ayaga-kalkti-5010092> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

³⁸ Saday, T. (2019, March 13). İstanbul'da Suriye mafyası ile Cezayir mafyası birbirine girdi. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/istanbulda-suriye-mafyasi-ile-cezayir-mafyasi-birbirine-girdi-3893070> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

1.46% in 2018 (Kızmaz, 2018, p. 402). These rates are all the more striking when we consider that Syrian refugees generally live in poor conditions in run-down neighborhoods that lack fundamental levels of social organization and have historically high rates of crime. Taking into account these surrounding conditions that could lead to criminal actions, one would expect a higher rate of involvement in crime under normal circumstances (Kızmaz, 2018, p408-410). It should also be noted that part of the recorded cases are for incidents that happen in between family members or relatives and some strictly within the Syrian community that do not pose a direct threat to local people. Therefore we could argue that, the frequency of setting an agenda that relates refugees to various types of crime through sensational news, unjustly creates a public perception that identifies the Syrian refugees as potential criminals.

This kind of news may sometimes fuel the social tension and create conflict in the shared spaces, neighbourhoods and towns as it keeps happening in Turkey. As the media's attention to the refugee issue is limited to the negative issues such as crimes, the social grudge and hostility towards the Syrian refugees evidently increase in the society.

This brings us to the theme that is often vividly visible in Turkish media: "local conflicts with the refugees". There have been several social conflicts to varying degrees of intensity in the areas where the population of the Syrian community is more dense. These incidents generally emerge as a neighbourhood tension and often result in mass fights. The reason of these incidents are sometimes just a rumour about the Syrian refugees such as: the mass fight in Gölcük³⁹ that happened after a crowd of Syrian youth allegedly "stared daringly" to some local Turkish people; the heated incident in Küçükçekmece⁴⁰ when local people attacked the Syrian groups and shops after a 12 year old Syrian boy was accused of stalking a Turkish teenage girl of the same age which eventually was understood to be a misunderstanding. The quick escalation of events due to the reactions of the local people to unverified rumour in these cases, can be explained largely due to the existing tension and prejudice against the Syrian refugees.

Another recurring theme in Sözcü newspaper is coded under the category: "the number of Syrians". It is quite remarkable that most of these news are either opinion columns (10 out of 23 articles) or reports of statements from opposition parties' high ranked cadre (8 of 23) which draws the attention to the "excessive number of people Turkey let in the country" as they generally put it. There are also reports on official figures documenting the increasing number of Syrian refugees in Turkey (3 articles). These news are generally mediatized in relation to the economic burden that the Syrian refugees bring, or the negative demographic consequences of hosting more refugees than the country is capable of.

³⁹ Gölcük'teki gerginlikte 31 Suriyeli İl Göç İdaresi'ne götürüldü. (2019, June 4). *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/golcukteki-gerginlikte-31-suriyeli-il-goc-idaresine-goturuldu-5044084/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber (accessed on 3 August 2021)

⁴⁰ Küçükçekmece'de neler oldu? (2019, July 1). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/kucukcekmece-de-neler-oldu-5207500> (accessed on 3 August 2021)

We will discuss how the opinion columns in Turkish media have considerable significance later in this chapter, but it is worth noting that a kind of language that is generally not suitable for news reporting is often used in an extremely sharp way in these columns. It is therefore important to mention some arguments from these columns in the *Sözcü* newspaper on this particular topic. Saygı Öztürk⁴¹ discusses the "frightening" demographic scenario and explains with the current population growth rate discrepancies in local and refugee communities, in five years every individual out of twenty people will be of Syrian origin and in 50 years this ratio will be every one out of four. Emin Çölaşan⁴² who is one of the most active columnists in Turkey since 1985, writes that certain regions of Turkey are "in the strictest sense of the word under invasion of Syrians" and blames the increasing unemployment rate in Turkey partly due to the fact that "there is an unknown number of refugees who are willing to do any work for the cost of a 'dead donkey'" and in an out of context manner emphasises that majority of these people are from Islamic countries apart from also stating that "there are all sorts of thieves, pickpockets, rapist, extorter, and beggar etc. among these refugees". Bekir Coşkun⁴³, while discussing sarcastically why people should vote for AKP in İstanbul rather than CHP in the local elections, similarly points out to an "invasion" and speculates that İstanbul will be a "city of Arabs" by the year 2040 if people keep voting for AKP.

The approach and language used by the opposition party members are often not dissimilar to the columnists when it comes to the "number of Syrians" in Turkey. For instance, İyi Parti (a major nationalist opposition party currently in alliance with the CHP against AKP) candidate for the Fatih municipality (one of the major municipalities of İstanbul) defends her aggressive election banner that reads "I will not surrender Fatih to Syrians"⁴⁴ saying that her banner was received pleasantly by Fatih residents rather than negative reactions and adds that "I will take down all the Arabic signs in the shops and streets. This is Turkey! Refugees have to abide by the hosts. We are in a position to live with people that are culturally so different from us and our social structure is collapsing day by day". The CHP candidate who eventually

⁴¹ Öztürk, S. (2019, January 1). 5 yıl sonra bakın neler olacak? *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/saygi-ozturk/5-yil-sonra-bakin-neler-olacak-2938402> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

⁴² Çölaşan, E. (2019, March 26). İşsizlik belası. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/emin-colasan/issizlik-belasi-4142683> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

⁴³ Coşkun, B. (2019, June 21). Binali Bey'e niye oy vermeliyiz?.. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/bekir-coskun/binali-beye-niye-oy-vermeliyiz-5189686> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

⁴⁴ Önceler, S. (2019, March 15). Olay yaratan pankartı astran İYİ Partili İlay Aksoy: "Asıl beka sorunu Suriyeliler." *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/olay-yaratan-pankarti-astiran-iyi-partili-ilay-aksoy-asil-beka-sorunu-suriyeliler-3924115> (accessed on 5 August 2021)

won the İstanbul elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu, is not as sharp-tongued but both before and after the elections⁴⁵, referred to the Syrian refugees as "guests" and at the same time as a serious security problem which puts the livelihood of so many locals in danger. There have been other CHP or opposition candidates in Turkey's local elections whose electoral pledge was to cut every little aid to the Syrian refugees and to advocate for their deportation⁴⁶ back to Syria justifying their opinion based on the idea that "excessive number of Syrian people that AKP let in the country" are worsening the conditions of the Turkish people due to the economic and social strain they bring to the community. These arguments from opposition party members explicitly or implicitly accuse AKP and Erdoğan for accepting so many refugees and giving them privileges that exceed the benefits that local people receive. The emphasis is therefore generally on how the entire operation of handling a humanitarian crisis was mismanaged by the AKP by making its own people victim to the influx of refugees whereas other countries cleverly kept themselves out of this mess. This is evident from the "political note" CHP published⁴⁷ just before the local elections. This report is dedicated solely to the Syrian refugee issue and heavily criticises AKP's foreign and refugee policies that resulted in wasting Turkey's limited resources on millions of Syrian refugees, turning the country into "a huge refugee camp at the gates of Europe" and describes AKP's policies that led to this situation as "lost in the swamp that is called the Middle East". The new ideological orientation of Turkey under the rule of AKP as opposed to the conventional Kemalist Western-oriented approach is frequently blamed by the opposition wing and the discontent for getting involved in irrelevant Middle Eastern problems is often articulated with these words describing the Middle East as a swamp or a dark hole. In this manner, the fact that we are hosting the Syrian refugees in our country is merely due to the over ambitious foreign policies of AKP and its neo-Ottomanist reactions to the regional matters.

The economic situation in Turkey rapidly deteriorated over the last years with Turkish Lira constantly losing value and putting inflationary pressure on the economy. The wages, however, failed to catch up with the rising prices, and economic and financial policies of Erdoğan became a constant target for the opposition parties. In fact, in the purchasing power index Turkey fell from being the 21st down to 75th country on the list from 2010 to mid 2019. This corresponds to an almost one third of loss in average

⁴⁵ 23 Haziran'dan sonra Ekrem İmamoğlu ilk kez canlı yayına çıktı. (2019, July 9). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/son-dakika-23-hazirandan-sonra-ekrem-imamoglu-ilk-kez-canli-yayinda-5200208> (accessed on 9 August 2021)

⁴⁶ Gürses, Ö. (2019, April 14). Bolu'da en rahat Suriyeliler yaşıyor. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/boluda-en-rahat-suriyeliler-yasiyor-4416313> (accessed on 9 August 2021)

⁴⁷ Chp Bilim Platformu Politika Notları. (2019, March 22). *CHP bilim platformu'ndan "sarayın yanlış göçmen politikasının faturasını vatandaşa ödüyor" başlıklı politika notu*. <https://bilim.chp.org.tr/Haberler/23/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu-75005.aspx><https://www.chp.org.tr/haberler/chp-bilim-platformundan-sarayin-yanlis-gocmen-politikasinin-faturasini-vatandas-oduyor-baslikli-politika-notu> (accessed on 9 August 2021)

purchasing power score from 62 to 44 in 10 years⁴⁸. Since macro-economic figures are the major pillar of electoral success in Turkey, opposing parties and CHP had invested heavily on the economic catastrophe discourse. Syrian refugees were again in the central zone of these arguments partly blamed for the economic decline. The funds and resources spared for hosting the Syrian refugees has been brought to public attention along with the arguments that AKP cares more about the refugees than its own people. Therefore it is not surprising that economic themes like 'favoring Syrians over Turkish people' (15), 'economic consequences' (14) and 'funds to Syrians' (12) together constitute almost 20% of the news articles about Syrian refugees. That is still not counting the other articles that mention these economic concerns but not necessarily making it the main topic of the article.

Sözcü has an extensive coverage of the CHP president Kılıçdaroğlu's speech⁴⁹ in his party's weekly meeting in which he heavily criticises AKP's economic management that lead to an economic catastrophe. Among several aspects such as corruption, misled foreign policy, and international policy failures, he does not neglect to mention the excessive number of Syrian refugees in Turkey and their extraordinary cost to the economy. He points out that we have 3.6 million Syrian refugees who keep reproducing every month. Speaking of Erdoğan, he claims "You brought this disaster to our country and you have spent 35 billion dollars" and laments that "Our boys are dying in their country and they are enjoying their leisure time in Turkey".

It is noticeable that in many of these articles in Sözcü newspaper that relate the Syrian refugees with the ongoing economic issues, the government is questioned for not only its failure in economic policies but also is blamed for favoring the support aid to the refugees in expense of its own citizens. Therefore, although coded for their respective main subjects, several of these articles contain either two or even all three subjects. There is often an emphasis of Syrian people effortlessly enjoying the support from the government while the citizens keep suffering from the overall economic crisis. Moreover, not seldomly, these arguments lead to suggestions that we need to "offload" the refugees who "overstayed beyond acceptable time frames" as CHP Bolu parliamentary representative puts it in his video message before the local elections⁵⁰.

b) *Analysis of Yeni Şafak's Agenda Setting Strategies*

In Yeni Şafak we clearly see an opposite mediatization strategy. It is noticeable that Yeni Şafak

⁴⁸ *Cost of Living Index by Country 2019 Mid-Year*. (n.d.). Numbeo. https://www.numbeo.com/cost-of-living/rankings_by_country.jsp?title=2019-mid (accessed on 11 August 2021)

⁴⁹ Kılıçdaroğlu: "Kriz demek yasak! Mutfaklarda yangın var...". (2019, June 18). *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/kilicdaroglundan-onemli-aciklamalar-36-5183966/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber (accessed on 11 August 2021)

⁵⁰ CHP'li Tanju Özcan'dan Suriyeli vaadi! (2019, March 23). *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/chpli-tanju-ozcandan-suriyeli-vaadi-4099395/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber (accessed on 12 August 2021)

brings into attention the topics regarding the Syrian refugees not only in Turkey but in other countries in the region and Europe in order to emphasise that the issue is global and the Syrian people are in tragic conditions wherever they are due to the Assad regime's cruelty. The main subjects that appear more frequently during this critical local election period are: support aids provided to Syrian refugees (20), hardships of Syrian refugees (20), racism against Syrian refugees (19), safe return to Syria (17), foreign policies (15), and misleading data about Syrian refugees (10).

News articles that cover the support aids differ significantly from the Sözcü articles, in that, these reports generally emphasise the generous helping hand of Turkey as well as Turkish NGOs in contrast with "the cruelty of Assad" as well as the negligence of the international support, especially by the EU. Over the border aids are brought into attention more than the benefits provided to the Syrian refugees in Turkey, possibly in consideration that these benefits attract major public concerns. In parallel, these articles demonstrate the actorship of Turkey in the regional issues, contributing to AKP's efforts to build a powerful state image in line with its neo-Ottoman perspective.

The article with the headline "We stand by you"⁵¹ reports the various Turkish aid activities in İdlib and Azaz districts. The article starts, as is often the case in similar articles, with a statement about the tragic conditions of the Syrians who are seeking shelter from the Assad regime's constant attacks on civilians, and explains how Turkey brought smiles to the faces of the children by providing them shelter, education, health services, clothing materials and food. The report also notes that these aids were only possible after the successful military operations that wiped the area clean from the Kurdish terrorists YPG and PKK terrorists.

Another support aid article that utilizes the contrasting strategy draws attention to the several historical events that resulted in thousands of Kurdish refugees receiving Turkish support with the most recent example being the Kobane massacre in 2015. The report⁵² takes aim at the cooperation of the United States and the Kurdish militia, and argues that although they blame the military presence of Turkey in the region, Turkey has always been a safe harbour for the Kurdish people who escape from the terrorist organizations and regime forces, while the US cooperation with the YPG brought only instability to the region. The reporter also suggests that Turkey received 512,708 Syrians that fled from the regions controlled by the YPG.

As seen in these examples, the majority of these articles focus on the assumed regional role of Turkey and mention the support provided by Turkey as a natural consequence of its contrasting role versus the evil forces in the region. When the case is about the support to the Syrian refugees that reside

⁵¹ Özer, F. (2019, May 19). Yanınızdayız. *Yeni Şafak*.
<https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/yaninizdayiz-3471590> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

⁵² Asan, Y. (2019, January 15). İmdat kapısıyız. *Yeni Şafak*.
<https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/imdat-kapisiyiz-3431105> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

in Turkey, it is interesting to see that in most of the articles the recipient of these aids are the refugee children as in this⁵³, this⁵⁴, and this⁵⁵ article. The benefits that Syrian adult refugees or families as a whole receive is rarely mentioned in Yeni Şafak articles. On the contrary, Yeni Sözcü, often publishes articles that deny the common perception that the Syrian refugees are enjoying several types of state support. An article that is headlined "8 Lies and 8 Facts"⁵⁶, for instance, answers several arguments mainly outspoken by the opposition parties regarding the Syrian refugees. The article is based on an AKP report and claims that the 30 page report answers all the xenophobic, racist and anti-refugee propaganda of the opposition parties. A closer look at this AKP report on their official website⁵⁷ reveals several points of the party's official approach to the matter. The report starts with a statement that our tradition of tolerance has its roots from the Ottoman Empire and being tolerant to the refugees is an integral part of our civilization. Second point made is that hosting refugees is not a burden but a proof for our humanitarianism which is a stark contrast to how the EU responded to the issue against all human rights. This point about the EU is being raised several more times in the document. A reference to the "Ansar" and "Muhajir" in relation to the Islamic history is also present on highlights before blaming Europe as the place where humanity died and praising the solidarity of Turkish people with the refugees. Finally the report presents misleading data about the Syrian community in Turkey.

In almost all the materials that we discussed so far in Yeni Şafak, the common theme was, no matter the main subject of the article, that Turkey is providing a very generous humanitarian aid in line with its regional role despite the other cruel actors at the stage, be it the US, the Kurdish militia, Assad regime, Turkish opposition or the EU as a whole. Therefore the divine humanitarian act of hosting refugees is utilized instrumentally to demonstrate several justifications in AKP's foreign and domestic policies such as the military operations in Syria, the fight against the Kurds, negotiations with the EU, and the approach to the domestic opposition. This recurring theme of covering the Syrian refugee issue together with the international politics and regional security frame serves to underline the

⁵³ İlmek ilmek iyilik. (2019, February 26). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/ilmek-ilmek-iyilik-3448678> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

⁵⁴ MEB'den ücretsiz taşıma desteği. (2019, June 8). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/mebden-ucretsiz-tasima-destegi-3494071> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

⁵⁵ Afgan ve Suriyeli çocuklara mutluluk taşıyorlar. (2019, February 25). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/hayat/afgan-ve-suriyeli-cocuklara-mutluluk-tasiyorlar-344842> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

⁵⁶ Şahan, F. (2019, January 6). Suriyeliler hakkındaki 8 yalana 8 cevap. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/8-yalana-8-cevap-3429526> (accessed on 12 August 2021)

⁵⁷ AK Parti İnsan Hakları Başkanlığı. (2018). *Bir insan hakkı olarak sığınma hakkı. suriyeli sığınmacılarla ilgili doğru bilinen yanlışlar*. <https://www.akparti.org.tr/media/275669/suriyelilerkitapcik-1.pdf>. (accessed on 12 August 2021)

multidimensional motivations of the AKP policies in relation with the Syrian refugee plight in Turkey. Turkey's historical responsibility in the region that is inherited from the Ottoman Empire and the presumed leadership among the Muslim countries are intricately mediatized in these news articles in between the lines, thus, providing an implicit justification to host the Syrian community as well as justifying its ambitious policies in the region.

Emphatic articles that mediatize the hardships that the Syrian refugees face are also covered mainly in an international perspective and almost always emphasise the critical role of Turkey in the region against the other actors. Some of these articles present the terrible conditions in the refugee camps in the regional countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, with a headline "Misery Camps"⁵⁸ while also mentioning that Kurdish militia and the US being responsible for the isolation of these camps from the outer world. Another similar article that justifies the military operations of the Turkish army headlines "Don't Leave us to Assad's Hands"⁵⁹. It explains that the Syrian refugees, who fled from the cruelty of Assad as well as of the US backed terrorist organizations (referring to the Kurdish militia), are looking forward to the military intervention of Turkey. Article also quotes a Syrian refugee in Turkey who desperately awaits Turkey to bring peace to its hometown Haseke, so that he can see his children grow in his native land.

The news articles in this category appear to be less focused on the hardships that the Syrian refugees encounter on a daily basis in Turkey. A certain way of pretty storytelling is generally in place when these news are mediatized. The article about the paper collector Syrian refugee kid and also the one about the Syrian boy whose only dream is to have a prosthetic hand are just two examples of these types of articles that unsurprisingly features children. It seems as if several structural problems regarding the Syrian refugees such as their access to health and education services or integration issues do not exist.

While the previous two topics mainly covered the issue in an international frame the articles that cover the topic "racism against the Syrian refugees" tend to be domestic and generally target the opposition parties and their management cadres, mainly the CHP. The article about how the CHP's approach to Syrian refugees fuels the social tensions against the Syrians is one of many examples. The report highlights the racist attitude of the CHP mayor of Bolu city stating that the Syrians are afraid to even walk in the streets⁶⁰ because there is increasing hostility towards them after the mayor announced that he will send all the "Syrians" out of town. The news is published with the following image showing a

⁵⁸ Bilgen, Y. (2019, January 15). Sefalet kampları. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/sefalet-kamplari-3431106> (accessed on 14 August 2021)

⁵⁹ 129. Asan, Y. (2019, January 6). Bizi Esed'e bırakmayın. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/bizi-esede-birakmayin-3429365> (accessed on 14 August 2021)

⁶⁰ Şen, Ş. (2019, April 14). Suriyeliler korkudan sokağa çıkamıyor. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/suriyeliler-korkudan-sokaga-cikamiyor-3466520> (accessed on 14 August 2021)

Syrian family in poor conditions at home with the curtains closed and a Turkish flag hanging. The interview with the Syrian family also reveals that they receive a lot of support from many neighbouring Turkish families with whom they had good relations but after the election of the CHP mayor they started to feel a growing hostility towards them and they can no longer feel secure anymore.

Similarly, an article covers the "racist outbreak"⁶¹ against the Syrian refugees in the cities where CHP won the local elections, adducing the remarks from several CHP mayors in Bolu, Mersin, İzmir and Bursa. The quotes are indeed highly xenophobic, as for instance, İzmir Kemalpaşa's CHP mayor states "We will deport all the Syrians from here. There is now peace in Syria, so what can justify their stay here? They have to go back to where they have come from, no one should be apologetic about this.". The article also mentions the shared approach of İYİ Party and CHP in Antalya who proposed to ban the access of refugees to the beaches in a joint proposition. Several examples of CHP cadre's remarks and their contribution to the growing discontent about the Syrian refugees have been also condemned in opinion column articles in *Yeni Sözcü*. İsmail Kılıçarslan⁶² explicitly states that the ones who were disturbed because of the new year celebrations of some Syrian young men in Taksim square, are clear fascists under the disguise of Kemalism, nationalism, leftism Islamism or liberalism, and adds that this attitude is no different than the widespread European Islamophobia. On another column of tgh same journalist laments the elected CHP mayors's comments on the refugee issue and these kind of remarks will inevitably lead to a similar situation that surrounds the Muslim people in Germany who are subject to racist threats. He asserts the idea that if you (CHP mayor) advocate the idea to ban the beaches to Syrian refugees, then you will have no right to speak up against an arson attack on a mosque in Germany ". Yasin Aktay also targets CHP and states that while their xenophobia (CHP) is a shame on this nation, Turkish state's approach to the refugees - here he refers to the previously mentioned Islamic concept of 'Ensar and Muhacir'- are admired throughout the world in contrast with the obvious motivation of the EU and the US is to keep the refugees away from their countries.

While *Sözcü* often brings the deportation of Syrians to public attention as a serious possibility, *Yeni Sözcü* generally takes a softer approach and positions these reports along the lines of the regional policies pursued by the AKP and in the context of safe return back to their home countries as the peace is established in the region. Peace design in the region will only be possible by two critical milestones according to these articles: the elimination of Kurdish militia in Northern Syria along with their cooperation with the US which will create a safe zone for the returning refugees; and elimination of Assad's regime. For instance the Minister of Communication, Fahrettin Altun, in an interview⁶³ highlights

⁶¹ CHP Suriyeli düşmanlığını artırıyor. (2019, June 25). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/irkci-salgin-3496274> (accessed on 14 August 2021)

⁶² Kılıçarslan, İ. (2019, January 5). Laylon faşistler! *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ismail-kilicarslan/laylon-fasistler-2048783> (accessed on 14 August 2021)

⁶³ Cumhurbaşkanlığı İletişim Dairesi Başkanı Fahrettin Altun açıklama - Fahrettin Altun El Cezire yazısı.

Turkey's critical role in building the peace in the region against the PKK and ISIS as well as the Assad regime which has lost its legitimacy long ago. He underlines that this strategy is the key to provide the conditions for safe return of Syrians back to their homeland on a voluntary and permanent basis. Another article that summarizes Erdoğan's public speech⁶⁴ quotes him: "4 million Syrians will return home". Erdoğan states that in the areas where the successful Turkish military intervention took place -as in Al-Bab, Azaz, Jarablus, and Afrin- almost 300,000 refugees have resettled back from Turkey. He, therefore, assumes that when the military operations of Turkey sustains a safe region in Northern Syria clear from its terrorist components, Syrian refugees in Turkey will safely return back home.

The willingness of Syrian refugees to go back to their homeland is stressed in several articles of the same category, which serve to imply that, in fact, the faith of the refugees in Turkey depend on the success of Turkish military operations and the refugees are longing to go back once the peace is established. In an interview article with a Kurdish Syrian individual, the report concludes that the Arab and Kurdish Syrians are awaiting their lands to be cleared from the Kurdish militia to be able to go back. Ahmet Süleyman -the interviewee- praises Turkish army's efforts in the region and states that in the areas of Turkish army presence in Syria, people already restored their happy daily routine securely and he wishes that the same will happen to his hometown Ayn-Al Arab.

3.2.2 Framing the Main Areas of Problematization

Agenda setting arguably does not intervene with how the public will form an opinion around a specific subject, but rather brings an eclectic set of topics to its attention. Framing, on the other hand, is a more cognitive process employed to present these topics in a visually and verbally imposing manner. In the case of a typical news report, framing works through the words that are chosen to describe a topic, the way arguments for a causal relation is presented, the dimensions of the event that has been revealed or concealed, and also explicit or implicit suggestions to address the issue. Entman argues that framing is essentially about selecting particular points of a "perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text" and goes on to suggest that frames may "define the problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies" (Entman, 1993, p.52). Media frames, thus, are ideological in their essence and can practically channel the information on a certain subject towards a meaningful construction of a refined narrative. They provide an easy to digest, perspective-ready interpretation of a given story through a handcrafted composition of visual and textual inputs. Furthermore, framing is a key instrument to omit certain aspects of the issue from this composition rather than comprehensively cover and present a subject. In this regard, framing can be identified as a second step of the agenda setting and

(2019, April 13). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/fahrettin-altun-demokrasimiz-ayakta-3466460> (accessed on 15 August 2021)

⁶⁴ Yılmaz, Y. (2019, January 29). 4 milyon Suriyeli için Güvenli Bölge. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/4-milyon-suriyeli-icin-guvenli-bolge-3443665> (accessed on 15 August 2021)

implies how the selected materials are packaged for the reader. Although it is always questionable whether the individual readers will choose to utilize these frames as intended, it is difficult to oppose the idea that framing is an important influencer of the general public opinion as it "enhances the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and thus process it, and store it in memory" (ibid, p53).

In a broader and more systematic research, in order to depict what kind of framing structures are employed in a given news content, we would need to investigate -where applicable- what sources are used to report; what assumptions are made; what causal reasoning are used to explain the events; whether there are recurring themes and referrals to certain cultural codes, moral values, or representations; and how the language, symbols and visual elements are used. In this section, however, we will be focusing on what aspects the newspapers mainly problematize regarding the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey in line with Entman's four characteristics of framing mentioned above.


In order to visualize how these newspapers frame the topics in their agenda, it is important to understand how they choose to problematize issues regarding the refugees in Turkey or in Entman's terms "how they define the problem" at hand. The problematization process serves to present the issues from a defined perspective and places the arguments in a designed discursive structure. Framing takes place not only through the assumptions and choice of words or narratives but also through accompanying connotations and semiotic references. A seemingly neutral article may have visual or lingual references that subtly but surely transmit a certain narrative to the reader. For instance a short statement such as "İstanbul will soon become an Arabic city (or a city of Arabs)"⁶⁵, at the very least, defines a demographic problem in a nationalistic perspective but also carries background connotations of a cultural clash due to the contextual perception of Arabs in the history of modern Turkish Republic whose iconic cultural symbol is its largest city İstanbul. It also implies an already existing grudge between the modern secular elite Turks and religious conservative segments of the society as to the loss of ownership of the public spaces as discussed earlier with the "Arabization" context.

⁶⁵ Coşkun, B. (2019, June 21). Binali Bey'e niye oy vermeliyiz?.. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/bekir-coskun/binali-beye-niye-oy-vermeliyiz-5189686/> (accessed on 15 August 2021)

Turizmdeki Araplaşma memleketi ne hale getiriyor!

Arap turizmi İstanbul'dan sonra Karadeniz'i adeta istila ediyor. Turizmdeki ziyaretçi değişimi kaliteyi de düşürüyor. Turizm Gazetesi yazarı Fehmi Köfteoğlu çarpıcı gerçeği köşesine taşıdı.

haber Giriş: 13 Eylül 2017 Çarşamba - 15:39
son Güncelleme: 13 Eylül 2017 Çarşamba - 15:31

Takip Et 



A news article headline: "What does the Arabization of tourism do to our country?"⁶⁶ "Arab tourists are swarming our Black Sea coasts. The changing typology of the tourists is also dropping the quality."

Therefore, due to the complexity of the matter at hand, I chose to code the main problems associated with the Syrian refugee issue in a more generic taxonomy and provided some peculiarities with selected examples among these articles.

a) *Main Areas of Problematization in Sözcü*

In the Sözcü newspaper, the most recurring main problematic areas have been crime (30), economic (28), domestic policy (26), demographic-economic, and social tension (18). One important finding in Sözcü newspaper is that opinion columns rather focus on three problematic areas that are demographic-economic (12), economic (10), and domestic policy (8). These three areas constitute thirty articles out of the total 42 column articles possibly because they provide the columnists a direct route for discrediting AKP's refugee policies in relation to their social and economic impacts.

It is also interesting to see that in Sözcü, racism against Syrian refugees and general public perception about the refugees are rarely problematized considering that these problems that point to the local citizens constitute only 5% of the whole lot.

In a closer look on the major problematization patterns regarding the Syrian refugees in Sözcü, we can observe that perceiving their presence as an economic problem is the most common attitude. In these types of news articles Syrian refugees take the blame in mainly these three major points: Rising unemployment, decreasing wages and shrinking economy. These articles either define Syrian people as cheap labor who force the wages down or as passive beneficiaries who rely on government's support aid which is eventually funded by the taxpayers' money. Activities of Syrian businesses or individual

⁶⁶ Turizmdeki Araplaşma memleketi ne hale getiriyor! (2017, September 13). *Yeni Çağ*. <https://www.yenicaggazetesi.com.tr/-172594h.htm> (accessed on 18 August 2021)

economic agents are often profiled as informal and problematized as enjoying profits without paying taxes. For instance, the news article titled as "Syrians now became taxi drivers (!)"⁶⁷ reports that Syrians who bring vehicles from abroad, without any registration or tax, started to operate pirate taxis between Ankara and Kırıkkale cities and states that although they have been reported by the Drivers Association to the local authorities, no actions are being taken towards these illegal taxis who therefore are able to operate at a cheaper cost than a normal taxi.

We should note that in a majority of these articles like above, the government's treatment of the Syrians are simultaneously problematized with the actions of the Syrian refugees. AKP is consistently blamed for intentionally turning a blind eye to the "illegal or unjust" economic activities of Syrian refugees while also sparing the Syrian community a considerable amount of direct financial support. The strong emphasis on the fact that AKP's open border policies have led to the current refugee situation in Turkey is so often that, it seems the main problem from this perspective is not the refugees themselves but AKP's failing management of the foreign policy in relation to the domestic economic and social conditions.

Murat Muratoğlu, in his column article titled "Is 'not being Syrian' a crime?"⁶⁸, touches upon several main themes that emerge in these types of articles. He starts by complaining that 'Syrians' are receiving free healthcare whereas Turkish people at a minimum have to pay 70 Liras per month. He goes on to claim that Turkey has spent 37 billion dollars of taxpayers money on Syrian refugees and the Central Bank's reserves have shrunk to an alleged 16 billion dollars. In a rather short article, he also manages to squeeze in the rising food prices, decreasing wages and economic hardships of Turkish people before suggesting that Syrian people should be deported and have to live in Syria so that they will not eat up our national funds and resources.

When it comes to demographic or demographic-economic codes, Sözcü newspaper generally highlights certain localities where the Syrian refugee population is "excessively larger" than the local population that imply a demographic problem. A detailed Sözcü article titled as "Two thirds of the 8000 population are Syrians in the neighborhood"⁶⁹ demonstrates the demographic change in an outskirt

⁶⁷ Albayrak, Z. (2019, July 1). Suriyeliler taksici oldu! *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcü.com.tr/2019/ehttps://www.sozcü.com.tr/2019/ekonomi/suriyeliler-taksici-oldu-5207102/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber/ekonomi/suriyeliler-taksici-oldu-5207102/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber (accessed on 18 August 2021)

⁶⁸ Muratoğlu, M. (2019, April 18). Suçumuz Suriyeli olmamak mı? *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcü.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/murat-muratoglu/sucumuz-suriyeli-olmamak-mi-4481000/> (accessed on 18 August 2021)

⁶⁹ 8 bin nüfuslu mahallenin üçte ikisi Suriyeli. (2019, January 29). *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcü.com.tr/2019/gundem/8-bin-nufuslu-mahallenin-ucte-ikisi-suriyeli-3317178/?utm_source=dahafazla_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=dahafazlahaber (accessed on 18 August 2021)

neighbourhood in Ankara. The article reports that the Örnek neighbourhood which had 10,000 Turkish citizens back in 2007, now accommodates a population of largely Syrians. In a rather indifferent tone, the article draws attention to the fact that all kinds of shops have Arabic signboards. Through interviewing some of the Turkish residents in the neighbourhood, we also learn that as the Syrian population increased, Turks started to vacate the neighbourhood and only those who had no other option chose to stay here. A barber claims that the area is now called the "Little Aleppo" and urges the government to provide the refugees the same rights that the Turkish people have (This however implies that the refugees have more privilege in their businesses). Another interesting aspect of the article is the images used in between the storyline. The images either show the streets of this rundown neighborhood or the local shops which are referred to several times in the article, many of which have Arabic names. The Syrian men are almost without exception in their native clothing "Syrian keffiyeh" and the women without any exception in black hijab or burkas. The selection of the images together with the report that Turkish people moving out of this neighbourhood serves to highlight the impassable cultural gap between the two communities.

In another article headlined with an exclamation mark that reads "Tent city (refugee camp) is being evacuated! Housing aid to 35 thousand Syrians" reports that the refugee camp which was opened by Erdoğan in 2015 is being evacuated and its residents are going to be dispersed to several cities in Turkey with the government providing them support aid for their rental apartments. The article also contains images of crowded men groups of Syrian refugees and large Syrian families around a long convoy of transporter trucks. Although not mentioned at all in the article, we should note that there is a widespread concern about accommodating refugees in cities or towns and many people believe that they should be strictly kept in the refugee camps (Yıldırım et al., 2017, p109-110) due to demographic and cultural concerns. Therefore the article, despite its rather neutral tone except the exclamation mark in its title, transmits a feeling of a further invasion of the Syrian population.

Hüsni Mahalli in his column about the demographic problems that the Syrian refugees pose to Turkey⁷⁰, questions whether there is any credible reason as to why we should still keep so many refugees in our territory, suggesting that the conditions in Syria are normalizing and there have already been a considerable number of returnees from Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan etc. He claims that it is because the Syrians in Turkey are enjoying it too much that they do not want to go back, and identifies the group aged between 18-40 as a disgrace to their own country who do not fight for their country but instead enjoy their time in Turkey. He sums up his article by wishing: "if only Turkey could send back all these Syrian refugees back home". In fact, the idea of deporting the Syrian refugees is often-heard in the interviews or opinion columns as the most reasonable solution to the problem whereas one could hardly see a suggestion about what sort of integration policies Turkey should follow in order to prevent the current and potential social problems.

⁷⁰ Mahalli, H. (2019, January 6). Suriye bayrağı. *Sözcü*.
<https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/husnu-mahalli/suriye-bayragi-3005091/> (accessed on 19 August 2021)

İstanbul's new mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu (CHP), in his meeting with the local neighbourhood authorities after his 2019 local election win⁷¹, said the refugee problem in İstanbul is not only felt by those neighborhoods that the refugees are densely populated but all across the city. He states that unrestrained, planless and unsustainable policies have led to "drastic changes in our lifestyle and social fabric", noting that this is why a lot of neighbourhoods are experiencing conflicts between the Syrian refugees and local communities. He claims that, naturally they are going to help out the refugees who are in need of help but the ultimate goal should always be to create the conditions for their return back to their countries. The connotation regarding the cultural discrepancy between the two communities could be considered subtle in his speech to a certain degree, however, it swiftly leads to the conclusion that they are almost impossible to coexist so they should eventually go back to where they came from.

In another article in the demographic problematization category, we have a statement from AKP's İstanbul candidate who drew the attention to the positive news that now İstanbul is a city with a negative net migration rate due to AKP's successful policies to create opportunities in other cities. The article suggests this statement stirred some debates and without mentioning any names highlights that one of the reasons of this demographic movement is the influx of Syrian refugees which resulted in a "sociological regression" in the city. Statistics of the ratio of registered Syrian refugee population to the overall population which is 4.44% is detailed further in the article as well. There is no other note as to how the refugees cause a social regression or deterioration, but again, together with the data of "fleeing Turks", the argument resonates as if the cultural or social parameters for living together seem hopeless.

Crime news usually come in a variety of formats but frequently the terrorism, violence, extortion and family crimes are highlighted in the headlines. "Blood chilling words from the Syrian refugee : 'I want to chop off heads'" reads one of the headlines in Sözcü⁷². This instantly brings into minds the violent ISIS videos and recently this type of violent action is associated specifically with ISIS. However the news turned out to be a little different story. The reporter initially explains that the video that was widely shared in the social media once again demonstrates the situation about the Syrian refugees in Turkey. It then quotes the reaction of the surrounding Turkish men "This is the Republic of Turkey, you can not chop anyone's head off". The embedded video shows a news reporter interviewing the accused person trying to explain himself with a broken Turkish but instead of the context we see that the video loops several times on his violent remarks. Towards the end of the video the reporter concludes that "I think this means that we need to rehabilitate all the Syrian refugees". It appears after a few days that the Syrian refugee has

⁷¹ Vurgun, F. (2019, June 18). İmamoğlu muhtarlarla buluştu: Suriyeliler mesajı. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/imamoglu-muhtarlarla-bulustu-5183139> (accessed on 19 August 2021)

⁷² Suriyeli sığınmacıdan kan donduran sözler: "Kafa kesmek istiyorum." (2019, May 26). *Sözcü*. https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/suriyeli-siginmacidan-kan-donduran-sozler-kafa-kesmek-istiyorum-4933561/?utm_source=ilgili_haber&utm_medium=free&utm_campaign=ilgihaber (accessed on 19 August 2021)

seen a (probably Turkish) man beating a woman in the street and so he tried to separate the fight. Then the tension grew between the two men and only after that the young Syrian admitted to have threatened him to chop his head off. This news is also published in the *Sözcü* newspaper, with the headline "The Syrian refugee who said 'I will chop heads off' has been released!" The insistence of the report on highlighting the violent words repeatedly across the two articles, together with the rehabilitation remark that had been casually uttered by the reporter points to a general tendency in the media about not only criminalizing the refugees in a shocking way but also aggregating the Syrian refugees in "one unanimous group with all sharing similar characteristics, backgrounds, intentions, motivations and economic status or reducing these groups to their functions" (Koshravinik, 2010, p. 13) The comment on how this single event demonstrates the entire situation about the refugees is a recurring example of the aggregation strategies in the media.

As discussed in these few examples, media framing in *Sözcü* newspaper employs at least a few of Entman's elements in each of their articles as to defining problematic aspects of hosting refugees, analysing causal relations of these problems, making judgements and offering solutions. The problem definition covers both the Syrian refugees and the AKP government who brought them to the country. Causal arguments refer to the economic, social and cultural deterioration due to these two problems and solution offers vary from deportation, keeping refugees in refugee camps or rehabilitating them. Moral judgements, on the other hand, are often in the form of aggregation and justify the impossibility of these two communities living together. At this point, as a closely related aspect of our media analysis, we will move on to discuss how the Syrian refugees are represented in these newspapers.

b) Main Areas of Problematization in Yeni Şafak

Yeni Şafak differs significantly compared to *Sözcü* in terms of the representation strategies it employs regarding the Syrian refugees. We clearly see that *Yeni Şafak* refrains from problematizing issues that are especially brought forward by the opposition wing. This is noticeable from the low numbers of the articles that associate the Syrian refugees with socially and economically problematic consequences, unlike *Sözcü* newspaper. For instance, the number of articles that report criminal actions of Syrian individuals or groups (9) are considerably lower than that of *Sözcü* and these articles do not tend to point to a general pattern that frames the problem as widespread among the Syrian refugees. On the contrary, *Yeni Şafak* problematize a variety of social issues or political actions targeting the Syrian community, such as: hate speech against refugees (6), provocation (10), hostility (22) in order to demonstrate an empathic understanding about the general situation that the Syrian refugees find themselves in. Problematizing these actions also provides a vast amount of material to criticize opposition's stance on the issue. Yet again, the overwhelming number of articles dedicated to global and regional problems that directly determine the conditions of the Syrian refugees are highlighted by *Yeni Şafak*. These include articles covering the regional issues especially in Northern Syria from a point of view of millions of refugees who are awaiting to go back to their homeland once peace is established in the region. These

articles are coded under regional problems (33) and problematize actions of several actors involved in the Syrian War, including the US, Assad, ISIS, YPG and the EU. As discussed in the previous section, the Turkish State justifies its own presence in the Syrian territory as it is a natural conclusion to the fact that it is hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees globally. Erdoğan stated several times that “We do not consider Syria from a foreign policy perspective. Syria, in fact, is our domestic issue.”⁷³.

What is common in these groups of articles is that by problematizing the actions of domestic and international actors, *Yeni Şafak* strongly defends the policies of AKP regarding the Syrian refugees as well as its interventionist regional policies. This is fitting to the general strategy that AKP follows with respect to the Syrian refugees. AKP, as discussed in the second and third chapters, locates the refugee issue instrumentally in its ideological stance that reinforces its Islamist nationalist discourse domestically while keeping a so called neo-Ottomanist approach in its regional activities.

The news articles that problematize the domestic opposition’s stance on the refugee issue often depict instances when there are negative actions and remarks about the presence of Syrian refugees in Turkey. An article with the headline “Racist Epidemic”⁷⁴ attacks several CHP municipalities, which upon winning the local elections in their respective cities, started to “disseminate the racist hatred” against the Syrian refugees. Article provides several examples including the mayor of Mersin who pledged not to provide any aid to the Syrian refugees from the city budget anymore and CHP Bolu mayor who stopped serving food to the refugees through the food pantry. It also quotes CHP Kemalpaşa (a town in İzmir) mayor’s remarks “We will dismiss all the Syrians from here” and also the beach ban for Syrian refugees that took place in Mudanya (Bursa) and Gazipaşa (Antalya). The report refrains from commenting on these actions except for a brief statement that Syrian refugees are put in a difficult situation through these actions and remarks.

Another article demonstrates how these political actions reflect on society⁷⁵. Three local people of Afyon city posted a video on social media while they are torturing two refugees (Afghani refugees in this case) and forcing them to say specific words like “Atatürk, CHP, 6 arrows (symbolizing CHP’s party logo that originates from six Kemalist founding principles of Turkey - including secularism, and Kılıçdaroğlu - CHP’s leader). The report involves the posted extremely disturbing video without much else comments. However, the incident itself is almost a surreal crime that demonstrates how the feeling of hatred towards the refugees of Islamic origin is associated with the Kemalist values and CHP which

⁷³ Erdoğan: Suriye Bizim İç Meselemizdir. (2011, August 6). *TRT Haber*. <https://www.trthaber.com/haber/gundem/erdogan-suriye-bizim-ic-meselemizdir-4907.html> (accessed on 20 August 2021)

⁷⁴ CHP Suriyeli düşmanlığını artırıyor. (2019, June 25). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/irkci-salgin-3496274>

⁷⁵ Afyonkarahisar’da mültecilere eziyet edenler tutuklandı. (2019, May 5). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/afyonda-multecilere-eziyet-eden-uc-kisi-gozaltina-alindi-3469601> (accessed on 20 August 2021)

naturally provides vast amounts of material to a pro-AKP media outlet.

A similar incident is reported from Kocaeli - a city neighboring İstanbul- where a Syrian teen was battered by four locals after he accidentally caused a parked bicycle fall⁷⁶. There are various more examples of local conflicts as well as political accusations towards the opposition that connect the violence against the refugees with the political stance of the opposition. An opinion column article from İsmail Kılıçarslan⁷⁷, also blames a group of Turkish artists who considers being an artist goes together with being opposed to the government. He draws attention to various inconsistencies that these artists demonstrate with respect to the domestic political issues such as the contrast of opinions about Gezi Park demonstrations versus the 2016 military coup attempt and their sympathy for Berkin Elvan (14 year old boy who was shot dead by a gas canister in Gezi demonstrations) versus their indifferent feeling towards Eren Bülbül (a 15 years old boy who was shot dead during a gunfight between PKK guerillas and Turkish police). In a similar fashion, he suggests that these opposition artists are equally indifferent to the refugee issue in Turkey by accusing them of being totally silent when a pregnant Syrian woman was raped and killed in Sakarya earlier.

Yeni Şafak not only problematize the domestic opposition but also often puts the blame on the regional actors regarding the refugee issue, either accusing them as the source of the Syrian people's misery or suggesting that they do not take responsibility to provide help to Syria and its people. These problematization strategies are often accompanied by legitimizing remarks of Turkey's regional interventions. An article that reports President Erdoğan's key advisor Gülnur Aybet's remarks⁷⁸ about Turkey's role in post-war Syria is illustrative. She underlines the support of the Turkish state to the Syrian refugees throughout the ongoing conflict in their countries and claims that Turkey was the leading country in the World in terms of the support aid provided to Syrian people. She underlines that the US has been inconsistent in its approach regarding the role of Turkey in Syria's future, however she believes that this situation will be temporary and the US will soon come to terms with Turkey's irreplaceable importance for Syria's reconstruction after the war. She also highlights that one of the major conflicts of opinion with the US is the presence of Kurdish militia on the east bank of the Eupharates river. These types of statements are repeatedly outspoken by Erdoğan and his high rank cadre, addressing the regional and global actors to remind them Turkey has well-deserved political and economic stakes in post-war Syria

⁷⁶ Suriyeli genç bisikleti düşürdüğü için darp edildi. (2019, June 22). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/video-galeri/gundem/suriyeli-genc-bisikleti-dusurdugu-icin-darp-edildi-2195145> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

⁷⁷ Kılıçarslan, İ. (2019, May 11). Pembe mabatlılarla alıp veremediğim. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/ismail-kilicarslan/pembe-mabatlilarla-alip-veremedigim-2050332> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

⁷⁸ Türkiye'siz olmaz. (2019, April 14). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/turkiyesiz-olmaz-3466523> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

due to its active engagement to take on responsibility to host millions of refugees.

Another article reports the significance of the safe zone that Turkey requests to be established in Northern Syria⁷⁹ in order to protect Turkey's borders against the Kurdish militia as well as providing a safe land for the refugees to go back to their homeland. Turkey's Washington ambassador Serdar Kılıç lashes out at American senator Bob Menendez who claims that the YPG/PYD are their closest allies in the region. Kılıç states that Turkey is hosting more than 300,000 Kurdish Syrian refugees that are waiting to go back to their towns, however Kurdish militia denies them access back home. He also highlights that what the US defines as their closest ally are in fact an extension of the PKK that is explicitly defined as a terrorist organisation by the US.

The Kurdish problem, that is the major security concern for the Turkish state since the 80s, is recurrently brought into attention in *Yeni Şafak* in association with the Syrian refugee issue. An article with the headline "Syrian Kurds want to go back home"⁸⁰ provides quotes from Syrian Kurdish refugees who reside in a refugee camp in Suruç. Süleyman claims that "Turkish state is taking good care of us, and they have always been extremely helpful. Back home the terrorists (Kurdish militia) destroyed our homes and we want those areas cleaned from terrorists. In those areas where Turkey had military operations, people went back to peace and security." There are more quotes from other Kurdish refugees that are almost identical to Süleyman's and they point out to the crucial role of Turkey and their expectation from the Turkish state to intervene with the situation in their region.

3.2.3 Representation of Syrian Refugees in News Content

Van Dijk considers that the daily ideology of the people on the ethnic subjects more often than not are formed predominantly by the mass communication tools rather than by self construction mechanisms. He argues that the newspapers define the frames and facts for the people through representation (Van Dijk, 1995, p.15-16). For the case of immigrants it is generally xenophobic, racist and discriminatory and provides a presentation that defines the issue as a social problem or a security problem. The news coverage rarely addresses the fundamental problems of the refugee issue or their social causes. (Ibid., p.17-18) van Dijk exemplifies this issue saying: "Control over the means of public discourse and communication, dominant groups or institutions may influence the structures of text and talk in such a way that, as a result, the knowledge, attitudes, norms, values and ideologies of recipients are – more or less indirectly affected in the interest of the dominant group." (Van Dijk, 2013, p.85) Thus, for Van Dijk, the media is an indispensable tool for the desired power structure and the discourse architecture

⁷⁹ Bilgen, Y. (2019, January 25). Aşama aşama güvenli bölge. *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/asama-asama-guvenli-bolge-3442993> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

⁸⁰ Suriyeli Kürtler evlerine dönmek istiyor. (2019, January 16). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/dunya/suriyeli-kurtler-evlerine-donmek-istiyor-3431338> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

to formulate the beliefs and thoughts of the people as well as to marginalize alternative ways of thinking or being (Van Dijk, 1995, p.10-11).

In practice, we see that agenda setting, framing and representation strategies constitute a unified mechanism that prioritise, problematize and conceptualize a certain phenomenon towards a politically goal-oriented construction. This is why the media representation of the refugees should be considered as a component within the entirety of these strategies, especially supplementing the framing job. While framing demonstrates the problem, representation provides the peculiar characteristics of those who create the problem. If the problem is demographic, it is because the refugees are invaders, or similarly, if the problem is economic it is because they are abusive and if the issue is cultural, this is due to their inferiority etc.

For this section about media representation of the refugees, I will refrain from providing a quantitative demonstration of the articles but will rather discuss certain recurring media practices with examples. This is partly because the method for representation in these news contents are often contextual rather than direct designations. The references are not always outspoken but instead implied with cultural or moral codes and symbols. Moreover, an article may refer to several different codes intricately that make it difficult to choose the most dominant characteristics associated with the refugee subjects of the articles. However, it is safe to say that most recurring representations in Sözcü newspaper are those that identify the refugees as criminals, invaders, abusers, economic burden and culturally inferior or socially disturbing.

Here it may be relevant to point out a significant detail about the wording to refer to the Syrian refugees in these two newspapers as they both overwhelmingly choose to call them just "Syrians" without any mention to their status in the country. This is partly due to the fluctuating and ambiguous official discourse about their status and partly owing to their tweaked legal status defined as under "temporary protection". It also happens that a few different versions of naming are used within the same article such as "Syrians", "Syrian refugees" or "Syrian asylum seekers". The term "guest" that was often used in the initial years of the Syrian war seems to be rarely in use in the recent years as the initial assumption that it would be a matter of time the Syrian conflict would be solved and the guests would go back to their countries faded away (Yanasmayan, 2019 p.37-38). In any case, solely using the nationality of the refugees in a news report serves to associate the topic of the report not just with a Syrian individual or a group but with the entire Syrian community that inherently assumes their homogeneity. This practice also multiplies and expands the effect of agenda setting strategies as the reader frequently encounters certain topics associated with the "Syrians".

a) *Representation of Syrian Refugees in Sözcü*

A Sözcü news report from Esenyurt⁸¹ - an outskirt district of İstanbul where there is a big Syrian

⁸¹ San, E. (2019, June 11). Esenyurt'ta Suriyeliler şiddette sınırı zorluyor. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/esenyurtta-suriyeliler-siddette-siniri-zorluyor-5109163/> (accessed on 21

refugee community - is headlined as: "Syrians are pushing the limits in violence in Esenyurt" and reports two different incidents where groups of Syrian people clashed with sticks and planks in extremely violent acts that "keeps shocking the local people". The article reiterates the contrast between the "shocked local community" and the "extremely violent Syrians" several times within a relatively short news article and explains the details of these events as if these fights are a daily routine among the Syrian community.

Another Sözcü article that highlights a social conflict is more about the cultural conflict that is recurrently brought into attention in the Turkish media. Its headline goes as "In Bursa, the Syrians swarmed to the beach and they bore the pants off the holiday makers"⁸² and goes into detail within the text about how the "Syrians" who crowded the beach, swimming in their underwear and riding horses around terrified the peaceful holiday makers. In response to the complaints of the local people, the municipal security forces removed the tents of the Syrian people and forbade the entrance of horses to the beach. More strikingly, the municipal mayor who is a member of the CHP stated afterwards "Nobody has the right to disturb others or prevent their freedom. While our children are martyred, while our mothers are crying and our economy is getting worse, we cannot tolerate that they (Syrians) live in pleasure and disturb our own people." Here again, a contrast between the peaceful local tourists and the disturbing Syrian refugees is employed to emphasise the extreme differences in lifestyle and culture in a strong derogatory tone. A week later the CHP mayor was defending his statements⁸³ by claiming that "Our security forces only intervened to those who caused visual pollution with disturbing actions like making barbecues, putting up tents, bringing camel or horses to the beach, smoking shisha or swimming in underwear" and did not resort to any discrimination. The resentment regarding the Syrians engaging in enjoyment activities is quite common in social media too. There are hundreds of posts that are posted by people who witness Syrian individuals or groups enjoying a similar activity like swimming in a pool, going to a beach, or smoking in a shisha cafe and report it with immensely degrading captions.

From Sözcü's perspective, the claim that the Syrian refugees are tremendously enjoying their life in Turkey is proof of how ridiculous are the support aids we provide them through the state budget. Bolu city mayor, who built his election company largely on anti-immigrant pledges and won the elections after the city was governed by the AKP mayor for fifteen years, points out how abusive the Syrian refugees are saying: "They receive money from four different institutions. They have the most stylish clothes, they lead the most comfortable life, even better than our own people! Does this abide with any rule of

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⁸² Ataş, H. (2019, June 8). Bursa'da sahile inen Suriyeliler, tatilcileri canından bezdirdi. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/bursada-sahile-inen-suriyeliler-tatilcileri-canindan-bezdirdi-5074142/> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

⁸³ Ataş, H. (2019, June 18). Suriyeliler için 'talimat' veren Başkan konuştu. . . . *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/mudanya-belediye-baskanindan-suriyeli-aciklamasi-5095359/> (accessed on 21 August 2021)

conscience?" in an interview with Sözcü newspaper.

The reference to cultural inferiority of the refugees are so oftenly used regardless of the subject of the article. It can show up in a news report about an individual crime, or a neighbourhood fight as well as in a public beach or public entertainment activity. In the previous few examples not only "the fact" that they enjoy their life in Turkey but also how they do it is questioned and disparaged in one way or the other. As is the case in the cultural clash between the modern secular "White Turks" and the religiously conservative segment of Turkish society, certain types of behaviours and cultural customs are stereotyped in a downgrading manner. For instance, they do not generally gender-mix in social life, bigoted religious beliefs are the dominant determinant of their behaviours and dressing, they oppress their wives and daughters all the while they stare at other women and stalk them, men walk in crowded groups while women is kept shut at home, older men tend to sexually abuse young girls and boys, those that are higher class are "codfish aristocrats" and "ignorant vulgars" who have no idea how and where to spend money and do not know how to behave in social spaces etc. These stereotypes are readily nested in public opinion through the crooked modernization period of Turkey and rests on the pre-existing secular-religious divide in the society. In that sense, Syrian refugees, apart from their ethnic origin, are familiar to the eyes of a modern Turk who simply extends these stereotypes, that is also attached to the religiously conservative Turkish people who lead a visible Islamic lifestyle, to tag the Syrian community.

At this point, although out of our scope, I would like to demonstrate this with a social media topic in Eksisozluk: "The public swarmed the beach and citizens can not go in the sea". This expression is believed to be a quote from a state-appointed governor of İstanbul back in the early days of the republic which refers to the recently migrated people from Anatolia as the "public" and refers to the İstanbulites as the "citizens". There are several posts under the topic that discuss the meaning of this statement with examples from the current states of the "public" beaches. One user writes:

"Why am i being blamed for being an elite while these people stare relentlessly at my bikini and showing me their pubic hairs under their underwear they use for swimming who also let their kids poo under the trees and in the dressing cabinets, who has no idea about the social rules and respect to other people? And why is it a sin to blame the ruling party when I claim that these people need to be educated and taught how to behave?"

Another user explains what a public beach is: "public beach is where vulgar, uneducated, impudent and dirty men play camel-wrestling in their underwear - since they do not know how to swim; women who are covered from their head to toes (meaning Islamic swimming suits or dress) leave children's used diapers, plastic bags and all the dirt around; where big families make BBQ although forbidden; groups of young men who walk 10-15 people together and stare at the women and stalk them etc." These comments refer to the Turkish people from the eyes of modern "White Turks" but it is striking that the way they describe the behaviours are almost identical when one investigates what is written about the Syrian refugees.

The news article on the first day of 2019 reports the new year celebrations of the Syrian people

in Taksim square⁸⁴. The article explains that the Taksim square, which used to be the symbolic place to celebrate the new year until recently, staged another type of "festivity (!)" this year. A crowded group of Syrian young men celebrated the new year with flags and slogans before harassing two young women. It was noted that quite remarkably there were no Turkish people in the celebrations which also involved the "halay dancing" - a Middle Eastern and Anatolian form of traditional dancing. The same incident was addressed in Uğur Dündar's column⁸⁵ a few days later with similar comments. He argues that squares like Taksim Square in İstanbul, Piazza Navona in Rome or the Times Square in New York serve as the "crown of the city" and all the local governments pay attention for these squares and protect them to keep their culturally valuable characteristics. However in Turkey all the associated values attached to the Taksim Square have been destroyed under the AKP's rule and now it even hosts celebrations of these sorts.

In a more factual article, some statistical data is presented from CHP's report on the Syrian community. According to this document, the Turkish government allows the Syrian refugees with legal tweaks to apply their old-fashioned customs. The document claims that many Syrian women are forced to be a second wife, and that at least 15% of the Syrian teenage girls aged between 15-18 are married while the cases of pregnancy in the age group of 13-14 is widespread. It is also noted that many Syrian women accept the idea of being the second wife and one man was released from custody after getting married with a 13 years old girl.

b) Representation of Syrian Refugees in Yeni Şafak

There are three major categories in Yeni Şafak, when we analyze its refugee representation strategy, namely "miserable", "victim" and "abused to racism". In many of the reports and opinion columns these representations are jointly used to describe how they are the victims of a cruel war that Assad raged on them before their homelands were besieged by terrorist groups and powerful states; how their life turned upside down to a tragic misery that few has witnessed in the recent history; and lastly how still under these conditions they can be subject to discrimination and abuse by local people in Turkey. In the previous two sections, several examples of these have already been discussed. Compared to Sözcü newspaper, the approach of Yeni Şafak strictly remains more emphatic and protective towards the refugees, while this does not particularly hide their deliberate attempts to instrumentalize the entire refugee issue in parallel with the AKP's regional and domestic political ambitions. The notion of instrumentalization is evident from the accompanying narratives in the stories of refugees that recurrently

⁸⁴ Taksim Meydanı'nda Suriyelilerin yılbaşı kutlaması. (2019, January 1). *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/gundem/taksim-meydaninda-suriyelilerin-yilbasi-kutlamasi-2939445/> (accessed on 26 August 2021)

⁸⁵ Dündar, U. (2019, January 2). Taksim Meydanı'nda ÖSO bayrağı!.. *Sözcü*. <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/2019/yazarlar/ugur-dundar/taksim-meydaninda-oso-bayragi-2966059/> (accessed on 26 August 2021)

put the blame on AKP's rivals at the domestic and regional stage.

While the news articles of Yeni Şafak that were discussed earlier present the Syrian refugees mainly in these three categories, it is also interesting to visit some of the opinion columns in Yeni Şafak that employ similar representations albeit with more concern towards the refugee issue. Hasan Öztürk, a columnist in Yeni Şafak, has written a series of three articles with the headline: “Who would not like the return of Syrians, and why?”^{86 87 88}. In his first article, he states that Syrian people's misfortune to confront so much cruelty and terror from all directions -namely, Assad, ISIS, YPG, Al Kaide, Al Nusra - leaves our conscience no option but to accommodate them and anyone who opposes this idea should question his/her conscience. This statement underlines the misery of the Syrian refugees and their victimhood. He goes on to suggest that Turkey has several additional responsibilities to fulfill with respect to the refugees such as; making sure to let those who want to take refuge in Europe; engage actively to create a peaceful and favorable environment in Syria for those who wish to go back to their homeland; and seamlessly integrate the refugees who will be staying in Turkey permanently. Then, given these state of art, he lists his main concerns about the entire refugee issue stating that there is a bigger picture that puts Turkey in a vulnerable situation. Firstly, he laments that the EU has put all the burden on Turkey with the refugee agreement in 2016, clearing off any responsibility that it should be taking. Secondly, he accuses the Kurdish groups in Northern Syria and Southeast Turkey, who prevented the return of Syrian refugees to their hometowns who were displaced to Turkey when the ISIS sieged Kobane and wanted to go back after ISIS retreated. In his second article, Öztürk claims that two thirds of the Syrian refugees in Turkey originated from the areas that are currently in control of the Kurdish militia and their representatives in Turkish politics are playing all their cards to not allow the Syrian refugees back to these areas due to their demographic strategies in the region. This demographic project is allegedly sponsored by the US and designed to create a Kurdish dominant region along the border of Turkey. In his third article of the series, the US's Middle Eastern strategies, that divide the region into several unstable areas, are lamented due to the perspective that Turkey is now starting to become a reserve for refugees in order for the grand strategy of the US in the Middle East to take place. In conclusion, he reiterates his question of “who would like to keep all the Syrian refugees in Turkey?”. As accustomed in several other Yeni Şafak articles, we see that

⁸⁶ Öztürk, H. (2019, April 21). Suriyelilerin geri dönüşünü kimler neden istemez (1). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hasan-ozturk/suriyelilerin-geri-donusunu-kimler-neden-istemez-1-2050099> (accessed on 26 August 2021)

⁸⁷ Öztürk, H. (2019, April 23). Suriyelilerin geri dönüşünü kimler neden istemez (2). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hasan-ozturk/suriyelilerin-geri-donusunu-kimler-neden-istemez-2-2050126> (accessed on 26 August 2021)

⁸⁸ Öztürk, H. (2019, April 26). Suriyelilerin geri dönüşünü kimler neden istemez (3). *Yeni Şafak*. <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/hasan-ozturk/suriyelilerin-geri-donusunu-kimler-neden-istemez-3-2050171> (accessed on 26 August 2021)

Öztürk singles out Turkey in its efforts to aid the Syrian refugees, as opposed to all the actors involved in the Syrian War including the EU, the US, Kurdish militia, ISIS and Assad. However he diverts from the regular Yeni Şafak articles stating that, in fact, the refugee issue has some other regional dimensions that may harm Turkey in the near future.

Another article that covers the statements of AKP's candidate for İstanbul elections is remarkable in that it provides us with a rare Yeni Sözcü article that somehow associates Syrian refugees with negative attributes in caution. These negative representation remarks, in fact, are quoted from the AKP candidate, Binali Yıldırım. When Yıldırım is presenting his electoral pledges, the first question that is directed to him is about the Syrian refugees and he goes into a detailed account about the matter.

“We are there to ensure that people do not die in Syria. We are there to ensure peace in Syria. We are also there to provide an opportunity for the people we host to return to their hometowns. The east of the Euphrates (Northern Syria) is also related to this... Syrian refugees are not permanent after all. It is out of the question for us to allow them to engage in activities that would constitute a crime during their stay here, or to threaten the safety of life and property of İstanbul residents. We have zero tolerance. If anyone is involved in these matters, we will arrest them and send them where they came from. Temporary protection status has been granted in order to ensure their records. We will not turn a blind eye to those who do not recognize our values and to unfair competition.” Binali Yıldırım

These remarks, coming from one of the top AKP members and just before the İstanbul elections, is a response that is addressed towards the voters who are increasingly concerned with the Syrian refugees in İstanbul. Yıldırım defines the problems around the Syrian refugee issue as external conflicts and emphasises Turkey's role in Syria is the path taken in the righteous direction that will also ensure Syrian refugees to go back home safely before they cause any sort of disturbance or ordeal to the Turkish society.

Conclusion

In this research, I tried to explore how the Syrian refugee issue in Turkey is debated in its unique socio-political context mainly focusing on the deepening divide between the seculars and the religious conservatives through an analysis of their respective political stance and historical dichotomy. I suggested that Syrian refugees, most of whom are of Arabic ethnicity and Sunni Muslims, have been instrumentalized in political agendas of both sides of the political axis - AKP and CHP. For AKP, Syrian refugees have served to legitimize its ambitious involvement -often referred to as neo-Ottomanism- in the Syrian War while domestically utilizing the issue to strengthen its Islamist ideology with an emphasis to embrace its religious brothers and sisters. CHP and the secular segments of the society, on the other hand, have continuously raised concerns over the Islamization of the country, abandoning Kemalist Western secular values, and its new direction facing Eastwards rather than its Western orientation since the beginning of the Republic. For seculars, the involvement of Turkey in the Syrian War and hosting millions of Sunni Arab refugees are all associated with AKP's ideological agenda of turning Turkey to an Islamist country that aim for a religious leadership in the region that resemble the Ottoman Empire. I utilized two major newspapers that are strictly aligned with these two political poles in order to demonstrate the discursive practices that reveal their respective political agendas. Both newspapers provided us with some concrete materials that demonstrate the political positions of the two parties regarding the refugee issue in Turkey.

Turkey has become a deeply fractured society especially along the axis of secular and religious conservatives in recent years. These two segments of the society are increasingly showing signs of partisanship and becoming more and more hostile to each other ideologically. It is possible to observe this deep divide both through the political debates carried out by the AKP and CHP as well as through the daily social interactions among people and in the media. There are all types of hot political topics that these two poles clash on, and the Syrian refugee issue has become one of the most significant topics among them in the last decade. The fact that the refugee issue was a direct result of the Syrian War and Turkey's involvement in this conflict had several major implications in its domestic and foreign policies, escalated this widely debated topic to an ideological level between the two existing poles in Turkey. The questions have started to arise regarding Turkey's new Eastern orientation rather than its traditional Kemalist modern Westernist approach; the demographic strategies of AKP that many seculars feared that was a policy of "Arabization", "Islamization"; social and economic sustainability of hosting refugees; deteriorating international relations of Turkey especially with the Western countries; the ideological and cultural tension arising in the society mainly stemming from AKP's favouring of a conservative religious lifestyle that was strengthened by the discursive strategies employed for welcoming Syrian refugees as opposed to the secular concerns of freely enjoying Western values in an increasingly Islamized country (both demographically and culturally). Turkey's Syrian policies, and thus the Syrian refugees who found themselves within such a sharply divided society, inevitably were positioned in such a delicate surface

that is full of tense interrelations.

This research attempted to reveal how the domestic political and social context reflected on the Syrian refugees. As the ramifications of the Syrian refugee plight in Turkey extend to a wide range of political and social events, my attempts were destined to be limited in scope to cover all major aspects of this debate. However I am hoping that analysing the refugee issue along the axis of two strictly opposite political ideologies may help to bring a new dimension to our understanding of the underlying factors that affect the acceptance of the Syrian refugees by different segments of the society in Turkey. We are only at the beginning of a new social phenomena in Turkey, and the handling of the refugee issue will be critical for the next decades of the country as the Syrian community will inevitably be an integral part of the society. So far, Syrian refugees have turned from "guests" to "enemies", however the future of Turkey will be strongly connected with the faith of the Syrian community regardless of whether there are social and political concerns around the issue. As things stand, the efforts for a healthy integration between the hosts and the guests are minimal due to their legal status as well as a negligence towards their rights.

Since the 2019 local election period, that is analysed in this dissertation, the reproach towards the Syrian refugees have been intensifying as a new milestone in Turkish democracy is approaching with the upcoming presidential elections scheduled for 2023. Seculars started to see a big opportunity in these upcoming elections to take down AKP due to the extremely bad signs from the economy, as well as the growing discontent towards the refugees within the society. There seems to be no reason to doubt that vows to deport the refugees after the election will be a major pillar of the opposition's political agenda in these two years. The debates already have steamed up since the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan which resulted in some groups of Afghan refugees seeking shelter in Turkey. We will witness how much worse life as a refugee can get during and after this critical election, no matter who will eventually win. We will also see to what extent the social and political polarization in Turkey can further go. It is already a "make or break" moment in Turkey with the tension having risen to unsustainable levels and the outcome of this social rupture will define not only the lives of the Turkish natives but also the Syrian community in Turkey. If there is a tiny hope of a social reconciliation that will bring the huge divides in the Turkish society together, the process of achieving a reunification will have to involve the Syrian community as much as it has to involve its local components that are currently in heated conflict, such as the Kurds, Alevias, seculars and religious conservatives etc.

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