

# CASE STUDIES OF INTERACTIVE RADICALISATION

## Turkey



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**DARE: Dialogue About Radicalisation and Equality**

# **Case Studies of Interactive Radicalisation Turkey**

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## Executive Summary

The main objective of this report is to elaborate upon extremism and radicalisation in the socio-political context of Turkey, with a particular focus on the Syrian movement after the civil war in Syria. Within this objective, the main questions addressed are as follows: What are the spill over impacts of the Syrian Civil War in Turkey in relation to extremism and radicalisation? How have these impacts been influencing the current social, cultural and political polarisation in Turkey? How does this polarisation resonate at the discursive level in politics and everyday life of the local community? How were the terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2016 associated with the Syrian population flow to Turkey in the minds of the public and the opposition parties to the government? What kinds of reactions did the opposition parties and people demonstrate to the Syrian population flow to Turkey? Can these reactions be regarded as an indicator of xenophobic attitudes towards the Syrian population in Turkey? If so, what are the forms of extremism towards Syrians? Has the Syrian conflict impacted on existing divides within Turkey in the form of radicalisation of pro-government and opposition factions? Does the hostility towards Syrians suspected of being terrorists carry the potential of radicalising Syrians? In relation to the preceding two questions, can we talk about an emerging pattern of cumulative extremism concerning the Syrian issue?

The main themes of this study are as follows: 1) the impact of the Syrian civil war on the current socio-political and sectarian divisions in Turkey; 2) emerging extremism between pro-government and opposition groups arising from the Syrian conflict; 3) the potential for radicalisation of Syrians in Turkey as a result of hostility towards them; 4) cumulative extremism; and 5) the inflection of political and public discourses in Turkey with sentiments of humiliation and grievance relating to the Syrian issue.

This report finds empirical evidence demonstrating that the Syrian civil war has brought a new dimension to extremism and polarisation in Turkey. The infiltration of radical Islamist terrorists into Turkey amongst irregular population flows, and the violent attacks they have committed, have fuelled extremism by appealing to their sympathisers. At the same time, the perpetration of such violent attacks by radical terrorists, have elicited reactions from groups opposing the government who tend to equate these attacks with the Syrian population per se and thus spread hatred and grievance to the whole Syrian population in Turkey.

The second main finding presented here concerns narratives of grievance and humiliation, mostly constructed by extreme nationalist parties such as The Good Party (GP). These narratives, coupled with the existing structural problems, stagnation, unemployment, poverty and diminishing welfare provisions, resonate especially among groups with low socio-economic status and in opposition groups to the government. In this way, the Syrians have become the scapegoats for all these structural problems. These narratives of xenophobia, blame and grievance have been accompanied by violence in the form of the storming of Syrian households and businesses, lynching and other violent encounters where the two communities live in close proximity.

The third key finding is that there exists a general anti-Syrian consensus at grassroots level. According to existing data, competing political party supporters - who exhibit deep polarisation on almost every other issue - seem to unite when it comes to opposition to the permanent settlement of Syrians. Narratives of humiliation and grievance related to the issue of the Syrian population in Turkey posted on Turkish social media accounts illustrate the presence of extremism towards Syrians. For the extreme nationalist opposition, narratives of grievance are based on concerns over the deterioration of social cohesion, increase in poverty, dissolution of social welfare and inadequate social services. For all these structural problems opposition groups blame the ruling party of JDP (The Justice and Development Party) and its supporters for the open border policy. These narratives of grievance pave the way for the expression of extremism at the discursive level through the social media. As for the extreme pro-JDP groups, the opposition especially the main opposition party of RPP (Republican People Party), GP and pro-Kurdish PDP (People's Democratic Party) are stigmatised as traitors and

terrorists who have done much more harm than the Syrians.

Thus we can conclude that the arrival of Syrians into Turkey has brought a new dimension to pre-existing polarisation in Turkey. Given the widespread articulation of humiliation and grievance, we might anticipate the growth of extremist ideologies that blame the Syrians for structural social problems in contemporary Turkey. Examination of extreme nationalist discourse and violence in poor neighbourhoods suggests a real potential for the emergence of cumulative extremist tendencies.

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this report is to provide an insightful perspective concerning the dimensions of emerging extremism revolving around the Syrian crisis in Turkey. Through a comprehensive literature review and secondary data analysis, the focus was directed towards discourses of humiliation and grievance as important indicators of extremism regarding the Syrian population in Turkey.

Before moving on to the movement of Syrians to Turkey, it is crucial to introduce a conceptual clarification regarding terminology. Arguing for the need for change in the discourse on migration and movement, Sirkeci and Cohen (2016: 382) call for the use of the term movement and movers rather than migrants and migration. The traditional model of migration refers to a finished process of “one-time event with a specific pathway to follow” (ibid.). Such a definition, by disregarding the role of conflict and oppression, assumes that the migrant, with a rational independent choice, moves into a better life (ibid.). However, as will be discussed, Syrians, rather than making a rational voluntary choice, are forced to escape involuntarily from conflict and violence. What is more, the circumstances in which they find themselves in Turkey are far from being humane. So, in this report, when referring to Syrians, the term ‘movers’ is preferred over the term ‘migrants’. The reason for not defining them as refugees is that, due to geographical limitation to UN Convention, Turkey does not grant refugee status to people coming outside of Europe. Hence, calling a population ‘refugees’ when they are not granted with such permanent citizenship-like rights would be misleading for the purpose of the analysis. Their current legal status is officially termed as ‘temporary protection’, which is granted, and can be withdrawn, by decision of the Ministry of Interior and the Head of the Republic.

Before discussing the issue of the Syrian Civil War, Syrian migration and its effects on Turkey in terms of escalation of radicalisation, extremism, and violence, it is important to present the conceptual and theoretical framework drawn upon with reference to the term ‘extremism’.

According to Böttcher (2017: 74), extremism can be understood as a marginal ideological position that seeks to become central by means of ‘militancy, criminal acts and mass violence’. Extremist views are rooted in an understanding of society as divided between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the striving for a homogenous society comprised of those like ‘us’ (ibid.) with no room for social, political and cultural difference. Following this logic, Salafist/jihadist groups such as ISIS, al-Nusra Front, al-Qaida, Hezbollah and Hizbut Tahrir employ violence and terror with the aim of conquering the lands of war<sup>1</sup>. The terrorist attacks committed by ISIS in Turkey between 2013 and 2016 reflected this lack of tolerance for lifestyles other than the Salafist way of life in their targeting of groups of non-Muslim tourists, mosques of non-Sunni sects, concert halls and night clubs. They also targeted religious/national celebrations and rallies for peace and solidarity with Kurdish resistance groups of Syria (one of the main rivals of ISIS and other jihadist groups in northern Syria).

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<sup>1</sup> Dar-al harb, the lands that belong to non-believers, non-Muslims and are subject to war and conquest considered as the rightful trophy for the jihadists. For ISIS and Hezbollah this dar-al harb includes the lands covered by Turkey.



Sharing a border over 900 km in length with Syria, Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrians outside Syria –almost four million. Due to their status of ‘temporary protection’, and the lack of clarity about that status, the Syrians find themselves in adverse conditions. Poor housing and shelter, informal labour and exploitative work, limited access to formal and higher education, child labour and child marriage are among the most urgent problems awaiting resolution. However, beyond such structural problems that are the basic requirements for leading a dignified life, social exclusion, hostility, stigmatisation and marginalisation are among the primary problems that Syrians confront in their everyday encounters with members of the host society. These social problems are also important for understanding the cumulative extremism that is the primary object of study in this report since hostility to Syrians, which often turns into violent confrontation in poor neighbourhoods, occurs in the context of the increasing experience of similarly poor living conditions by the host community. The sudden influx of foreign population is experienced by the population in the context of the economic recession, insufficient welfare system and high unemployment rate beleaguering the country as a whole. In this situation, the newly arrived Syrian population has swelled the ranks of social groups with the lowest level of socio-economic status and placed them in competition with the local poor for limited jobs and welfare provision. In such circumstances, everyday encounters between the host population and Syrians might be expected to provide fertile ground for situational and interactive extremism and radicalisation.

For explaining the spill over impact of the Syrian Civil War on socio-political divisions in Turkey, the notion of cumulative extremism provides a useful theoretical and conceptual framework. Among the ten factors introduced by Eatwell (2006) for discussing extremism in Britain, communal morality, social separation, relative deprivation and migration can be found in contemporary Turkish society. Extremism towards Syrians is expressed in discourses of humiliation and grievance that emphasise that local citizens are the only rightful beneficiaries of state services and that any provision for Syrians is offered as a temporary favour not a right. In line with Eatwell’s (2006: 210) definition of communal morality, Syrians in popular discourse in Turkey are pejoratively referred to as ‘cowards’ who escaped fighting for their country and therefore should not be endowed with equal rights and services available to Turkish citizens whose ancestors fought for their freedom. Social exclusion, especially among youth and in poor neighbourhoods, exacerbates extremist tendencies while relative deprivation and poverty increase competition over highly limited resources between the local and the Syrian poor, which can culminate in aggression and violence. Specifically, the analysis of cumulative extremism in the contemporary Turkish context suggests three, concurrent, axes of polarisation. Firstly, to the already existing divide between the pro-government and opposition groups, the Civil War added the case of three million Syrians who have moved to Turkey and are stigmatised, collectively, as radical Islamists and as a drain on national resources. Secondly, the terrorist attacks in Turkey between 2013 and 2017 perpetrated by radical Islamist groups, and also connected with the Syrian Civil War, have encouraged those who sympathise with, or are open to, the messages of these terrorist organisations to join these groups. Finally, the dynamics of the Civil War and the sectarian division in Syria have the potential to resonate within the Turkish social context by fuelling existing Sunni and Alevi sectarian cleavages.

In this context, four primary groups emerge as actors in processes of cumulative extremism. The first potentially oppositional groups are the Syrian and Turkish populations, especially communities living in proximity and in low socio-economic status neighbourhoods. Here there is potential for cumulative extremism if the antagonism and xenophobia towards Syrians among the local population continues. The second nexus of antagonistic groups of actors include the current, pro-Islamist Turkish government and its supporters, on the one hand, and opposition parties and opposition groups, such as seculars, Alevi and Kurdish populations, on the other. The analysis of social media posts, inflected with narratives of humiliation and grievance, reveals the engagement of the two groups in verbal attacks on one another over the government’s Syrian policy and the presence of the Syrian population in Turkey.



Within the conceptual and theoretical framework outlined above, the objective of this research is to examine the emerging extremism, as well as polarisation leading to extremist behaviours and perceptions, within the Turkish socio-political context regarding Syrians in Turkey. To this end it draws on data from published literature and existing reports as well as field research. Additionally, to elaborate the discourses of humiliation and grievance and understand the formation of extremist narratives, an extensive number of internet sources are collected and analysed from the perspective of critical discourse analysis.

Following this introduction (Section 1), the scene is set for the study through a review of the existing literature on the emergence of Syrian Civil War and historical and political background to the movement of Syrians to Turkey. This part (Section 2) of the report is divided into four sections. The first and second sections discuss the beginnings and transformation of the Syrian uprising into a civil war, the main actors and the rise of terrorist activities. The third and fourth sections summarise the process of the movement of Syrians to Turkey and the living conditions of Syrians after arrival. Following a short explanation of methods and data collection (Section 3), Section 4 of the report will present the data analysis and findings. The findings will be presented under three sub-sections. The first provides an overall picture of the impact of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey. This includes a discussion of the consequences of Turkey's open border policy, in particular the infiltration of extremists and radical Islamists among the Syrian civilian population, the terrorist attacks and how the attacks following its open border policy have started to reinforce extremism in Turkey in two ways. First, these terror attacks have contributed to the mobilisation of those who were already receptive to radical messages. Secondly, they have fuelled extremism by increasing hostility towards all Syrians, who are suspected of being terrorists by secular and nationalist populations in Turkey.

The second sub-section employs the conceptual and theoretical prism of cumulative extremism to analyse hostility and grievance towards the Syrian population. Here it is argued that: the narratives of politicians as well as public perceptions construct the Syrians as scapegoats; the discourses on grievance, blame and stigmatisation further the already existing hostility and carry the potential of fuelling extremist attitudes of violence among Turkish and Syrian communities; as a result of the negativity attributed to the Syrian population, the term 'Syrian' has gained a pejorative meaning. Together these arguments suggest that the discourses of humiliation and grievance directed towards Syrians as well as attitudes of hatred and stigmatisation are warning signs of extremism. Syrians represent a new 'other' who are blamed for destroying the cohesion of Turkish society. Production and reproduction of hostility and xenophobia in politics, as well as in the public, are discursive reflections of accelerating extremist attitudes towards the Syrians. The final sub-section will elaborate how xenophobic and exclusionist political discourses resonate in the attitudes of competing political party supporters. In this analysis, two main arguments will be put forward. Firstly, it can be asserted that there is a deep polarisation in the key social and political issues between political parties and their supporters. However, when it comes to the issue of Syrians the polarisation of opposing political groups decreases. Secondly, looking at the messages conveyed through social media, some extreme statements towards supporters of competing parties can be observed. As an important implication of the movement of Syrians to Turkey, voicing of anti-Syrian sentiments have become a common strategy of opposition and dissent groups. This escalates extremism in two ways. On the one hand, it allows opposition groups to mobilise the language of humiliation and grievance towards the ruling party and its supporters for letting in a 'troublesome' foreign population and for making the country's previously secure borders vulnerable to the infiltration of 'dangerous foreigners'. On the other hand, the ruling party supporters demonstrate their grievance to the opposition groups by stigmatising them as terrorists and traitors, in comparison with whom Syrians - as real Muslims - are more acceptable. The result is accelerating extremism not only between the Syrian and Turkish populations but also within the Turkish population among highly politicised extreme groups.

Finally, the presence of Syrians brings a new dimension to the existing political polarisation and sectarian division in Turkey. The presence of Syrians triggers a new form of extremism between the supporters of the ruling and opposition parties of Turkey. Especially extreme nationalists channel their dissent and anger to the ruling power through the Syrian issue. Secondly, policies toward the Syrian population paves the way for further extremism, which is reflected in the discourses of humiliation and grievance towards the Syrians. Thirdly, the spill over impact of the sectarian nature of the Syrian civil War has exacerbated the concerns of the Alevi<sup>2</sup> population of Turkey. The Alawite character of the al-Assad regime may turn the Alevis in Turkey into potential targets, especially in the eyes of Islamist Syrian opposition groups that have already arrived in Turkey<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. Setting the Scene

### 2.1 From Arab Uprisings to the Syrian Civil War

Romanticising the uprisings that started from Tunisia and spread to Libya, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen through reference to the ‘Arab Spring’ is highly controversial, since the violence, turmoil and loss of thousands of lives throughout endless armed conflicts (which turned into a civil war in Syria) can be considered as anything, but a ‘spring’. Ertuna (2014: 12) suggests that the term itself is quite reductionist given that these uprisings, from 2011, took various forms and paths depending upon structural differences in these societies. Looking at the outcomes of these uprisings it becomes clear that these movements did not result in a transformation of the regimes towards a democratic system. On the contrary, in Egypt under the rule of Sisi, the political hegemony of the military continued after the elected leader Morsi was overthrown in a coup d’état. In Libya, international intervention backed by the UN during the uprising brought a violent end to Kaddafi’s rule and in the absence of a centralised power, the country is still in turmoil, being divided among various kinship groups who compete over the oil resources (Cansen, 2014). The path that this movement followed in Syria became a completely different issue. Initial peaceful protests and resistance against the tyrannical rule of the al-Assad regime turned into a never-ending civil war with international intervention.

On 17<sup>th</sup> of December 2010, the self-immolation of Sidi Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, marked the symbolic beginning of the ‘Arab Spring’ (Mahmoud, 2015: 12). Even though the incidents leading to the self-immolation of Bouazizi (economic constraints, confiscation of his tables and goods while he was working on the street) remain unclear, Tunisia, just like Egypt, Morocco, Libya and Syria was on the verge of a social and political transformation (May, 2016: 26). As May elaborates (ibid.: 26-27) the culture of mobilisation is nothing new to the Arab World, ‘the support for Palestinian Intifada, followed by Kefaya organised to protest US War on Iraq’ were a portent of what was to come in the form of Arab Uprisings. From the remote town of Sidi Bouzid, the uprising spread throughout the country until the Tunisian Head of Republic, Zeynel Abidin bin Ali, had no choice but to flee the country the following month. The success achieved in Tunisia encouraged neighbouring societies as similar protests against the decades of Kaddafi’s tyranny brought a violent end to his rule in October 2011 (Pargeter, 2016: 177). Meanwhile, in Egypt on 25 January 2011, which is known as the ‘Day of

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<sup>2</sup> Despite similar semantics, Arab Alawites in Syria and Turkish and Kurdish Alevis of Anatolia refer to different faith groups. Alawites are considered an ‘offshoot of Shiite Islam’, Alevis on the other hand have ‘syncretic nature combining Sufism, Islam and Shamanism’ (Cagaptay 17 April 2012). As opposed to the myth of assuming Alawites and Alevis are identical, they refer to different paths of Islam. But their names refer to Ali – fourth caliphate and relative of Muhammed. However, since they are minority groups in their countries with Sunni majority and targets of fundamentalists and radical Islamists, Alevis empathize with the Syrian ‘fellow Alawites being attacked by majority Sunni groups’. For more information (see: Cagaptay 17 April 2012): ‘Are Syrian Alawites and Turkish Alevis the Same?’.

<sup>3</sup> A more detailed discussion of Syrian Alawites and Anatolian Alevis can be found in Section 4 of this report.



Rage', thousands of young Egyptians from different social backgrounds poured into Tahrir Square to protest against corruption, implications of neo-liberal politics, unemployment, torture, poverty, authoritarianism and police brutality with the slogan: 'We are all Khaled Said'<sup>4</sup> (Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011: 1213; Northedge, 2011: 6; Shwartz, 2011: 35-40). The course of events that led to these demonstrations reveals that the extreme police oppression of the people played a vital role in the mobilisation of the Tahrir Square Uprisings (Shokr, 2011; Northedge, 2011; Ghosbashy, 2011). After 18 days of revolt President Hosni Mubarak resigned from his post.

Looking at the socio-economic background out of which the Syrian uprisings occurred, a similar picture emerges:

National wealth and resources were abused by an elite group with strong ties to the regime. The images of inequality, conspicuous consumption spread via the Internet and social media, which exacerbated the sense of relative deprivation among the impoverished middle classes of the Syrian population. The deepening socio-economic gap became more and more visible as the living conditions of Syrian youth - with high cultural capital not accompanied by economic capital – deteriorated. (Baczko et al 2018: 47, translated from Turkish by the authors)

Dissent towards the Baath regime was nothing new in Syria. The process triggered by the coup in 1961 led to the one-man chieftdom of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 (Bozarslan, 2011: 93-94). Hafez al-Assad and key figures in the regime belonging to the Nusayri Alawis also structured their political strategies on the mainstream Baath ideology that combined a version of socialism and Arab nationalism. The Movement of the Muslim Brothers, or Ikhwan, originating in Egypt was a strong oppositionist group to the rule of secular Baath regime and mobilised Sunni masses in Hama and Aleppo (Ertuna, 2014: 99). Violent conflicts took place during the years 1979-1982 between the Sunni opposition groups organised around Ikhwan and the Baath regime while Hama and Homs became the major centres for rebellion (Bozarslan, 2011: 186-188; Ertuna, 2014: 99; Seale, 2012)<sup>5</sup>, costing around 25,000 lives in Hama (out of a population of 250,000) (Seurat, 1989: 39 cited in Bozarslan, 2011: 188). Three decades after these rebellions, in January 2011 the Sunni clerics in Damascus and Homs started to voice their dissent and criticism to their flock. Meanwhile, Syrian secular middle-class youth started to mobilise via social media platforms. The first peaceful protests and flash mobs in Damascus and Aleppo became unsustainable due to the disproportionate power of the regime forces (Baczko, et.al. 2018: 80). From 2011 to 2013, hundreds of thousands of protestors were arrested and tortured and tens of thousands lost their lives as a result of torture in the detention centres Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Latakia (ibid: 97).<sup>6</sup> By Spring and Summer 2011, the peaceful in protests were not only confronted with the police and the Mukhabarat, the intelligence agency of the Syrian regime, but the military also organised operations against unarmed protestors as well as rebellious cities such as Latakia, Homs and Hamas (ibid: 101). Military operations bombarded Sunni districts and cities, paving the way for armoured Syrian regime forces to enter these centres (ibid: 102). As of 2012 new actors came forward as the first instances of armed rebellious groups and, only after 2013, the armed conflict became the arena of struggle among international powers through bureaucratised and internationally financed armed organisations (ibid: 115-123).

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<sup>4</sup> Khaled Said was brutally beaten to death by the police for posting a footage on police corruption on 6<sup>th</sup> of June 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Note that these rebellions occurred between 1979 and 1982 were violently crushed by the regime.

<sup>6</sup> The mass deaths and tortures in the detention centres were revealed when an official in a detention centre escaped with thousands of photographs of the dead detainees. For more detailed information see the report published by Human Rights Watch on 16<sup>th</sup> of December 2015: 'If the Dead Could Speak Mass Deaths and Torture in Syria's Detention Facilities' See also 'Syria: Torture Centres', Human Rights Watch and Barnard, A (11.05.2019) 'Inside Syria's Secret Torture Prisons: How Bashar al-Assad Crushed Dissent'.

Pargeter (2016: 177) stresses that while bringing together all strata of society who were oppressed under decades of authoritarian regimes, the Arab Uprisings 'took political Islamist movements from marginality into the mainstream politics.'. In the Syrian phase of the Arab Uprisings, the al-Assad regime eliminated the leaders of dissident groups and freed imprisoned radical Islamists to marginalise the social movements and undermine the legitimacy of peaceful protests in the realm of mainstream politics. As a result, al-Assad could easily claim that he was fighting, not against innocent unarmed democratic liberal civilians, but armed, barbarous, radical Islamist gangs (Baczko, Dorransoro and Quesnay, 2018: 96). In addition to this, and in contrast to the Arab Uprisings in Egypt, the al-Assad regime in Syria was supported by a heavily armed, strong military and, even from the onset of the peaceful protests, military attacks against protestors were not uncommon and, as a reaction to the military attacks, the protestors formed militia groups (Baczko, et al, 2018: 91-93, 115-122).

## 2.2 From Peaceful Protests to Armed Conflicts

From the very beginning of the Syrian Revolt in 2011, the regime suppressed unarmed civilian rebels with heavy firearms. The origins of Syrian uprisings revealed the arbitrary practices of excessive force of the regime. Alarmed by the Arab Revolts in the region, the Mukhabarat was highly cautious of any small signs of dissent. In March 2011, a group of school children in Deraa between 10 and 15 years of age, inspired by the protests in Tunisia and Egypt, painted some slogans on the wall (Cabek, 2016: 7-8), and were arrested and held in prison in Damascus for interrogation and possibly tortured (Lesch, 2012: 55-56, Griffin, 2016: Cabek, 2016: 7-8). On 15 March, a few hundred people including the parents and relatives of the children marched to the centre of Deraa. The protest grew in volume in the days that followed; tens of thousands of people joined the marches and were confronted by security forces who opened fire, killing hundreds by the end of March 2011. As early as the following month, Deraa was under military siege and all utilities were cut off (Griffin, 2016: 44). In September 2011, in the city of Homs alone more than 200 people were killed by the regime. The fierce military operations generated a countrywide reaction and resistance. The rebels and opposition groups escaping from the regime forces went underground. The fugitive rebellions turned to webs of militia as a safe haven. The regime cut off all possible means of dialogue, so the rebels were left with two choices: to migrate or fight. In early 2011, the armed groups within the protesting groups were marginal in terms of their numbers; only towards the end of the year did armed struggle become a routine form of resistance. The first motive of protestors to turn to firearms was to protect the demonstrators (Baczko et. al, 2018: 91-106). The fact that the regime used excessive force over the civilians left no choice for the rebellion groups to engage in armed struggle. In the wake of 2012, the armed groups that became semi-professional militia trying to hold control over streets, neighbourhoods, districts were supported and reinforced by former regime soldiers who escaped from the military with heavy weapons (ibid.). Within this landscape and among the opposition groups to the secular regime, al-Qaida gradually entered the scene. The new leader of al-Qaida, al-Zawahiri, who had succeeded bin Laden, was against al-Assad and called his regime heretical on grounds of its long-term oppression of Sunnis and Ikhwan. Al-Qaida by the late 2011 and early 2012 was slowly 'making its way to Syria' by suicide bomb attacks to government facilities (Lesch, 2012: 63). Some ISI<sup>7</sup> groups with al-Qaida affiliation saw the uprising as an opportunity for gaining ground and crossed into Syria (ibid.).

The organisation and development of ISIS has its origins in the historical process that began with the formation of al-Qaida (1987), the war in Iraq (2003), the Arab uprisings (2010) and the civil war in Syria (2011) (Oosterweld and Bloem, 2017: 5). The chaos and turmoil following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 paved the way for sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shia populations. Disillusioned from losing the governing power to Shia, Sunni tribes turned to al-Qaida and al-Qaida affiliated ISI (ibid; Griffin, 2016). In 2006, Islamic State in Iraq was established with Omar al-Baghdadi as the

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<sup>7</sup> Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) later to become Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

leader. In 2004 Omar al-Baghdadi – known as Abu Bakr at that time - was arrested in Fallujah and held as Enemy Prisoner of War (EPW) (Griffin, 2016: 4; Marsico, 2015: 21). The US-run prison camp Bucca in Iraq, that was open from 2003-2009, held more than 100.000 people captive, predominantly jihadists and Baathists, and the imprisonment led to further radicalisation and collaboration among these groups (Marsico, 2015: 21). As Griffin (2016: 4) stresses, it is not yet clear whether al-Baghdadi was radicalised during his time in prison or prior to his arrest. Ten years after his imprisonment he was to announce his caliphate in Mosul. The 2011 revolts in Syria, amidst the existing sectarian conflict between the ruling Alawite groups and Sunni population, provided fertile soil for the spread of ISI (ibid: 8). For al-Assad also, the involvement of an al-Qaida affiliated group -ISI- provided the basis for his claim to legitimacy in that he was fighting Islamic extremists (ibid., Lesch, 2012; Khatib, 2015: 3). Indeed, through a general state pardon in May 2011, al-Assad released more than 1,000 Islamist extremists from several prisons, many of whom fought as Jihadists in Iraq (Griffin, 2016: 45). Khatib (2015: 4-6) refers to this as evidence of the ‘Pragmatic relationship between Islamic State and the Syrian regime’, whereby the operations of the group ‘validate al-Assad’s narrative that he is fighting Islamist extremists’.

By 2013 taking the name Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, ISIS started to gain control over the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Fallujah. In early 2014, ISIS took control in Raqqa in Syria and, after taking Mosul in the same year, it declared the establishment of caliphate. Meanwhile in Iraq escaping the atrocities of ISIS, a huge population of Yezidis were stranded on Sinjar Mountain in life-threatening conditions. The sufferings of this population raised international concern and the US declared airstrikes against ISIS, which was continuing to advance in Syria by capturing Kurdish populated regions, such as Kobane, and generating another huge wave of human movement to Turkey. The advance of the Islamic State, its genocide-like atrocities against unarmed civilians raised international concern and an anti-ISIS coalition was formed to halt its threat. Subsequently, ISIS also declared war against the citizens of the anti-ISIS coalition by initiating a chain of terrorist attacks in major cities of Europe and Middle Eastern countries. Some of these attacks, which sparked the international community’s attention towards the Syrian civil war and led the international powers to justify their intervention as a legitimate and necessary, are summarised in the table 1 below.

**Table 1: ISIS Terrorist Attacks**

Date	Location	Type of the Attack	Casualties
11 May 2013	Reyhanlı, Turkey	Explosive loaded two vehicles	52 people were killed 146 were injured
January 2015	Paris, France	Two gunmen attacked the offices of Satirical Magazine Charlie Hebdo	11 people were killed
18 March 2015	Tunis, Tunisia	Gunmen attacks tourists in a museum in Tunis.	More than 20 people were killed
26 June 2015	Sousse, Tunisia	Gunmen randomly shot tourists at the beach of a holiday resort	38 people were killed
20 July 2015	Suruç, Turkey	Suicide bomber attacked a cultural centre	Killed over 30 people
10 October 2015	Ankara, Turkey	Two suicide bombers attacked a rally organised near the train station	103 people were killed 246 were injured
12 November 2015	Beirut, Lebanon	Twin suicide attacks in a Shia district	Killed 43 people and injured over 200

13 November 2015	Paris, France	Terrorist attacks in 6 different venues across Paris, most notoriously in Bataclan Concert Hall	130 were killed
22 March 2016	Brussels, Belgium	Two blasts in Brussels airport and one blast in a subway station	34 people were killed, over 200 injured
14 July 2016	Nice, France	A lorry slammed through a crowd celebrating the Bastille Day	Killed at least 84 people
1 January 2017	Istanbul, Turkey	Several gunmen shot people in a night club celebrating new year	39 people were killed, 71 people injured

All these attacks, costing thousands of lives, are deeply rooted in the ideology of ISIS. Some of the principles laid down by its key jihadi manual that ‘acts of violence can be used to undermine faith in the governments of the West and Middle East to provide security for their people and to polarise Muslims and non-Muslims’ (Atran, 2016; Oosterweld and Bloem, 2017: 9). In other words, in line with what Khatib (2015) argues, sharia-law was instrumental for ISIS to acquire power and money (Oosterweld and Bloem, 2017: 10). Additionally, the atrocities, crimes against humanity such as kidnapping and enslaving girls and women and genocides committed by ISIS in the occupied regions are justified by sharia law (Marsico, 2015: 42).

For the objective of this report, it is important to outline the major ISIS attacks in Turkey and their relation to the Syrian population movement to Turkey. With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, ISIS became a major threat to Turkey. Between 2013 and 2018, hundreds of people were killed in Turkey as a result of 86 terrorist attacks (START, 2020). Analysts and commentators have explained the high number of attacks by ISIS in Turkey by a combination of factors including: Turkey’s open border policy that facilitated the infiltration of fighters posing as civilians; Turkey’s involvement in the Syrian Civil War on the side of the rebellious armed groups insisting on the removal of al-Assad; and coalition with the US-led Western Front fighting against ISIS (ibid., Okyay, 2017: 242-244; Arango and Schmitt, 2015; McCaul, 2014; Uslu, 2016; Sarfati, 2019: 2-3). Some factual details of the ISIS attacks in Turkey are given below:

- On 11 May, 2013, in the Reyhanlı district of Hatay, 52 people were killed when two explosive-laden vehicles were detonated. ISIS claimed responsibility for this attack and the organisers of the attack, who hold Turkish citizenship, were captured in Syria. However, despite ISIS accepting responsibility for the attack, the Turkish government blamed it, firstly, on the Syrian regime and then on a leftist organisation.
- On 20 July, 2015, an ISIS suicide bomber with Turkish citizenship attacked a cultural centre in Suruç, Turkey. The attack killed more than 30 people - members of a Socialist-leftist association organising a support event for the Kurdish people in Kobane (a Syrian Kurdish town under siege by ISIS at the time). Some of the terrorists who organised the attack in Suruç were also the organisers of the Ankara railway bombings (Kamer, 2019).
- On 10 October, 2015, a rally named ‘Peace Right Now Against War; Peace, Labour Democracy’ was organised in Ankara. As people gathered for the rally at the gates of the central station and passengers were disembarking from a recently arrived train, two suicide attacks occurred. 103 people lost their lives and 246 were injured, making it the deadliest attack in the history of the Republic of Turkey. The perpetrators were also Turkish nationals with ISIS affiliation.

- On 1 January, 2017, several gunmen randomly shot people celebrating the new year at a night club in Istanbul. In this attack, 39 people lost their lives. The only captured attacker was a foreign national from Uzbekistan.

When ISIS denounced its allegiance with al-Qaida, its distinct objective also became clearer. Different from al-Qaida, the so-called Islamic State was offering a concrete state system as an alternative to the status quo (Khatib, 2016: 6). The distinctive political project of Islamic State also made it more popular and gained it sympathisers worldwide, many of whom left their homes to fight in Raqqa (ibid: 7). Hence, the global objective of establishing an Islamic state based on sharia-law attracted many foreigners as well as members of other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. Furthermore, as ISIS gained control over the regions where there is an authority gap, chaos and turmoil, locals welcomed the rule of ISIS due to the perception of Sunni locals that it was replacing the violence of the war with order (Galang, 2015: 3, Khatib, 2015: 8). Both ideological reasons based on the formation of sharia ruled Islamic state by Salafist practices and economic interests were instrumental in attracting foreign recruits both fighters and their resident families, offering salaries over 1500 US Dollars per month (Khatib, 2016: 9). Some estimate that, between 2011 and 2015, ‘more than 29,000 foreign fighters joined the fight against the Assad regime, 5,000-7,000 of them were from Europe and Western democracies’ (Schmid and Tinnes, 2015: 27). A significant number of supporters and fighters of ISIS in Europe came from young people from immigrant communities with low socio-economic status. For instance, in France, a large Muslim underclass was overrepresented in prisons.<sup>8</sup> ISIS controlled areas promised a sense of identity and power to ordinary individuals and an authentic Islamic way of life for those who wanted to escape secular regimes (ibid.). Propaganda campaigns through social media, including graphic images of violence and the execution of foreign captives – citizens of anti-ISIS coalition states – served -to intimidate the local people under the control of ISIS and its enemies but also won it popularity among its global sympathisers (ibid: 11-14; Galang, 2015: 2). The extent of popularity of ISIS among young and immigrant-background people of Europe is also revealed through various polls conducted between 2014 and 2015. These polls estimated that support for ISIS among young people and people of immigrant background was as high as 14 per cent in France and Great Britain (Schmid and Tinnes, 2015: 9).

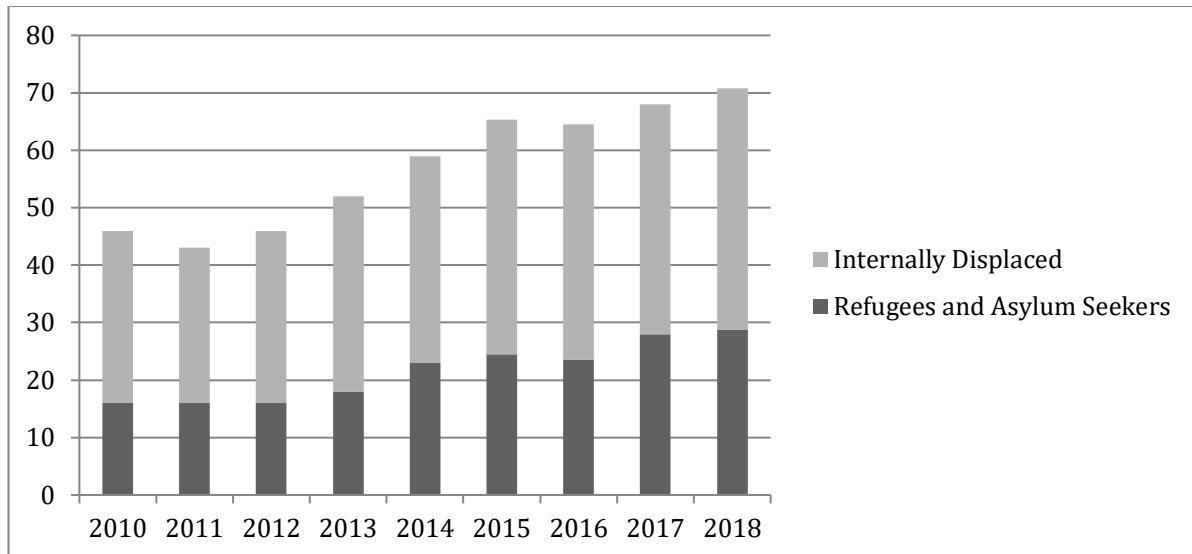
With the fall of ISIS, a new international crisis is awaiting thousands of detained ISIS suspects in Iraq and Syria. In northeast Syria alone, Kurdish led Syrian Democratic Forces hold around a hundred thousand ISIS suspects, and their families from 50 different countries, as prisoners. While Kurdish authorities urge the western nations to repatriate their citizens, due to security concerns most of the states are reluctant to bring the suspects to their home countries. The inhumane and overcrowded prison conditions also hold the risk for further radicalisation especially for the children who are born or raised in those prison camps. According to international reports, even access to drinkable water is not possible and most of the children suffer from serious disease and malnourishment (Willie, 2019).

### 2.3 The Movement of Syrians to Turkey and Europe

One of the largest forced displacements after the Second World War is the Syrian population movement to Turkey. As presented in the Figure 1 the last decade has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of people forcibly displaced. In 2011, 42.5 million people were subject to forced migration, the number reached to 45.2 the next year; and in 2014, 60 million found themselves in forced migratory movements. As for 2018, there are more than 70 million facing forced displacement globally (UNHCR, 2018).

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<sup>8</sup> It should be noted that around 70 percent of prisoners in France are Muslim whereas the Muslim population only make up of around 7 percent in the country.



**Figure 1: Forced Displacement 2010-2018**

Source: <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5d08d7ee7/unhcr-global-trends-2018.html> (Accessed on 28.12.2019).

When the origin countries of refugee flows are considered, 67 per cent of the refugees come from five major countries: Syria (6.7 million); Afghanistan (2.7 million); South Sudan (2.3 million); Myanmar (1.1 million); and Somalia (0.9 million) (ibid.). As for the host countries, only 16 per cent of the refugees are hosted in the developed regions; and one third of the refugees are in the least developed regions in the World (ibid). Among the host countries, Turkey, with 3.7 million refugees, hosts the largest number of refugees since 2013 (ibid.).

Among 6.7 million Syrians, only 28,200 have been accepted by resettlement countries such as Canada, Australia, US and EU countries (UNHCR Statistics for Resettlement).

EU countries, as a response to a mounting refugee crisis and irregular migration, took several measures including: providing funds for increased border controls in Bulgaria and Greece; controlling the borders with surveillance cameras; increasing the number of, and strengthening, armed patrols; closing of entrance routes with barbed wire (Hungary); and signing re-admission agreements with non-EU countries like Turkey and Ukraine to establish buffer zones for migration (Amnesty International, 2016: 9) (Amnesty International, 2016). One striking case is the Operation Aspida launched by Greece in August 2012. As part of this operation, Greece enrolled 1800 additional police officers and put up 10 kilometres of barbed wire at the Turkish border (Amnesty International, 2014: 11). According to Frontex, 2,000 migrants were caught per week before the operation, and this number dropped dramatically to 10 people a week immediately after the operation took place (Amnesty International, 2014: 11). However, this did not stop the refugee flow; instead people turned to more dangerous routes, namely via the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. After Operation Aspida, the number of those who were captured while crossing the sea rose from 169 to 3,265 from 2012 to 2013. As the land routes are strictly controlled, in order to discourage the sea route, the Greek coast guards allegedly turned to inhumane practices of damaging the overcrowded inflatable boats of the refugees putting them at risk of capsizing (ibid: 20)<sup>9</sup>.

The fact is that Turkey lies at the crossroads between countries in turmoil and more prosperous regions and thus, starting from late 1990s and early 2000s, it has become both a major transit country as well as a buffer zone. Sharing 911 km of border with Syria, it is one of the countries most

<sup>9</sup> The Amnesty International report is based on testimony of witnesses who were rescued at sea and media reports. Officials deny or keep quiet when presented with these allegations.

affected by refugee flows from the Syrian civil war. The implications of the Arab Uprisings in Syria and the violent response of al-Assad discussed above have generated a humanitarian crisis leading to waves of refugees entering Turkey. Current statistics suggest 3,587,779 Syrians are registered in Turkey and 63,948 of them live in camps (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Temporary Protection Statistics, March 2020). 1.67 million of the Syrian population in Turkey is younger than 18 (ibid.) and predominantly live in the metropolitan areas such as Istanbul, Antep, Hatay, Urfa, Adana and Mersin and Kilis where there are high densities of the Syrian population (ibid.).

## 2.4 Living Conditions of the Syrian Population in Turkey

In this section we consider whether the conditions in which the Syrian population in Turkey, the majority of whom live outside of camps, meet the conditions for a dignified life including employment in suitable conditions for adults, proper schooling for children and decent housing conditions (Amnesty International, 2016: 24). In addition to exploring the employment, housing and education available to the Syrian population, we consider the specific issue of the problem of Syrian children being drawn into child labour.

With regard to employment, Syrians are predominantly found in the informal unqualified jobs sector working under insecure, dangerous, inhumane conditions and earning below the minimum wage. 52 per cent of the Syrian population in Turkey belong to economically productive groups (18-65 years); and some reports estimate between 950,000-1,200,000 Syrians are employed (International Crisis Group; 2018: 5; Refugee Livelihood Monitor, INGEV, 2017; Erdogan, 2019). However, of approximately a million working Syrians, only 31,000 have legal work permits and almost 95 per cent of the employed Syrians do not have access to formal employment (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services. Labour Statistics). The unemployment rate among Syrians is also as high as 50 per cent (Refugee Livelihood Monitor, INGEV, 2017). More than a million children are of school age, although only 684,919 of them have access to education (Ministry of National Education, Lifelong Learning Directorate General, October 2019). Moreover, many adolescents and young people have limited access to language classes, relevant technical and vocational skills training, and higher education. This creates a situation which could have negative consequences for the long-term development prospects of Syria, and which poses risks to sustainable social cohesion in Turkey. The number of Syrians under temporary protection enrolled in universities in Turkey has risen to just under 20,000, but this still represents an enrolment rate of less than 4 per cent compared with the pre-war enrolment rate of 20 per cent in Syria (UNHCR, 2017-2018).

This suggests that around 400,000 children are in danger of being drawn into informal work and/or marriage. According to a survey mentioned in an Amnesty International Report (2016: 31), 'the most common reasons for children's non-enrolment in school were that the children needed to work to support the family (26.6 per cent) and that the family could not afford the school fees (20.3 per cent)'.

Housing and shelter is also an important issue concerning the Syrian population, of whom 98 per cent are left to meet their need for shelter themselves (see: Republic of Turkey Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management, Temporary Protection Statistics, March 2020). According to research conducted by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) in the south-eastern provinces of Turkey, 28 per cent of the Syrian population live in unhygienic conditions, 19 per cent in houses with no insulation and protection from weather conditions and 10 per cent shelter informally in tents, barracks or construction sites whilst 64 per cent of those living outside the camps are struggling below the poverty level (Global Shelter Cluster, 2019).

A government analysis published in 2013 found that 25 per cent of Syrians were living in ruined buildings or under make-shift arrangements and 62 per cent lived in housing units together with eight or more people, which results in severe overcrowding (housing units had on average just 2.1 rooms). In 2014, field research conducted by the Turkish Medical Association confirmed that most



houses in which Syrians reside were in poor physical condition, and that some people lived in parks or ruined homes (Amnesty International, 2016: 25; AFAD, Syrian Refugees in Turkey: 2013 Field Survey Results, 2014).

In addition to the structural factors relating to employment, education and health care, that living conditions of the Syrian population are dramatically shaped by the quality of interaction with, and acceptance by the local population. This is, not least, because the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion also set the limits and circumstances of employment, housing and education. Host communities 'perceive Syrians as a threat to their economic and political wellbeing' (International Crisis Group, 2018: 6) leading to tensions and hostilities between the Syrian and local communities. For instance, as early as 2013-2014, just a couple years after massive influx of Syrians, locals attacked Syrian workers who constituted between 60-70 per cent of workers in the leather industry of Izmir Bornova district. There are reports also that, especially on payday, local young men attack young Syrians (ibid.). Negative social perceptions, coupled with the negative images presented in the media, have stirred up resentment among the population leading to mob violence and even to lynching (Kolukırık, 2009: 6).

It can be said that there is an increasing discontent with the presence of a large population of Syrians in the major cities of Turkey. The increasingly negative perceptions of Syrians in Turkish society have the potential to lead to the formation of anti-refugee or anti-migrant movements. As can be seen from these findings, as outsiders, Syrians have become the scapegoats for structural problems such as unemployment and public order. For now, such antagonistic voices are reflected in the views of supporters of the mainstream opposition parties while online Twitter groups, such as '#ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum' ('I do not want Syrians in my country'), carry the potential to form an anti-Syrian movement.

### 3. Sources, Data Collection and Analysis

Based on this objective, this report addresses the following questions:

- What are the spill-over impacts of Syrian Civil War in Turkey in relation to extremism and radicalisation?
- How have these impacts been influencing the current social, cultural and political polarisation in Turkey?
- How does this polarisation resonate at the discursive level in politics and in the everyday life of the local community?

Drawing on the notion of cumulative extremism, the report attempts to understand the dynamics and dimensions of the tension between the opposing political groups in Turkey as well as between Turkish and Syrian communities. The concept of cumulative extremism is mobilised in this report to help understand the 'ebb and flow of extremist mobilisation' (Busher and Macklin, 2015: 885). The term cumulative extremism is defined by Eatwell (2006: 205) as the way in which 'one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms'. The theory of cumulative extremism proposes that 'escalating hostilities between the opposing groups' follows from polarisation and violent confrontations (Busher and Macklin, 2015: 885). This suggests it would be useful to consider processes of polarisation and extremism linked to the Syrian population flow into Turkey through the prism of Eatwell's (2006) notion of cumulative extremism. Particular attention is paid to narratives of humiliation and grievance, which appear to be the main ways through which people articulate their movement towards extremist positions. Patterns of rhetorical and community polarisation are also examined through the perspective of the cumulative extremism.

To explore the Syrian issue through the prism of cumulative extremism, the emergent antagonisms among the following four sets of actors will be elaborated. The first two groups of actors are the Syrian and Turkish community actors especially those living in poor neighbourhoods where the



violent confrontations take place. Examination of the violent confrontations between the Turkish and Syrian communities, suggests that they are not orchestrated, on either side by, by organised extremist mobilisations but that the violent attacks on the businesses and households of Syrians are conducted in an unorganised and uneven fashion, occurring often spontaneously and randomly. This conforms to Busher and Macklin's (2015: 890) suggestion that, in the ebb and flow of the interaction between the opposing groups, 'the patterns of mobilisation and counter-mobilisation between opposing 'extremist' groups are far more likely to be uneven and sporadic'. Extremism towards Syrians is expressed in discourses of humiliation and grievance that emphasise that local citizens are the only rightful beneficiaries of state services and any provision for Syrians is offered as a temporary favour, rather than as a right. Moreover, Syrians in popular discourse in Turkey are pejoratively referred to as 'cowards' who escaped fighting for their country. Social exclusion, especially among youth and in poor neighbourhoods, exacerbates extremist tendencies. In addition to this, relative deprivation and poverty increase competition over highly limited resources between local and the Syrian poor, which may result in aggression and violence. The political and public discourses on grievance fuel already existing hostility and involve a potential to stimulate extremist attitudes of violence among Turkish and Syrian communities. Together these arguments suggest that the discourses of humiliation and grievance directed towards Syrians, as well as attitudes of hatred and stigmatisation, fuel extremism.

The second group of actors consists of political and community actors including the current, pro-Islamist Turkish government and its supporters, on the one hand, and opposition parties and opposition groups, such as seculars, Alevi and Kurdish populations, on the other. Here, drawing on the notion of cumulative extremism, we potentially see a parallel escalation of hostility among the antagonistic groups, which mostly takes place discursively through social media. The opposition groups mobilise the language of humiliation and grievance towards the ruling party and its supporters, which are accused of letting in a 'troublesome' foreign population and of making the country's previously secure borders vulnerable to the infiltration of 'dangerous foreigners'. At the same time, the ruling party supporters express grievance towards opposition political groups by stigmatising them as terrorists and traitors, in comparison with whom, Syrians - as 'real Muslims'- are more acceptable. The result is accelerating extremism not only between the Syrian and Turkish populations but also within the Turkish population among highly politicised and polarised political groups.

This study of extremism emerging from the Syrian population movement into Turkey is based on the extensive data contained within existing academic literature, policy and research reports. This is supplemented with more immediate accounts - providing insight into emergent extremist and radicalising narratives - drawn from published newspaper and social media content. The latter, in particular, allows the study to capture popular narratives as well as the statements of politicians coming from nationalist perspectives and known for their anti-Syrian rhetoric (such as Ümit Özdağ, Meral Akşener from the GP, Öztürk Yılmaz who is an independent MP and former Vice Chairperson of RPP) and anti-Syrian groups using social media to disseminate their messages. The official social media accounts of political parties are also used to gather official statements on Syrian population movement to Turkey. In collecting the data and scrutinising the materials from both conventional and social media, particular attention was paid to the meaning and discourse that the subject narrates to convey her/his position to the public. This required critical examination of the narratives presented in the context of the recent history and contemporary social-political atmosphere of Turkish society.

Methodologically speaking, the data retrieved from both academic literature and mainstream media as well as social media were analysed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). Epistemologically, CDA is appropriate for this study as it recognises discourse as a social practice that constitutes the social world and is shaped by it (Fairclough, et.al., 2011: 358) and, it follows, that 'discursive practices produce and reproduce unequal power relations' between different social groups (van Dijk, 1993:

249; *ibid*). Considering that an individual's discourse is structured by dominance and power and that dominance is legitimised by the ideologies of powerful hegemonic groups (Wodak, 2001: 3), critical discourse analysis becomes a powerful way of analysing how the extremist/radicalising anti-Syrian discourses are generally produced and legitimised. Hence, with critical discourse analysis the inherent power inequality is unravelled between Syrians, who escaped from the civil war in Syria, and local communities in Turkey. This is particularly because such inequality is produced and reproduced semiotically in everyday use of language in the discourses of humiliation and grievance. At this point, it seems crucial to distinguish between the institutional discourses generated by the government and opposition parties and individual narratives that point to these institutionally underpinned discourses. The government discourse presents Syrians as fellow 'Muslim brothers and sisters' through which common religious identity is emphasised. Based on this institutional discourse, the pro-government groups adopt a narrative of solidarity with Syrians and acceptance of them. On the other hand, the institutional discourse of the opposition parties regards Syrians as an additional burden on the Turkish population already struggling to carve out a decent life for themselves as well as considering Syrians as a threat to social cohesion and security. In line with this institutionalised discourse of the opposing political parties, a common narrative shared by the opposition groups at grassroots level regards Syrians as usurpers of the national wealth and a danger to society and the modernist identity of the society. The report analyses two aspects of extremism based on subjects and objects of the extremist discourses that are fed by discourses of humiliation and grievance. First, the anti-Syrian discourses generated by local people, as well as those of opposition parties' politicians, express grievance towards the Syrian population through the attachment of blame to them Syrians for social problems they experience. In this context, the subjects of extremist discourse are the local people and opposition parties' representatives whilst the objects are the Syrian population living in Turkey. Secondly, the existing antagonism between the pro-government and opposition groups has taken on a new dimension with the Syrian population movement. The opposition groups, as the subjects of narratives on humiliation and grievance, blame the pro-government groups for the 'problems' brought by Syrians. The pro-government groups, as the subjects of narratives on humiliation and grievance, blame the opposition based on an accusation that claims the opposition supports "terrorists" and being "disloyal" to the nation and the state. These verbal attacks expressed on social media are evidence of the extremist attitudes of these two groups.

For the purpose of this study, the findings of existing empirical research from surveys conducted by research centres such as KONDA, as well as academic studies, are employed to present an overall picture of attitudes towards the Syrian population in Turkey while the particular discursive reflections of humiliation and grievances towards Syrians are elicited from new empirical research into the opinions expressed on social media platforms. This decision was informed by the observable evidence that social media is central to the spread and reproduction of provocative extremist statements of hostility and, thus, social media posts might be reasonably expected to be implicated in phenomenon of violent conflict and mass assaults on Syrians, justified with reference to provocative and false accusations found in such posts. This is not to draw a direct causal connection between social media posts and violence but to recognise that many people turn to mass media and internet resources for information (Neuman, 2014: 6) and that the internet, among other factors 'enhances the process of radicalization, by acting as an echo chamber' (von Behr et. al., 2013: 16, 31)

For the purpose of the study, we analysed social media platforms in the form of Twitter trend topics. The platforms were selected according to number of posts and their popularity, measured by their status as trend topics. All the posts were reviewed from the beginning of the hashtags and trend topics and common themes and discourses on humiliation and grievance were identified and classified. The sample of the research includes tweets posted on the topics: #suriyeliler (Syrians); #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum (I don't want Syrians in my country); and #suriyelilersuriyeye (Syrians move to Syria). The date range for the Twitter group #suriyeliler starts from 11.05.2011 (the date of the first post) to 15.01.2020 and includes posts both carrying messages of solidarity and support for

Syrians as well as references to humiliation and grievance. Accordingly, among a total of 319 tweets, 150 conveying messages of hostility towards Syrians were included in the analysis. For #ülkemesuriyeliistemiyorum hashtag, tweets posted between 27.09.2013 (the date of the first post) and 15.01.2020 were included in the sample and for #suriyelilersuriyeye the date range is between 02.07.2016 (the date of the first post) and 15.01.2020. Since our main objective is the study of extremism in the form of humiliation and grievance, only the relevant posts were included in the sample. The hashtag '#ülkemesuriyeliistemiyorum' (I don't want Syrians in my country) in itself is an important indicator for the anti-Syrian attitudes but the fact that it became a trending topic is what directed the attention of the researchers to its posts. The hashtag received its first posts in 2013 and 2014 but it became popular as of 2016 and on two separate occasions (3 July 2016 and 1 January 2019) it became a worldwide trending topic. (Hurriyet Daily News, 2016). The twitter posts provided rich material for the issues addressed in the following section. The messages spread through social media provided insights for the basis and context of hatred towards Syrians in Turkey as well as different dimensions of polarisation among different political party supporters and Syrian-local communities.

For ethical reasons – specifically in order to ensure the anonymity of individual accounts - screenshots of the original tweets are not included in the report. This is because the account names and photos make it possible for the account users to be traceable. Drawing on original posts, which are archived and kept safely by the researchers, however, findings are presented that allow us to explore how groups from competing political parties attack each other employing radical narratives on the Syrian issue.

News reports about Syrians were also searched through the online web pages of mainstream printed newspapers in order to follow how the mainstream media reflects the reactions towards the Syrian population in Turkey. These news reports were analysed using critical discourse analysis and employing the same coding as for the social media content. The type of news that came up after searching with key-word 'Syrians', the headlines highlighting alleged adverse impacts of Syrians to the society gave more than expected information about the standing of the newspapers and messages with anti-Syrian discourse conveyed through mass media. Therefore, no further research was needed to collect primary data through interviews with journalists, policymakers and civil society representatives.

To sum up, for the purpose of the research, the following method and data collection process were employed: literature review, collection of secondary data through existing empirical evidence and collection of secondary data from social media. After reviewing the collected empirical material, a critical discourse analysis was conducted revealing the following key themes: (1) the Syrian Civil War and its resonance in Turkish socio-political and sectarian divisions; (2) evaluation of the Turkish community's perceptions of the Syrians in Turkey from the perspective of cumulative extremism; and (3) the impact of the Syrian population movement on polarisation and hatred in Turkish politics. The findings of the analysis relating to each of these themes are presented in Section 4.

## 4. Key Findings

Elaborating the notion of cumulative extremism, both Eatwell (2006) and Busher and Macklin (2015) focus on the rise of tensions between the extreme Islamist groups and anti-Muslim extreme right-wing groups. Busher and Macklin (2015: 885), in their analysis, focus on more or less institutionalised, organised movements; extreme Islamist groups such as al-Muhajiroun on the one side and English Defence League (EDL), British National Party (BNP), National Front (NF) on the other. By analysing the cases of confrontation, tactics, repertoires of these groups, the authors offer six proposals for providing a concrete foundation for the notion of cumulative extremism (ibid: 899). These proposals include, paying attention to the difference between 'extreme narrative and extreme



forms of action'; focusing on how 'cumulative extremist processes social and political processes of inclusion and exclusion'; describing the nature of interactions between opposing extremist groups; paying attention to movement-counter-movement influence; examining the impact of wider cultural social and political environment; examining the ways in which relevant movement-counter-movements are coupled (ibid: 887-896). Applying this perspective to the question of whether population movement to Turkey as a result of the Syrian civil war triggered cumulative extremist tendencies, it seems that some of the dimensions identified by Busher and Macklin are more relevant than others. For example, the movement counter-movement aspect appears largely absent from the Turkish case since Syrians have not formed any notable organised counter-movement groups. Moreover, Turkish mass reactions to Syrians do not take the form of organised group formation but develop from the circulation of unfounded messages accusing Syrians of serious crimes leading to random reactions as enraged crowds gather in an unorganised fashion to attack their Syrian neighbours. The relevance of this perspective lies, rather therefore, at the discursive level as radical Islamist attacks and pro-Islamist government's Syrian policies are strongly criticised by secular opposition groups. As the terrorist attacks by ISIS members intensified between 2013 and 2017, these criticisms turn into accusations that government policies are to blame. In other words, as the radical Islamists infiltrated through the porous borders between Turkey and Syria, opposition groups held government policies, and their supporters, responsible. This brought a new dimension to existing political cleavages between pro-Islamist government supporters and secular as well as pro-Kurdish opposition. This cleavage is mostly reflected in the discourses on humiliation of the two groups to each other and grievance on how each group blames the other as the enemy of the nation.

The popular and political levels become intertwined as concerns about the infiltration of terrorists and Salafist fighters among the Syrian population moving to Turkey generate negative popular perceptions towards the Syrian population. The security concerns and suspicion towards the incoming foreign population must be understood in the context of deepening structural problems and insufficient public services, which fuel negativity towards Syrians. In this way, political discourse takes on a physical dimension when they are translated into competition with Syrians for welfare provision and limited employment opportunities experienced by Turkish residents of poor neighbourhoods.

#### 4.1 The Syrian Civil War and Its Resonance in Turkish Socio-Political and Sectarian Divisions

The spill-over impact of the Syrian Civil War and the influx of more than 3 million Syrians has brought a new dimension to existing structural socio-political problems in Turkey. These dimensions are three-fold. Firstly, to the already existing polarisation between the pro-government and opposition groups, the Civil War added the case of three million Syrians who have moved to Turkey and are stigmatised, collectively, as radical Islamists, and as a drain on national resources. Secondly, the terrorist attacks by radical Islamist groups which are also connected with the Syrian Civil War, gained momentum in Turkey between 2013-2017 taking hundreds of lives. Moreover, these atrocities, committed mostly by ISIS, also encouraged those who are sympathisers, or open to the messages of these terrorist organisations, to join these groups. Finally, the dynamics of the Civil War and the sectarian division in Syria has the potential to resonate within the Turkish social context by fuelling existing Sunni and Alevi sectarian cleavages.

In Turkey, radical Islamist groups are identifiable back to the Islamic Revolution in Iran in the early 1980s (Çağlar, 2006 cited in Özbey, 2018: 5). The 1990s were marked by Hezbollah attacks especially in the south-eastern provinces of Turkey where hundreds of people were murdered (Özbey, 2018: 5). Following the 9/11 attacks, radical Islamist groups gained international momentum, especially through al-Qaida and affiliated groups such as al-Nusra Front and ISIS (ibid.). ISIS became a major threat to Turkey after the start of Syrian Civil War; Turkey experienced 86 terrorist attacks between 2013 and 2018, killing hundreds of people (START, 2020; ibid: 6). Analysts and commentators have



explained the high number of attacks by ISIS in Turkey as related to: Turkey's open border policy to Syrians that has facilitated the infiltration of fighters posing as civilians; Turkey's involvement by siding with the opposition groups in Syria and foreseeing a future for Syria without al-Assad; and coalition with the Western front fighting against ISIS led by the US (ibid., Okyay, 2017: 242-244; Arango and Schmitt, 2015; McCaul, 2014; Uslu, 2016; Sarfati, 2019: 2-3).

It is important to recognise, however, that Turkey's open border policy has indirect as well as direct impacts, since it has deepened ethnic, political, and sectarian cleavages in areas in which the Syrians have been settled by the administrative bodies. On 11 May 2013, two vehicles loaded with explosive materials exploded in a border district of Turkey named Reyhanlı. This generated a sectarian debate between the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP – Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) and dissident groups including the main opposition party, Republican People's Party (RPP – Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) and the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party (PDP – Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi) now called the People's Democratic Party (PDP – Halkların Demokratik Partisi) (Okyay, 2017: 842). While RPP accused the JDP of supporting Sunni jihadists against Alevi populations, the JDP accused the RPP of using terrorist attacks to promote its own political agenda by neglecting national security (ibid.). In fact, Erdogan, then prime minister, emphasised the Sunni identity of the victims of the attack (ibid.), which, within the polarised atmosphere of Turkey, is a way of implicating the Alawite Assad regime. Such implications inevitably deepen the polarised societal cleavages between social strata represented by ruling and opposition parties, and thus escalating the tension between the groups.

The porous borders and open border policy, moreover, have allowed ISIS terrorists to infiltrate Turkey for recruitment, organisation and to perpetrate terrorist acts (ibid: 843). One such act was the Suruç massacre of 20 July 2015. To show solidarity and support for the people of Kobane – a Kurdish town close to Turkish border in Syria occupied by ISIS - leftist groups and parties organised a campaign for humanitarian supplies, toys and books. When the local administration of Suruç banned the passage of the group to Kobane, around 300 people gathered at the central forum of Suruç to hear a public declaration by the group. An ISIS suicide bomber, who had infiltrated the group, detonated his bomb, resulting in the deaths of 34 activists. The terrorist was linked to an ISIS cell in Adiyaman (Acarer, 2017: 57). From the perspective of cumulative extremism, we might anticipate such an attack to be met with retaliation from the groups and communities who were its victims. However, the reaction of the leftist groups to the Suruç massacre came in the form of peaceful protests and memorial marches on every anniversary of the attack (T24 Independent Newspaper, 2015). Therefore, in this case, cumulative extremism in the form of the escalation of tension and aggression between opposing camps (Eatwell, 2006: 205) did not materialise.

Terrorist acts of extremist groups like ISIS always carry the potential for encouraging sympathisers to be recruited for the so-called global causes of the Islamic State. In particular, pro-Islamist individuals with Salafi orientation may become receptive to extremist messages that demonise any faith outside of their understanding of Islam. These 'outsider' groups include secularists, non-Muslims, Shiites, Alevis and Alawites. For this reason, concerns of the Alevi population of Turkey about the influx of Syrian opposition fighters and ISIS terrorists with Salafi or Sunni origin and their antagonism towards religious minorities, seem to have reasonable grounds. Sectarian cleavages and the concerns of Alevi population - who make up of 15-20 per cent of the population - have roots in the traumatic past of Alevis marked by massacres. In 1937-1938 during a Turkification campaign, tens of thousands of Alevi people were killed in the Dersim region of Turkey. On 19 December 1978, mass attacks by right wing Sunni groups in Maraş on Alevi people, their homes and businesses cost hundreds of lives, and on the 2 July 1993, 35 intellectuals and musicians, mostly Alevis, were killed in Sivas by local radical Islamist groups. The Alevi population of Turkey today remains largely distrustful of the current pro-Islamist government and its policies, including its policy in relation to Syria. (Crisis Group, 2016: 16). Given their history of oppression, moreover, the settlement of Syrians in close proximity to Alevi neighbourhoods and villages, understandably, was perceived by the Alevi population as the continuation of Sunnification and assimilationist policies towards them by the state. For instance, in

March 2016, the construction of a container city for 27,000 Syrians in a rural region inhabited by 6,000-7,000 Alevi people created uproar among the Alevi community leading to riots in April in the region, spreading to Alevi communities all over the country (ibid: 17; Bulut, 2016). The sensitivities of the Alevi villagers about the refugee camp is voiced by the head of one of the villages:

They made expeditions to 16 different regions and decided this region was the most suitable for camp. Why the region with predominantly Alevi population out of 16 other regions? We are not against refugees. But most of them held Alevis responsible for the Syrian Civil War. Sectarian conflicts may occur. What if people with ISIS or al-Nusra affiliation move into the camps? Then we won't have any security or dignity. There are six thousand people here, if a camp with twenty-seven thousand inhabitants is established, we will feel like we are in a camp. We won't have any security if ISIS members settle (Emen, 2016).

Actually, the selection of such container cities also has symbolic connotations for cities including Sivas and Maraş where massacres happened. In fact, the representatives of the Alevi community strongly emphasise that 'we are not against the war-torn persecuted refugees, but the choice of place is wrong' (ibid.). Syrian spill-over effects in terms of sectarian cleavages took on a new dimension with refugee resettlement to Alevi villages; the absence of transparency over refugee settlement creates grounds for speculation (International Crisis Group, 2016: 18).

The city of Hatay, with a multi-ethnic and multi-religious population and sharing border with Syria, provides another example of how the Syrian Civil War has deepened sectarian cleavages in Turkey leading to the escalation of radicalisation. Hatay's proximity to the Syrian conflict zone makes it as a logistical base for Syrian opposition fighters mostly with Sunni and/or jihadist affiliations. The presence of such armed fighters in the streets of Hatay and their everyday encounters as well as confrontations with the Alevi population have exacerbated communal tensions (Crisis Group, 2013: 20). For instance, during an interview conducted in 2013 by Crisis Group researchers with a Hatay Deputy, Refik Çirkin, it was noted that:

In Yayladağ, people from al-Qaida are walking in the streets. Having people who are fighting against an Alawite regime, with lots of [Arab Alevis] in the province, made people unhappy ... very frightened. The Alevis think that when the Syrian war is finished [these al-Qaida affiliates] will turn their guns on them. Sometimes impressions can outweigh fact (International Crisis Group, 2013: 20).

Another interview conducted by Crisis Group researchers with a president of a civil society organisation HEDAV in Hatay reveals the dimensions of sectarian tension between the newcomer Syrian fighter/civilians and local Alevi population:

I have been threatened [by Syrian opposition people], they say, we'll punish you, after we've finished with Syria, you'll be looking for a place to hide .... People say, 'I'll take that [Alevi] building, that restaurant' .... We are worried that one or two provocative attacks will cause a civil war (Crisis Group, 2013: 21)

Such narratives demonstrate that the Syrian civil war not only generated a wave of movement from Syria into Turkey but brought with it social conflict. The presence of Syrians, with their affiliation to conservative Sunni Islam, and the emphasis of the pro-Islamist ruling party in Turkey on religious solidarity between locals and Syrians escalated the tension between the opposing groups represented by different political actors such as the ruling JDP and main dissent groups of RPP and PDP in Turkey. In addition to the deepening political cleavages and polarisation within society, the infiltration of radical Islamist terrorists with Syrians and the killing of hundreds of civilians in violent attacks brought further division. On the one hand, the groups represented by the dissident political actors blamed government for its liberal open border policy facilitating the infiltration of radical

Islamist terrorists. On the other hand, these attacks served as a recruitment campaign appealing to the sympathisers and supporters of such groups within Turkey. As can be seen, the Syrian civil war exacerbated pre-existing political cleavages in Turkey. At the same time, the presence of Syrian Sunni opposition fighters and members of radical Islamist groups, who perceive all faiths and life-styles other than theirs as infidel and to be destroyed, has generated serious concern, especially among religious minority groups in Turkey, towards Syrians. These concerns feed the traumas of Alevi groups in Turkey who have a long history of persecution and oppression. In turn, this has revitalised sectarian divisions not among local Sunnis and Alevis but newly arriving Sunni Syrians who are settled in close proximity with local Alevis.

#### 4.2 Evaluation of the Turkish Community's Perceptions of Syrians from the Perspective of Cumulative Extremism

The sudden influx of population as a result of the Syrian civil war brought an additional burden to Turkey, already struggling with economic stagnation, unemployment, poverty, and inadequate public services. The introduction of a highly vulnerable foreign population into this already difficult situation has had three main repercussions. Firstly, the incoming groups have become scapegoats for existing institutional dysfunctions, as narrated in political speeches of extreme right-wing nationalist parties. Secondly, as a result of the blame attributed to the Syrian community for the social and economic problems they face, local populations have expressed attitudes towards Syrians that have shown extremist tendencies, including discriminatory xenophobic speeches and violent encounters. Thirdly, due to the negativity attached to the Syrian population, the term 'Syrian' has gained a pejorative meaning and become regarded as an expression of insult.

To gain a better understanding of the scapegoating of, and negativity towards, Syrians, the institutional framework and nature of their status in Turkey requires elaboration. The initial official discourse on Syrians focused on the temporary nature of their stay. This emphasis on temporariness, and vagueness of the definition of rights of the Syrians, paved the way for speculation and unfounded claims such as that Syrians were being given priority in health care or unconditional material benefits. In legal institutional terms, in fact Turkey has been a party to the United Nations' Refugee Convention since 1951 but, employing geographical limitation sanction, does not provide refugee status to individuals coming outside of Europe. Thus, individuals coming from countries outside Europe are not accorded refugee status but rather with temporary status as conditional refugees until they are accepted by Third Countries. Individuals fleeing persecution and life-threatening circumstances spend their waiting period in Turkey with conditional refugee status until they are resettled in a permanent settlement in third countries by the UNHCR. The case of Syrians, however, is also different from the individual UNHCR applicants. In response to the immediate needs of individuals fleeing war in massive groups, Turkey introduced a new process to its migration legislation, namely temporary protection. The status of temporary protection is based on the decision of the Head of the Republic and is applied only to Syrians (it does not apply, for example, to Palestinian or Iraqi refugees living in Syria).

The 'temporariness' of the status of Syrians is also reinforced by the representation of Syrians as 'guests' in the mainstream media and wider hegemonic discourse, which has created a perception that newly arrived Syrian populations should stay in Turkey for a limited amount of time and be largely invisible. Such expectations, created through various means of media and public speeches of politicians, have led local Turkish communities to become alarmed by any slight instance that is outside of their expectations of 'subservient', 'non-demanding', and 'guest' Syrians. Such expectations are coupled with suspicion and concerns over security towards the newcomers due to open border policies and increasing competition especially among low-income groups over public services. In other words, with the unprecedented influx of Syrians and social as well as economic problems, new issues arise about 'exclusionist and xenophobic attitudes' towards the newcomers (Saraçoğlu and Belanger, 2019: 364). For instance, an interview conducted by BBC Turkey reporter in

Fatih/Istanbul, captured the following opinions among small businesses owners who find themselves in competition with Syrian businesses:

Because they (Syrians) are refugees they take advantage of our country. We cannot take such advantage from our own country.

They have priority in hospitals. Wherever you go they have priority. It is as if they are citizens.

They don't conform to our norms and traditions. They are laid-back people. As if they live in Hawaii, we live elsewhere. I'm 32 years old, I haven't lived such comfortable life in this country, that's all I say. (Girit, 2019)<sup>10</sup>

The following headline (see Plate 1), taken from the mainstream tabloid newspaper *Sözcü*, highlights how Syrian students are supposedly advantaged by saying that: 'Reaction to the 1,200 Turkish Lira scholarship for Syrian Students: Nowhere else in the world attaches more value to foreigners than its own people' (Sözcü, 2016).



**Plate 1: 'Reaction to the 1,200 Turkish Lira scholarship for Syrian Students'**

From such discourses, we can see how the dichotomies of 'citizens' vs. 'guests', 'rights-resources' vs. 'usurpers-resources' frame the perceptions of locals to Syrians. These discourses reflect what Eatwell (2006: 209) refers to as the 'communal morality' aspect of cumulative extremism whereby 'extremists do not perceive themselves as such (*some form of pathology*) but as moral agents.' This notion helps illuminate how local populations frame themselves as rightful moral agents – deserving of state services – and where those services are insufficient, they blame not the system but the immediate close 'other' who should be silent and be non-demanding.

This sentiment is captured also in an interview conducted by International Crisis Group (2018: 13) with a local in Ankara:

It is as if all these distributors of aid and the state only realised that this neighbourhood had a poverty problem after the Syrians settled here. Suddenly they opened shiny offices and started distributing aid. As if before Syrians came, our neighbourhood was a bed of roses. Nobody ever cared about us as we struggled for years to sustain ourselves. After the Syrians arrived, suddenly everyone came here to help them.

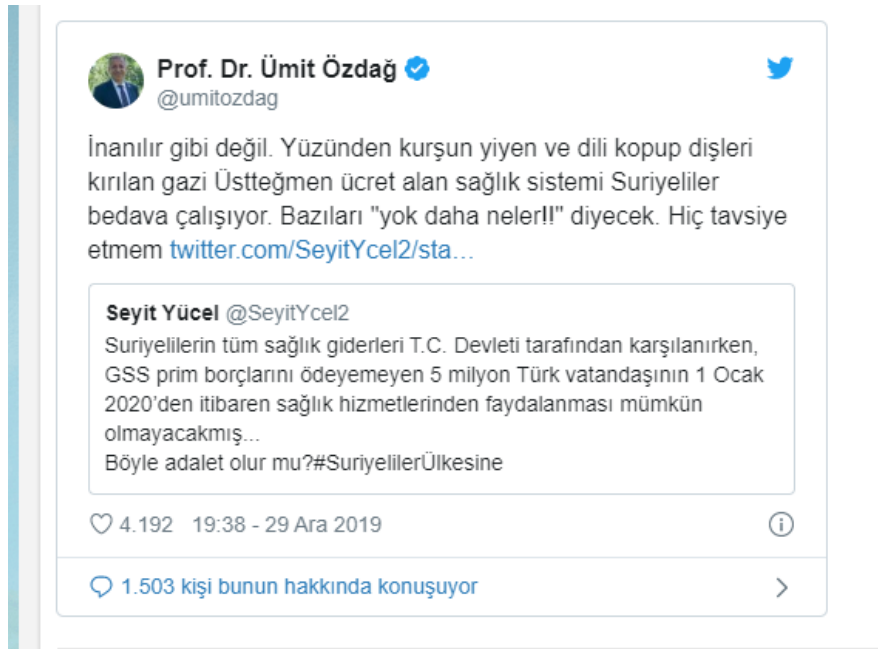
Discussing the British case, Eatwell (ibid.) argues that right-wing nationalist groups see 'welfare in terms of rights based on past contributions and sufferings of previous generations', while the supporters of right-wing parties, also, 'the perception of free riding is very strong'. Examples from the election campaigns of such parties include statements such as, 'We stood up to Hitler during the Blitz. Our generation of East Londoners deserve better than being left to die on trolleys in hospital

<sup>10</sup> 'Mülteci oldukları için ülkemizden bizden daha iyi faydalanıyorlar. Biz o kadar faydalanamıyoruz onlar kadar', Translated by the authors.



corridors' (ibid.). A similar tone exists in the statements of Vice Chairperson of RPP in Turkey: 'While Turkish soldiers fall martyr in Syria, a Syrian young man at the age of military service can stroll around with Turkish girls.'(Sözcü, 2017). Instead of questioning the insufficient healthcare system or the existence of war to begin with, based on patriotic sentiments, the general tendency becomes to blame another vulnerable group for one's own misfortunes.

The dismay that Syrians do not conform to their 'guest' status also voiced by extreme right and nationalist party MPs. For instance, Ümit Özdağ from Good Party (GP-iyi Parti) in a tweet (see Plate 2) complained to his approximately one million followers, 'Unbelievable. Health Care System demands payment from a veteran who took a bullet to his face, lost his tongue and teeth but for Syrians it is free' (Yeniçağ, 2019).



**Plate 2: Tweet from MP Ümit Özdağ expressing grievance about 'free' health care for Syrians  
Source: Yeniçağ, 2019)**

Such a vivid depiction of this antagonism between 'a patriotic citizen who did not hesitate to fight and take a bullet for his beloved country' and those 'coward' Syrians who 'hesitate to fight for their own freedom and enjoy unlimited rights' stimulates the emergence of a social atmosphere in which widespread and prevalent anti-Syrian sentiments can flourish. Statements likewise trigger and stimulate the tension by increasing the grievance especially among low-income groups and the nationalist right-wing party supporters.

As an example, for how nationalist right-wing parties approach the Syrian issue, we might take the example of a workshop organised by GP on 16 December 2019 (see Plate 3 below). During the workshop, GP outlined its policy approach towards Syrians including the prohibition of citizenship rights and citizenship applications, ending the open border policy and gradually repatriating the Syrians to Turkey.



**Plate 3: Tweet from a famous journalist, Ruşen Çakır, on a workshop organised by GP discussing the repatriation of Syrians**



**Plate 4: MP Ümit Özdağ: 'The Arab Mafia will mean trouble for us'**

In an interview conducted by the Cumhuriyet newspaper with the MP Ümit Özdağ (see Plate 4 above) and published under the headline 'The Arab Mafia will mean trouble for us' is another example of extremist views towards Syrians. In that interview he states that:

400 thousand children who are out of school will join Salafist organisations or the mafia, they can even start a civil war... Nobody has the right to give citizenship rights to millions of Arabs and darken Turkey's future (Özbey, 2019).

This discourse of hate and the criminalisation of war stricken non-schooled children carries the potential to instil in readers a hostile predisposition towards Syrians in general and Syrian children in particular (Taşdemir, Ud and Ekmekçiler, 14-20 December 2019). Another MP from the same nationalist party says that 'by 2040, 10 per cent of the Turkish population will be Syrians.' He goes on to assert that 'by 2040, Şanlıurfa, Gaziantep, Hatay will be no longer cities of Turks; half of the Adana and Mersin population will lose their Turkish identity' (Yeniçağ, 2019). By triggering nationalist sentiments that 'the future of the nation is at stake' and presenting Syrians as threats to national identity fuels extreme hostility towards Syrian populations. The same party also organised a workshop on 'The Repatriation of Syrian Asylum Seekers' in December 2019, where its chairperson declared that when they come to power, they will repatriate all Syrians (Çakır and Bozkurt, 2019).

Such antagonistic and unwarranted statements from extreme nationalist parties also serve to mobilise its supporters. However, their impact depends upon the degree of coincidence between extremist narratives and popular perceptions. As Busher and Macklin (2015: 895) note, "where their competing narratives ... have greater cultural resonance, it is more likely that the groups will attract attention and generate active and/or latent support (...)".

In order to assess how far such extremist views correspond with popular attitudes, it is essential to consider empirical evidence on Turkish perceptions of Syrians. According to various public opinion surveys and field research, negative perceptions about Syrians are on the rise. For example, comparing the results of EUROSTAT Perception Surveys conducted in 2006 and 2015 in Istanbul and Ankara, anti-foreigner attitudes appear to be on the rise. In Istanbul, 15 per cent of those surveyed in 2006 responded ‘strongly disagree’ to the question ‘Do you think foreigners are good for your city?’. By 2015, the proportion had risen to 34 per cent. The findings in Ankara were similar: 19.7 per cent in 2006, rising to 35.0 per cent in 2015 (Düşündere and Çilingir, 2017: 4). To the question ‘Do you think foreigners living in your city are well integrated’ in Istanbul, only 9.3 per cent expressed strong disagreement in 2006; but in 2015, 40 per cent of the city population strongly disagrees with that statement and 24 per cent partially disagrees (ibid.: 3).

Another survey conducted by the *Economist Platform* based on a sample of 1,500 people in 12 major cities in Turkey revealed:

- Almost 70 per cent of the participants regard Syrians joining the labour market as negative or very negative.
- 70 per cent of the participants think that Syrians are the reason for the unemployment of Turkish people.
- 78 per cent of participants think that Syrians create a security problem and cause public disorder (Ekonomistler Platformu, 2017).

Another study conducted by a research team from the Political and Social Research Institute of Europe in 2017 provides qualitative data on the nature of this negativity (Eşigül et al, 2017: 8). In the report it was noted that few of the participants present discourses of marginalisation and humiliation:

They lower the quality of our country. On my way to the bridge (across the Bosphorus) I can come across Syrian beggars, Syrian street vendors in at least in five or six different places... They get financial help that we don’t have... Almost 1500-1600 TL money they get per person. Despite this they go out on the streets (to beg) (Woman, 49).

Our country is already in a difficult situation; the uneducated scumbags should go. If there are doctors, professors, businessmen with lots of money they can stay. (man, 33) (Eşigül, et. al., 2017: 22)

Syrian Barometer, the research for which is conducted by Konda Research Agency, provides insightful data about how Turkish people perceive Syrians (Konda, 2016: 13) in relation to economic and security issues.

**Table 2: Popular perceptions of the influence of asylum seekers on the economy and security**

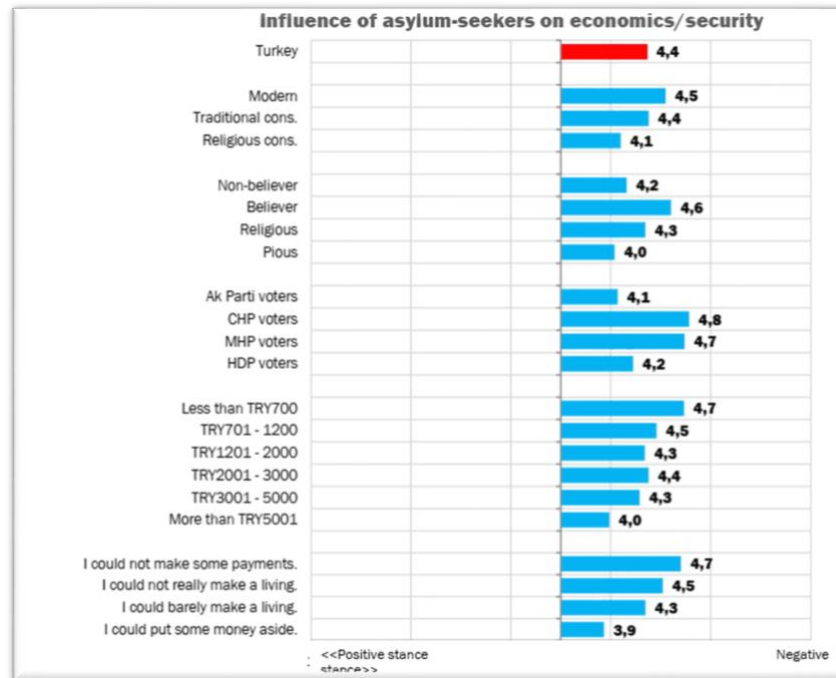
Statement	Somewhat agree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly Agree (%)
‘Cities are less secure with Syrian asylum-seekers’	14	23	37
‘Asylum-seekers are a threat to the economy in Turkey’	14	21	37

'No more asylum-seekers should be allowed into Turkey from now on.'	14	15	34
'Employment opportunities have decreased because of the Syrian asylum-seekers.'	10	21	40
Statement	Somewhat disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
'I think we have a similar culture to Syrians.'	14	18	37

Source: (Konda Syrian Barometer February 2016: 34)

KONDA's research clearly indicates a prevalent societal concern about the security and economic impact of Syrian asylum-seekers. The research correlated levels of hostility with a number of variables relating to life-style, religiosity, political views and socio-economic status. The level of hostility was scored on a positive to negative scale from 1 (most positive) to 6 (most negative). Figure 2 shows attitudes are generally negative towards the impact of Syrian refugees on Turkish society; across all four variables, the average rating falls within the 'negative' part of the scale (ranging from 3.9 to 4.8).

The level of hostility varies according to political position based on voting preferences, religiosity, life-style and economic well-being. Religious conservatives, pious individuals, JDP voters and economically better-off people hold less negative attitudes towards Syrians (see Figure 2). The level of tension in society over the Syrian issue is evident in these data, which also confirm the suggestion above concerning the coincidence of extreme nationalist expressions and popular negativity towards Syrians. Another significant fact in the data is how the negativity towards Syrians changes according to economic status. Those groups that indicate they struggle to manage financially on their current income have a high negative stance. This seems to support evidence above on the emergence of violent confrontations between the two communities especially in low income neighbourhoods where public services are insufficient.



**Figure 2: Positive and negative attitudes towards the impact of Syrian refugees (source: Syrian Barometer February 2016: 35)**

According to an interview conducted by the International Crisis Group (2018: 3) with an anonymous international organisation ‘that tracks refugee related social tension and criminal incidents’, there were 181 such incidents in 2017 resulting in 35 deaths (24 of them Syrian). The formation of ghetto-like low-income neighbourhoods in which Syrians and locals live in close proximity have the potential to intensify hostility (ibid.:4). For instance, in Istanbul on 28<sup>th</sup> June, 2019, a social media group named İkitelli Youth Group started a provocative twitter hashtag of ‘#Ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorom’ (‘I Don’t Want Syrians in My Country’) based on an unfounded rumour that a child had been molested by a Syrian youth in İkitelli, a poor working-class district of Istanbul. The rumour spread across the whole district and crowds poured onto the streets storming Syrian businesses and houses. Police used force to disperse the crowd with tear gas and water cannon. Subsequently, 16 people were arrested for spreading provocative messages which triggered the attacks against Syrians (Sözcü, 2019; Hürriyet, 2019). While most of the unrest and violence start with rumours about alleged or actual assaults, the violent action is directed towards not only the person who allegedly committed the assault but to the whole community and businesses. This suggests that rumours of sexual assault to women and children play a role in justifying the aggression.

The violent confrontation in the village of İzmir shows how economic constraint and competition over limited job opportunities in agriculture work to inflame tensions. In a poor neighbourhood at the periphery of İzmir’s Torbalı town, the main economic activity is agricultural labour. After the settlement of Syrians, most local agricultural workers lost their jobs since the employers prefer cheaper and non-demanding Syrian labour over locals (International Crisis Group, 2018: 5-6; Ulu, 2017). In April 2017, simmering tensions between the Syrian and local population reached a peak after a rumour spread through the neighbourhood that a 12-year-old Turkish boy and his family had been beaten to death by a group of Syrians. The Chief of the Neighbourhood told a newspaper reporter that:

They first took our jobs. Then they stole our valuables. They engaged in sexual intercourse in the cemeteries. And finally, they tried to take our lives. (Ulu, 2017)

The aggravating tension among the poor populations of locals and Syrians in Torbalı town of Izmir over the scarce financial resources turned into a violent conflict resulting in the 500 Syrians leaving their tents and neighbourhood. Another violent encounter took place in the Camdibi neighbourhood of Izmir in late June 2018, when Syrian houses and businesses were stormed in violence lasting over three days. This violence spread from a dispute about noise in the neighbourhood park followed by some provocative messages on social media suggesting that Syrians had shot at, and stoned, houses. In another example, a widely followed account on Facebook circulated an unfounded message on 28 June 2018 claiming that 200-300 Syrians attacked apartments and set households on fire. The message, which used extreme wording, also blamed the government for allowing such attacks by Syrians and called on the people of Camdibi to save their neighbourhood. The message gained immediate response from the followers of the account who mostly responded using similarly extremist expressions. These included threats that, if the locals were to respond to Syrians in similar fashion then there would be bloodshed or, if we do not suppress them now, then they will become uncontrollable in near future. Besides these provocative responses, there were also some rational replies questioning the credibility of the original message. Following such messages, groups of men stormed the streets, trying to evict Syrians from their houses and stoning their businesses. This outbreak lasted for three days and according to the news report how many people were injured or left their houses is unknown (Ud, 2018). This incident suggests that the local population was open to extremist/radicalising messages meaning they were primed and quick to respond with violence at the slightest provocation. The numerous cases of such violent encounters indicates that both the hosting and hosted groups are vulnerable to the extreme and radical messages which play on deeply rooted socio-economic dynamics. Disadvantaged groups living in deprived neighbourhoods have close encounters with the Syrians with whom they share similar economic deprivation. Such economic constraints are also a means for claims making for populist nationalist political actors to mobilise their potential supporters.

There is also evidence that, as a result of increasingly negative attitudes towards the Syrian population, the word 'Syrian' itself started to gain negative and pejorative connotations in everyday use. A very dramatic instance of the pejorative use of the word 'Syrian' happened after a high-profile football match between two popular teams in Istanbul. Observing the fans who had turned out to wave off the team bus, one of the players commented, 'Cross my heart - they are all Syrians' in a belittling manner (see Plate 5 below). After the video recording of him making this comment was shared widely on social media groups of the team, fans reacted by saying they felt humiliated and insulted by being referred to as 'Syrians'. Among dozens of reactions, only a few people responded that 'we should question why you take someone calling you 'Syrians' as an insult'. Overwhelmed by the reactions, the footballer had to publish a message of apology to the fans in order to preserve and re-instate his reputation (Sputnik Türkiye, 2019).



**Plate 5 Tweet from an account of football club fans quoting the comment of their team’s player: ‘Cross my heart - they are all Syrians’**

In this section, the repercussions of the movement of Syrians to Turkey in terms of social conflict and tensions have been demonstrated in relation to increasing negative perceptions of Syrians in Turkish society. Such perceptions were found to coalesce around three main narratives. The first is the discourse of the ungrateful ‘guest’ exploited especially by extreme nationalist parties whose statements provoke tension through mostly unwarranted claims. Secondly, xenophobic statements by politicians aimed at mobilising their voters resonate among a broader public as seen on several social media platforms. Finally, this negative sentiment has resulted in the term ‘Syrian’, which once carried a neutral if not sympathetic meaning, is now starting to become a pejorative word. Saraçoğlu and Belanger (2019: 364-365) argue that negativity towards Syrians is based on the ‘perception of losses: loss of economic gain, loss of urban space and loss of national-social cohesion’. The perception of loss is also prevalent in the findings of this study. Three main losses emerge from the data gathered for this study with regard to the perception of, and attitudes towards, Syrians. These might be summarised as: economic loss – expressed in sentiments that Syrians are taking jobs, causing unemployment and becoming an economic burden; loss of urban space – expressed through violent confrontations and aggression towards Syrians start with small disputes on the parks and streets; and the loss of national social cohesion – expressed in the discourses of politicians emphasising the Syrian threat to national identity and cohesion resonate with the public.

### 4.3 The Impact of the Movement of Syrians on Polarisation in Turkish Politics

This section examines how xenophobic and exclusionist political discourses are reflected in the attitudes of competing political party supporters. In this analysis, two main findings are discussed in relation to radicalisation and polarisation. The first is that the data collected by a range of different research organisations, academic institutions and political parties all suggest that the deep polarisation between supporters of opposing political parties on key social and political issues appears to be suspended when it comes to the issue of Syrians. On this issue, the evidence is that, regardless of political stance, a consensus prevails in Turkish society against the permanent stay of Syrians. The second finding of interest is that, notwithstanding this overall consensus, pro-government and opposition groups at the extreme ends of the spectrum attack each other over the Syrian issue. Extreme statements can be found on social media platforms especially on Twitter and reflect the hostility between the opposition and pro-government when it comes to Syrian policy and the presence of the Syrian population in Turkey.

The open border policy to Syrians generated an opposition which led to latent or open hostility towards Syrians (Tuncel and Ekici, 2019: 57-58). The negative perceptions in the local communities based on the dependency and cultural incompatibility of Syrians channel individuals to political parties which adopt an exclusionist anti-Syrian discourse (ibid.). The results of the latest local elections (especially in metropolitan areas that accommodate large numbers of Syrians) – in which opposition parties, namely RPP and GP, enjoyed increased support among the electorate - should be read in this context (ibid.; Buluz, 2015). The increasing visibility of Syrians in shared public spaces, and their transition from temporary guest status to permanent communities, became one of the main factors shaping the political atmosphere (Buluz, 2015; Alğan, 2019; Erdogan, 2018 cited in Tuncel and Ekici, 2019: 61). So it is fair to say that the parties that situate themselves in opposition to the ruling party also mobilise their campaign over the Syrians and the government policies towards Syrians. As Syrians become a subject for political claims, especially at times of electoral campaigns, the aggression and hostility towards them also intensifies, as discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, opposing political camps and their supporters also blame and attack each other over the Syrian issue.

The Syrian Barometer presents insightful data on how Syrians are perceived within the prism of current party politics (Konda, 2016: 39). It shows that while opposition to the integration of Syrians is found across the population, the level of opposition varies with political affiliation. Respondents supporting the ruling party of JDP and the pro-Kurdish party of PDP for instance show lower levels of disagreement with the integration of Syrians into Turkish society, whereas supporters of the main opposition party of RPP and nationalist party of NMP (Nationalist Movement Party) have a higher tendency to disagree with such integration (ibid).

Research conducted by Doğan (2017: 2) for the KONDA research agency analyses the expectations, hopes and general concerns of the electorate. According to the research report, the supporters of JDP relate all the structural problems of Turkey (e.g. the increasing cost of living, unemployment, the decreasing wages and purchasing power the weakening of state economy) to Syrians (ibid.: 23). Pro-government groups labelled Syrians as the responsible for all the ills in society. According to Doğan (ibid.), those groups who refrain from criticising the government’s socio-economic policies turn their attention to Syrians and point to them as the actor responsible for all the structural problems. The following interview conducted with a JDP supporter also points to this analysis:

(...) they really have privileges, even though there are so many hospitals people complain about it. They say ‘they have priority over us’ Do they? Really, they have, I cannot say anything against that. My cousin has a wholesale shop, there was an empty shop 4 storey and with 10 thousand rent. No one was renting there for two years. Syrians rented the shop. Of course, they can, they don’t pay tax, sell the same items. (ibid.)

Another series of research reports published by KONDA entitled ‘Seçmen Kümeleri: CHP Seçmenleri’ (Electorate Clusters: RPP Electorates) gives space to how RPP as well as JDP electorates perceive Syrians. According to the data, 47 per cent of JDP supporters think that accepting Syrians is the country’s responsibility arising from its history and geographical location. Among RPP supporters 28 per cent agree with this view (Doğan, 2018: 39). However, supporters of both parties - 58 and 53 per cent respectively - regard Syrians as people escaping from persecution. However, in the same data it is also evident that RPP supporters have slightly more negativity towards Syrians than JDP supporters since 30 per cent of RPP participants believe that Syrians are ‘usurpers who use war for their economic interests’ and ‘people who are a burden on us’ whereas only 9 per cent of JDP supporters agree with those statements.

A more recent study of polarisation in Turkey finds that Turkish society is polarised and divided on almost every political subject; the rare exceptions concern views on Turkey’s EU relations and perceptions of Syrians (Erdoğan and Semerci, 2018: 134). On the question of Syrian repatriation after



the war ends, 86 per cent of those surveyed were in favour of repatriation (ibid.: 138). When these results are correlated with political party support, the figures appear to differ but not substantially: 76 per cent of pro-Kurdish PDP supporters agree with repatriation, 83 per cent of JDP supporters, 89 per cent of NMP supporters, 93 per cent of RPP supporters and 95 per cent of GP supporters (ibid.: 138-139). This would suggest that, as noted above, the deep polarisation between opposition and pro-government groups does not hold when it comes to the issue of repatriation of Syrians from Turkey.

More detailed analysis of responses to a series of questions about entitlements - such as access to free health care and education, citizenship, employment and business ownership - that should be accorded to the Syrian population in Turkey, however, revealed greater variation according to political stance. Thus, the provision of access to free health care is supported by 60 per cent by PDP supporters, 50 per cent of the JDP supporters, 42 per cent of NMP supporters, 39 per cent of GP supporters and 38 per cent of RPP supporters (ibid.: 140). When it comes to free access to the labour market and freedom to open businesses, there is also a considerable difference between PDP, JDP and NMP supporters –whose supporters agree with this by 32, 30 and 23 per cent respectively– and RPP and GP voters, whose supporters favour free access to the labour market only by 13 and 12 per cent, respectively. When it comes to the right to citizenship, there is a low level of support across all respondents, regardless of political affiliation. PDP supporters express the most support for the right to citizenship –26 per cent– while the lowest level is found among GP supporters –at just 6 per cent. The levels of support for the right to citizenship of Syrians among the supporters of JDP, NMP and RPP are 22, 16 and 12 per cent respectively (ibid.: 139-140).

Focus group interviews conducted as part of the same research also point to the narrowing gap between the different parties:

(...) For instance, my relatives have their shops and flats. They pay tax for these [for owning business shops and flats]. Syrians open up a business, but they don't pay tax [on it]. They [Syrians] live in rented flats. They are paid [by the government]. They are paid, they have more rights than we have. I see Syrians as a huge problem. (RPP Focus Group, ibid, pp: 140-142).

My personal view, I don't want them. (...) Unemployment increased because of them. They are paid a monthly salary by taking from us. (...) Now they [Syrians] are paid [by the government] 800 million [equivalent of 800 Turkish Lira today] or something. I shouldn't be paying them 800 million [through taxes]. This all comes out of our bills, food and livelihood. I'm very concerned about this I definitely don't want them. (JDP Focus Group, ibid.).

Turkish people when they want to buy an item, they question for hours shall I buy this, can I find a cheaper item. But they [Syrians] can purchase 5-6 items at once without thinking. I cannot stand their shopping. When I hardly buy one present for my kid, they fill their bags so easily (...) (NMP Focus Group, (ibid.).

(...) Ok we worry about them, especially children. But while our citizens are unemployed, they are presented with opportunities like in education, materially, they are given privileges... And it's hard to know if their numbers will grow substantially in the future.' (PDP Focus Group, ibid.).

These quotations capture the general atmosphere of the focus group interviews conducted within the context of the research (ibid.). The shared anti-Syrian sentiments among party supporters are visible in several news reports following the defeat of the JDP in metropolitan cities in local elections. An interview conducted by a BBC Turkey reporter with JDP supporters revealed this convergence. For instance, a retired resident, declaring his support for the JDP, states that:



'I don't want them to become citizens. I vote for JDP, but I don't want them to be citizens.' (Arslan, 2016).

Two other respondents who are close to the ruling party of JDP said:

'It is not right to give such an honourable status of citizenship to a nation who are escaping from war.'

'I'm very much disturbed by them. They fight, they are noisy. Aggressive. They don't know what to wear when they are at the beach. We cannot even go to parks.' (ibid.)

In an interview, Professor of Sociology from Galatasary University, Didem Daniş, refers to the general hatred towards Syrians 'as glue that binds a highly polarised society' (Ergun, 2019). The reason for the increasing xenophobia, according to Daniş, lies in the structural problems and economic crisis and in such cases, people tend to blame the closest 'other' instead of the main structural causes of the crisis (ibid.). Furthermore, especially when talking about the JDP supporters, who cannot direct their disillusionment and criticism directly towards the government and the ruling party, they naturally turn to the closest 'other' namely the 'Syrians'. Daniş also mentions that a sudden influx of a completely different culture speaking a foreign language that makes up of 4.5 per cent of the population is not easy to absorb. Therefore, we should not be quick to label anyone expressing concern or criticism as racist (ibid.).

Despite the data that demonstrates a shared anti-Syrian perspective among some political groups, there are also contrasting attitudes towards Syrians and these are highlighted in the political campaigns of competing parties during elections. The notion of 'communal morality' (Eatwell, 2006) is mobilised in the mutual accusations levelled by opposing groups in Turkey over their Syrian policies, the communal morality aspect of the cumulative extremism can be considered as a relevant conceptual tool. For instance, in his speech in the Great Assembly, the RPP group deputy chairman blamed JDP policies for the 'refugee problem' adding that giving citizenship rights to Syrians with the agenda of gaining additional voters is politically immoral (Şimşek, 2017). Another MP from RPP accused the JDP of putting self-interest ahead of the interests of the nation by claiming that JDP decision makers have a covert political agenda – to give Syrians citizenship status in exchange for their votes in future elections (ibid.). An interview with a representative of Association for Solidarity with Asylum Seekers and Migrants (ASAM) summarises how due to 'the vagueness of their status and lack of permanence' Syrians in Turkey have become a domestic political tool mobilised in 'governing and opposition parties' campaigns while the governing party uses the threat to 'open borders and set all Syrians free to pass into Europe' as a tool in its relations with the EU (Hayatsever, 2018). Hayatsever goes on to set out how being used in this way is humiliating for the Syrian community while narratives concerning Syrians and their rights such as 'they can vote', 'they cannot vote', 'we will send all Syrians back when we come to power' reinforce the status ambiguity as well as stigmatisation that the Syrians already experience (ibid.).

Political polarisation over the issue of Syrians in Turkish politics can be observed in social media accounts, especially in Twitter. In the analysis of such tweets, radical expressions were encountered frequently and such messages were approved and liked by hundreds of other users. For instance, a pro-JDP user, in a post (dated 1 July 2018) proposes that expelling RPP supporters to Syria and letting Syrians stay in Turkey as an excellent idea. Such messages do not seem to be marginal among the extreme JDP supporters as they are liked and applauded by hundreds of other users also. When the responses to this message are analysed, the extremist supporters equate the opposition with terrorists; and use this to justify the proposal to expel them. For instance, a response posted on 2 July 2018 to the aforementioned tweet claims that 'Syrians are loyal and they are crazy about our leader' (Turkish president and the leader of the JDP). Another response claims that the RPP did the real harm to Turkey by letting the 'terrorists' (this refers to the pro-Kurdish opposition party, the PDP) be represented in Parliament. Actually, blaming the opposition for terrorism is a common theme among

the JDP supporters. For instance, a post, dated 11 May, 2019, published by a pro-JDP account, calls on RPP supporters to go to Syria and seek protection from their 'Kurdish terrorist friends'.

On the other hand, under the hashtag of #ülkemdesuriyeliistemiyorum ('I don't want Syrians in my country'), RPP and GP supporters blame the JDP for the 'problems' brought by Syrians. Most of the accounts posted in the hashtag share the view of a post, dated 14 January 2019, which blames the government for filling the country with radical Islamists. The account user bitterly criticises the government's Syrian policy questioning how the government can regard radical Islamists from Idlib, who have decapitated many people there, as friends. Another tweet, using vulgar expressions, posted on 29 October 2019 expresses grievance towards Syrians and the government. The post includes a video of Syrians enjoying their free-time in an indoor swimming pool and claims that while Turkish soldiers are sacrificing themselves for Syrians in Syria, Syrians are enjoying their free-time in swimming pools in Turkey.

Through the analysis of social media posts, this study is able to provide a more nuanced picture of attitudes towards the Syrian population in Turkey. Existing surveys show negative sentiments towards Syrians from across the political spectrum; indeed, while supporters of competing parties are divided on almost every other issue, they are in agreement on the question of Syrians in Turkey. However, by shifting the focus from the general population to those using the anonymity afforded by social media to express more marginal positions, the analysis of social media posts reveals how strong or extreme supporters of the pro-government and opposition parties express their hatred and antagonism towards each other by instrumentalising the Syrian issue. Thus, the apparently positive stance towards Syrians expressed in the social media posts of JDP supporters is actually an expression of hatred towards the opposition groups, namely RPP and PDP. As for the opposition groups, extreme anti-Syrian xenophobic discourses target the ruling party and its supporters. These groups blame JDP and its supporters for opening the borders and allowing the infiltration of Syrians at the cost of social cohesion and welfare. From these analyses, it becomes clear that Syrians become the object of extremist confrontation between opposing political groups. This instrumentalisation reinforces the xenophobic tendencies in society in two ways. Firstly, locals blame Syrians for the structural problems they also experience. Secondly, for the host Turkish society Syrians become the 'negative other' who are regarded as incompatible with the local Turkish society and culture.

## 5. Conclusion

This case study has explored the relationship between the Syrian crisis and emerging extremism in Turkey. Specifically, it has considered three key dimensions to this relationship. The first concerns, at the general level, how the Syrian Civil War has impacted Turkey in relation to extremism and radicalisation. The second relates to the specific impact of mass population movement from Syria into Turkey on existing social, cultural and political polarisation and how this has fuelled radicalisation. Finally, it has described how polarisation is discursively produced and reproduced in politics and in the everyday life of the local community.

It has been argued that the Syrian Civil War, resulting in the large population movement from Syria to Turkey and the increase of terrorist attacks in Turkey, has accelerated the rise of extremism in Turkey<sup>11</sup>. This conclusion is drawn based on three main sets of findings relating to: i) the role of the Syrian Civil War in exacerbating Turkish socio-political and sectarian divisions through the influence of radical Islamists; ii) the increasing articulation of narratives of humiliation and grievance directed

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that empirical research on individuals' perceptions of Syrian migration to Turkey before the Syrian Civil War is lacking as there was no regular movement of Syrian people to Turkey prior to the war. Empirical research on migration waves to Turkey before the Syrian Civil War was concerned primarily with the migration of Iranian and African populations. For this reason, it was not possible to compare attitudes of people concerning the flow of Syrian population into Turkey before and after the Syrian Civil War.



at the Syrian population in emergent extremist discourse; iii) the weaponisation of the Syrian issue as an added dimension to the already existing political polarisation in Turkey. The findings in each of these areas are summarised below.

Firstly, terrorist attacks committed by radical Islamist groups in Turkey between 2013 and 2016 have been an important spill-over effect of the Syrian Civil War, triggering extremist tendencies. If we understand extremism as the assertion of power through militancy and violence based on an understanding of society divided between an homogenised 'us' and an ostracised 'them' (Bötticher, 2017: 74), then the mass violence committed by radical Islamist groups between 2013-2016 reflects a pattern of pre-existing extremism in Turkey. Radical Islamists have promoted a Salafist Sharia doctrine, which does not tolerate any life-style or belief other than its own. The infiltration of radical Islamists into the country among the mass population moves of Syrians, their presence in public spaces and their violent attacks, have led to reactions among the secular and Alevi population. However, these reactions have never gone beyond the discursive level or resulted in any physical confrontation or retaliation towards Islamists from the secular, non-Sunni groups. Thus, in this case, while the conditions for cumulative extremism appear to be present, the reactions from the opposition groups suggest such a process has not materialised. However, the escalating Islamic extremism exacerbated existing cleavages between the pro-Islamist ruling party and secular, Alevi and pro-Kurdish opposition. These cleavages between the pro-government and opposition groups, relating to positions on secularism, modernity versus political Islam, ethno-religious minority rights versus a homogenous society based on Turkish nationalism and Sunnification, have been exacerbated by the influx of Syrians. This is primarily due to the focus of opposition discourse on security concerns and demographic changes as a result of predominantly Sunni and radical Islamist Syrian opposition groups coming to Turkey as civilians and fighters. The introduction of one extremist group into society facilitates the emergence of extremist tendencies from opposition groups. The concerns about security, together with suspicion of the newly arrived foreign population turn into a general hostility towards the Syrian population. Such generalised hostility is fuelled, moreover, by deepening structural problems, insufficient public services and diminishing welfare provision experienced by host and incomer populations alike.

Secondly, rising antagonism towards the Syrian population, as they have become de facto and increasingly permanent part of Turkish society, carries the potential for inter-communal tension. This study has demonstrated that political discourses of humiliation and grievance, conveyed especially through social media, fuel such tension and point to the emergence of a new form of extremism directed to the incoming foreign population. The empirical data presented on extremist nationalist expressions emphasising national cohesion, right to citizenship, the inferiority and temporariness of 'guest' Syrians are all proof of this emerging extremism in the Turkish social context. The most tragic outcomes of this extremism take form of violent confrontations in deprived neighbourhoods where Syrian and Turkish communities living in similar conditions of economic deprivation prove vulnerable to radicalising messages and react in extremist ways against the closest 'other'. The data also demonstrate that, extreme nationalist parties stimulate the tension with unwarranted claims. These claims have strong popular resonance and the affirmation of such claims affords extreme nationalist political actors the opportunity to turn these unwarranted claims into political propaganda tools that can be used to politically mobilise recipients towards radical/extremist views. Hostile discourse become so extensive that even the term 'Syrian' has gained a pejorative meaning. The generalised negativity towards Syrians revolves around discourse that purports that: 'Syrians are taking over jobs causing unemployment and usurping our national resources'; 'they are invading our public space, becoming too visible, disturbing our peace and leisure times'; and 'they are threatening our national identity, demographic structure and social cohesion'. Saraçoğlu and Belanger (2019: 364-365) see these negative attitudes as related to a 'perception of losses of economic gain, urban space and national cohesion'.



Thirdly, the Syrian population movement has had an important impact on the process of political polarisation in Turkey. On the one hand, the apparent cross-party consensus on the need to prevent the permanent stay of Syrians appears to transcend established and deep political divides. However, the level of negativity varies according to pro-governmental or oppositionist political positioning. Despite this consensus, the social media posts analysed for this study show how the Syrian issue, nonetheless, becomes a site of dispute between rival political party supporters and is expressed in extremist language. The claims made by the opposition parties - specifically the RPP and GP - serve to open hostility towards Syrians as a way of countering the policies of the ruling JDP. Election campaigns focusing on anti-Syrian sentiments resonated especially among the metropolitan population. Thus, it seems that the increasing visibility of the Syrians and their transition to permanent communities are starting to shape the Turkish political atmosphere too (Buluz, 2015; Alğan, 2019; Erdogan, 2018 quoted in Tuncel and Ekici, 2019: 61). This politicisation has intensified hostility and extremism towards Syrians as well as further polarising Turkish politics. The social media posts illustrate the way in which the Syrian issue is weaponised by political parties. The hate speech and anti-Syrian sentiments expressed in these exchanges reinforce extremist tendencies in contemporary Turkey.

The importance of this case study lies in its consideration of the impact of the Syrian population movement on the rise of extremism in Turkish society and politics. The study establishes that this impact has been to intensify radicalisation and that this process can be, in part, illuminated by the concept of cumulative extremism (Eatwell, 2006). On the one hand, the absence of organised mobilisation of Syrian and Turkish communities in the process as well as the lack of violent, physical retaliation by left-wing and non-Sunni, secular groups to Islamist terrorist attacks, suggest the notion of cumulative extremism has limited relevance to this case. However, at the discursive level, we have been able to identify a process of a deepening polarisation between pro-government and opposition political party supporters and their increasing resort to extreme expressions in their mutual attacks. For instance, as a response to the hashtag “I don’t want Syrians in my country” tweeted predominantly by the opposition groups, pro-government supporters say that instead of fellow Syrian ‘Muslim brothers and sisters’, it should be the opposition groups who leave Turkey for Syria. Another indicator of this intensification of extremism is the rise in narratives of humiliation and grievance among the host society towards Syrians. Expressions of hostility, aggression and xenophobia, moreover, are unlikely to attenuate in the foreseeable future given continuing instability in the region generating new movements to Turkey alongside deteriorating structural problems. These findings thus suggest the existence of the conditions for the escalation of cumulative extremism around this issue. Thus, further research to understand the relationship between the Syrian issue, popular perceptions and the rise of extremism is vital to formulate preventive actions and promote social cohesion between the Syrian and Turkish communities.

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