PARADOXICAL PERCEPTIONS ON SYRIANS' FORCED MIGRATION TO TURKEY: A CASE STUDY OF ISTANBUL *MUHTARS*

SURİYELİLER'İN TÜRKİYE'YE ZORUNLU GÖÇÜNE DAİR PARADOKSAL ALGILAR: İSTANBUL MUHTARLARI ÖRNEĞİ

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ABSTRACT

As one of Syria's neighbors, Turkey has become a refuge for more than 3.5 million forced Syrian migrants. Though many of them are living in Turkey's border cities, in or around the refugee camps, many others have already dispersed to other cities. Among these cities, Istanbul has the largest Syrian community. Drawing on a qualitative field work in Istanbul's neighborhoods, this study explores the Syrian migration to Istanbul and reports the attitudes towards this movement of the local neighborhood and village headmen, known as *muhtars* in the Turkish local administrative system. As the study shows, their attitudes towards forced Syrian migrants are paradoxical, marked both by feelings of disturbance, worry and uneasiness, and at the same time welcome and support. The study concludes by discussing historical and cultural reasons for these paradoxical attitudes by relating them to the understanding of hospitality in Turkish society to show how

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socio-psychological explanations of attitude formation towards Syria's forced migrants seem more appropriate.

Keywords: Syria's Forced Migrants, Istanbul, *Muhtars*, Attitude, Hospitality, Worry.

ÖZ

Suriye'ye komşu ülkelerden biri olan Türkiye, yerinden edilmiş üç buçuk milyonu aşkın Suriyeli'ye sığınak oldu. Sınır kentlerinde bulunan mülteci kamplarında ve bu kampların çevresinde yoğun olarak yaşayan Suriyeliler İstanbul başta olmak üzere ülkenin pek çok büyük kentine de dağılmış haldeler. İstanbul'un mahallelerinde, Türkiye'nin bürokratik örgütlenmesi içinde yerel yönetim sisteminin en alt kademesinde bulunan mahalle yöneticisi muhtarlar nezdinde gerçekleştirilen bir saha çalışmasına dayanan bu makale, İstanbul'daki Suriyeli göçüne yakından bakarken söz konusu yerel yöneticilerin bu göç hareketi karşısındaki tutumlarını incelemektedir. Çalışma, muhtarların Suriyeli göçüne ilişkin tutumlarının çelişkili nitelikte olduğu ve özellikle, endişe, huzursuzluk, misafirperverlik ve destek gibi birbiriyle çelişkili sayılabilecek unsurlar çerçevesinde şekillendiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Söz konusu çelişkili tutumun tarihsel ve kültürel sebeplerini Türkiye toplumunun misafirperverlik anlayışıyla ilişkilendirerek tartışan çalışma, tutum oluşumuna yönelik yazında yer alan sosyo-psikolojik açıklamaların yerinden edilmiş Suriyelilere yönelik tutumları değerlendirmek için daha uygun olduğu sonucuna ulaşmıştır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yerinden Edilmiş Suriyeliler, İstanbul, Muhtar, Tutum, Misafirperverlik, Endişe.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey has followed an open-door policy during the Syrian crisis and ensured *non-refoulement* of Syria's forced migrants. As the crisis in Syria deteriorated in mid-2012, the number of Syrians in Turkey increased.[1] As of

[1] Many Syrians entered Turkey regularly as travelers in the early phases of the crisis before later acquiring residence permits. Many others, on the other hand, entered Turkey irregularly *en masse* as asylum-seekers.

November 2018, more than 3.6 million forced migrants from Syria have been registered in Turkey.[2] As the crisis in Syria rapidly evolved into a protracted civil war, Turkey has had to cope with this record influx of forced migrants. Though most are reported to live in the border cities, where camps have been set up, many have moved to other major cities. Reportedly, in almost all cities, there are tensions between the local inhabitants and the Syrian refugees because of "economic hardships, social problems and changing ethnic and sectarian balances."[3] Fortunately, although these tensions have led to incidents and fights between Syrian refugees and locals in many cities and neighborhoods, none has turned into a larger scale conflict. Among these cities, Istanbul hosts the largest Syrian community.[4] The perceptions and attitudes of Turkey's inhabitants towards Syrians remain unexplored and unanalyzed. This article aims to fill this gap by presenting primary data collected at the local level and evaluating the social response to the massive influx of Syrians into Turkey.

This study shares the findings of field work conducted in Istanbul neighborhoods between October 2014 and August 2015 to report and discuss the attitudes of *muhtars* (neighborhood headmen) towards Syrian refugees in the city. As discussed in the following paragraphs, *muhtars* have been chosen specifically for this study. They hold a distinct position in the Turkish administrative system, their office is the closest administrative unit to the people, including Syrians living in various neighborhoods of Istanbul. In addition, they played an important role in Turkey's migration history, especially by registering and settling Balkan refugees in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century and during the Balkan wars (1912-14). *Muhtars* can play a similar role in the local organization of the current unexpected and exceptional mass migration. They have direct relations with Syrians in their neighborhoods, and play an intermediary role between these displaced people and local inhabitants. Despite their limited administrative authority, they are facing the immediate consequences of the Syrians' arrival in Istanbul as they experience the reactions of neighborhood locals and, in some cases, they act as a bridge between the Syrians and other administrative units in the municipality, as well as between them and NGOs. The study reveals *muhtars*' paradoxical attitudes towards Syria's forced migrants: their feelings are marked by disturbance, worry and uneasiness, but they also welcome and support them. Within a theoretical framework on the perceptions and dynamics of attitude formation towards out-groups, immigrants, foreigners, refugees, and asylum seekers along with a discussion on the concept of hospitality, this study reports the

[2] As of November 2018, 3,603,888 Syrian Arab Republic nationals are under temporary protection in Turkey (Ministry of Interior Affairs, Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM), (27/11/2018, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713_icerik).
[3] See the reports of ORSAM and TESEV, *Effects of the Syrian Refugees on Turkey* (Ankara: ORSAM, 2015).
[4] DGMM reports that as of November 22, 2018, there are 558,805 registered Syrians in Istanbul.

findings of field work and discusses the historical and cultural reasons for these paradoxical attitudes.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK ON ATTITUDE FORMATION

Attitude formation about foreigners, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants is an important area of research in the migration literature. Studies in different parts of the world have not only examined attitudes towards these out-groups but have also tried to understand how in-group members form them, and when and why they change them. There are two main groups of theories on attitude formation towards out-groups: "socio-psychological, affective or ideological explanations" and "rational-based and labor market competition explanations" (Markari and Longhi, 2012: 4).

Socio-psychological explanations focus on groups' needs to mark themselves as different, their interests for social dominance, and their belonging and identity formation or protection processes (Kyrsan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2005). Belonging and identification lead to the formation of stereotypes as identification induces in-group favoritism and a belief in group superiority, resulting in generalizations about negative out-group behaviors or characteristics (Herbst and Glynn 2004). The literature on socio-psychological explanations also mentions "*perceived threat*" that ultimately leads to irrational antipathy based on prejudices (Kyrsan, 2000; Stephan et al., 2005). According to the theory, these feelings lead the in-group to overreact to the perceived negative consequences of immigration (Markari and Longhi, 2012: 6).

Proponents of rational explanations, on the other hand, argue that in-group members develop their opinions about out-group members by calculating the material and non-material costs and benefits for their group. No matter whether their perceptions are realistic, if in-group members believe that the costs of out-group members exceed their benefits for the in-group, they tend to develop negative opinions about them. Rational interest explanations have different ramifications, as seen in realistic conflict, deprivation theory and labor market competition theory, but they all base attitude formation analysis on in-group cost-benefit calculations for the group's interests (Markari and Longhi, 2012: 9).

In line with these two main general theoretical branches, one study categorized the findings of almost 100 studies on immigration attitudes into two main groups: "socio-political studies" and "political economy studies" (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2013). Studies in the first group emphasize "the role of group-related attitudes and symbols", and focus on the concerns of perceived threats to national identity, prejudice and stereotyping. Studies in the second group, on the other hand, mainly deal with the economic impact of immigration on the host society and try to explain attitude formation by examining concerns

about labor market competition and the fiscal burden. The authors argue that there is not only one factor driving attitude formation towards out-group members; rather, "the attitudes are driven by concerns about the nation as a whole, including symbolic or cultural threats as well as perceived economic threats" (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2013: 4).

Similarly, the literature notes that fears and perceptions of threat play important roles in prejudice towards out-groupers, preparing the ground for attitude formation about immigration. Though researchers emphasize the influence of two main domains of threats in this process, emphasizing realistic and symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes are also considered influential determinants of attitude formation regarding out-group members (Stephan et al. 2005, 2). Symbolic threats are explained as "threats to intangible social constructs such as the national economy or national identity" (Hainmueller and Hopkins, 2013: 6). Another study defines realistic threats as threats to the in-group's political and economic power and symbolic threats as those targeting in-group values, beliefs, morals, and attitudes (Stephan et al., 2005: 2). The literature highlights that symbolic or modern racism theories find their roots in those symbolic threats to the in-group. Negative out-group stereotypes may encourage perceptions of threat and/or negative expectations about the behaviors or characteristics of the out-group members.

Another review of dozens of studies on attitudes towards asylum-seekers and refugees finds that prejudice, othering, demographic, economic and geographical factors, and information sources influence people's opinions on immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees (Finney and Peach, 2004). Finally, from their analysis on the determinants of European attitudes towards foreigners, Gang et al. (2002: 17) conclude that, economic strain and the influence of "increased concentration of immigrants in local neighborhoods" are factors. They note that, when combined with economic strain, such a concentration leads to prejudice and makes negative attitudes towards immigrants more likely. Although these negative attitudes cannot be reduced or controlled in many host societies, in several countries, including Turkey, the concept of hospitality appears to complement the analyses on host-foreigner relations.

2. HOSPITALITY: FROM GUESTS TO STRANGERS

Whether by choice or through forced displacement, migrants and asylum seekers arrive as guests in their host countries of residence, placing themselves at the mercy of their host's hospitality (Jeffrey, 2013: 124). Until migration was legally defined under 21st century international law, hospitality remained a central concept for migration. A simplistic approach would show how the status of migrants has developed from natural law to legal positivism; in other words from

hospitality to a restrictive right of immigration defined by international law and nation-states' judicial systems (Cavallar, 2013). However, the right of immigration as well as the rights-centered approach in the international migration remain far from perfect. As an anthropological concept, hospitality has many variants in different societies (including complementarities and contradictions between home and host societies), and remains a central explanatory element in migration studies. Hospitality is a variant of asylum, in that it allows the persecuted, the exiled and the victimised to be welcomed as guests rather than simply as individuals exercising their right to asylum (Worth, 2006: 11).

In this context, the level of acceptance in the host society greatly depends on the hospitality that this society can offer to a displaced person. Hospitality gains greater importance in the case of forced migration as the displaced person becomes a victim in the eyes of the host society's members. Thus, acceptance of migrants in host societies cannot be considered only in terms of the rights of the migrant recognized by the international law and defined by international institutions (from UNWRA to the Council of Europe); rather, it has to be analyzed within the local conditions, traditions and level of social acceptance in the host society. Here, hospitality plays a crucial role by offering an analytical framework. The literature on hospitality, although relatively limited, offers analytical elements to understand the power that the concept of hospitality has in international migration studies. Hospitality has a dual function by helping to determine the status of foreigners and by justifying the practical balance between inclusion and exclusion at the borders. Thus, hospitality appears to be both a historically bound solution to the problem of the legitimation of boundaries and a tool for problematizing relations between local communities and foreigners (Boudou, 2013).

Futhermore, "the City of Refuge", where the foreigner looks for his/her place, ought to extend an unconditional welcome to whoever comes, whether immigrant, deportee, stateless or displaced person (Derrida, 1997). Therefore, the "City of Refuge" becomes a space of contact and meeting between local and foreigners, between the host and the guest. Thus, hospitality can be simply defined from a philosophical perspective as the "capacity to offer tea and talk to the foreigner". This affective relationship can build the confidence needed to reinforce social solidarity and social cohesion (Cornu, 2007). However, if a guest stays for a long time then their permanent situation of being guest may make them "invisible" in the host society so that the guest becomes a stranger and the ties between the host and the guest are broken.

The arrival of Syrians in Turkey, especially in major cities like Istanbul offers a relevant context to reconsider the theoretical literature on attitude formation towards immigrants and the concept of hospitality. However, in order to

understand this specific case and provide a complete analysis of the situation in the field, some historical background on Turkey's migration experience is needed.

3. ANATOLIA: LAND OF MIGRATIONS

Migration has been a recurrent theme in Anatolia, and population movements have been important not only for modern Turkey, but also for the Ottoman Empire. In the Empire, voluntary migrations were restricted, the subjects were moved for reasons of political control or for the implementation of the conquest ideology (Faroqhi, 2014; Erder, 2018). In addition, it occasionally received influxes of refugees (Melton, 2012). In fact, the Empire had a highly institutionalized 'settlement policy' (*İskan Politikası*)[5] to manage all these population movements (Erder, 2018; Barkan, 1952).

In line with its cosmopolitan *millet* system, this settlement policy functioned to mix different ethnic groups or peoples until nationalist ideas eventually led to the establishment of Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro in the Balkan provinces (Erder, 2018). The foundation of these nation-states was accompanied by the eviction of Muslims and Jews (Chatty, 2010). As the empire's territory continued to shrink after successive defeats, Muslims from Caucasus, Crimea, and the Balkans were dispossessed and displaced, seeking refuge in the Empire's Anatolian heartland (McCarthy, 1995; Karpat, 2003; Chatty, 2010). This massive movement included many different Muslim groups, including Circassians, Chechnyan, Tatars, Laz, Acar, and Pomak (Meyer, 2007). In addition, large groups of Russian Jews arrived to the Empire (Chatty 2010). Different academics estimate the volume of these movements at 5,3 - 5,7 million between 1783 and 1914 (Karpat, 2003; Özbay and Yücel, 2001; Erder, 2018). This influx of Muslims from all parts of the Empire prevented a strict application of the Ottoman settlement policy. The rules were bent and Istanbul's neighborhood *muhtars* registered and settled the refugees (Behar, 2003).[6]

The settlement of territorial disputes and the end of the wars did not, however, halt the displacement and dispossession of Muslims in former Ottoman territories. Turkey continued to receive immigrants (Geray, 1962). Only these people, as well as Muslim Turkish speakers and Muslim ethnic groups that were believed to be able to assimilate into the new Turkish identity, were granted the right to immigrate (Çağaptay, 2002; Kirişçi, 2003a: 4). This right and their

[5] *İskan* in Turkish means making someone a countryman or giving someone a country.

[6] As Anatolia started to receive expelled Muslims from former Ottoman territories, the settlement policy and its institutions adapted to these new circumstances. The policy was reformulated to create a home in Anatolia for Ottoman Muslims, the Turks and other Turkish-speaking Muslims. The new policy aimed to sort out the ethnic groups and peoples in Anatolia – the people that would be sorted out were the Anatolia's autochthonous Christians (Erder, 2018).

movement to Turkey were regulated by successive Laws on Settlement.[7] These laws also illustrate how modern Turkey inherited the Ottoman Empire's late settlement policy and its institutions (Erder, 2018). In the period between 1923 and 1997, more than 1,5 million Turkish-speaking Muslims and Muslims from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece, and Chinese Turkestan immigrated to Turkey. Half of them were settled through the settlement policy and its institutions.[8] This policy still applies to the Muslim Turkish speakers and Muslim ethnic groups from former Ottoman territories.[9]

In addition to these movements, Turkey has received waves of migration, mainly from its eastern neighbors. These new movements have been characterized by irregularity and they have comprised asylum-seekers, irregular workers, and transit migrants (İçduygu and Yükseker, 2012). The asylum-seekers have originated mainly from Turkey's politically unstable neighbors, from Iran, Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and most recently from Syria. While the earlier movements involved more than 1,5 million people, who either transited Turkey or returned to their own countries, the recent movement from Syria involves more than 3,6 million refugees.

Turkey applies geographical limitation to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 New York Protocol.[10] In line with the geographical limitation, refugee status is granted only to European asylum-seekers in Turkey.[11] Although asylum-seekers from eastern countries have not been recognized as refugees, Turkey respected the principle of *non-refoulement*. They have been provided with *de facto* international protection in Turkey but treated as foreigners who can stay in the country temporarily. In line with the Turkish government's 'expectation of temporariness', these asylum-seekers are almost always in a grey area and invisible (Şirin-Öner and Genç, 2015). In the earlier waves, they had either returned to their countries or moved on to third countries (Kirişçi, 2003b). As discussed in the following pages, however, a different regime applies to Syria's forced migrants in Turkey.

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[7] 1923 Population Exchange Law, 1926 Law No. 885 on Settlement, 1934 Law no. 2510 on Settlement, 2006 Law no. 5543 on Settlement.

[8] The Grand National Assembly of Turkey, İskan Kanunu Tasarısı ve İskan Kanununda Değişiklik Yapılması Hakkında Kanun Tasarısı ile Bayındırlık, İmar, Ulaştırma ve Turizm Komisyonu Raporu (1/352, 1/12 (Ankara, 2003).

[9] These immigrants can acquire Turkish citizenship through citizenship laws that allow ethnic Turks to become naturalized Turkish citizens (İçduygu and Aksel, 2012: 7).

[10] In line with the geographical limitation, Turkey applies the Convention and its updating Protocol only to persons who have become refugees as a result of events occurring in Europe.

[11] There are cases when Turkey chose not to grant refugee status even to Europeans fleeing to Turkey as a result of events occurring in Europe. For example, Bosniac asylum-seekers, who fled to Turkey during the war in Yugoslavia (1992-1995), were not recognized as refugees but offered only temporary protection (Şirin, 2008).

In addition to asylum-seekers, in the last decades, Turkey has received irregular workers, mainly from the Commonwealth of Independent States (Toksöz et al., 2012). Turkey maintains a liberal visa regime with many of these countries and grants their nationals a ninety-day visa exemption. Migrants, overwhelmingly women, enter Turkey as tourists. They come mainly from Romania, Georgia, Bulgaria, Moldova, Ukraine, the Russian Federation, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkmenistan. They work in domestic service, child/patient care, entertainment, sex industry, garment workshops, construction, tourism, and agriculture (Toksöz et al., 2012). In addition, Turkey has also become "a waiting room" for irregular migrants intending to continue to Western Europe and North America since late 1970s (Erder, 2000: 251). These transit migrants come mainly from Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Apart from all these international movements, Turkish society has also experienced massive rural-to-urban migration since the early 1950s (Ahmad, 1993; Kalaycıoğlu, 2008: 23). In 1927, 76% of Turkey's population lived in rural areas. Though people migrated from rural to urban areas in the early years of the Republic, the economic transformation in agriculture, specifically mechanization of agricultural production in the early 1950s followed by de-propertization, and it led to massive internal migration that reversed the urban-rural ratio. Thus, by 2012, 77% of the population lived in urban areas. In addition to the unskilled rural labor force that migrated to urban areas in search for work, the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s witnessed urban-to-urban migration as well. Besides job opportunities, the main pull factors were the availability of better education and healthcare services in urban areas. Considering all these migrations, we can say that Turkish people are used to migrations and migrants. That is why, social acceptance, hospitality, and other positive attitudes towards migrants are expected take on new meanings in the Turkish case.

Syria's Forced Migrants in Turkey

Turkey has become home to more than 3,6 million forced migrants from Syria. The government was unprepared for this influx and it has had difficulties in managing this movement. The registration process was very problematic and, because the authorities have struggled to keep track of migrants, they were not able to make accurate estimations until very recently (Erdoğan and Ünver, 2015; Erdoğan, 2017).

Due to the peculiarities of Turkey's asylum regime and its new Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP), a 'Temporary Protection Regime' applies to these forced migrants, who are termed 'persons under temporary

protection'.[12] Though it provides international protection, the regime has shortcomings, with hundreds of thousands of Syrian children remaining out of school and Syrians facing problems in accessing healthcare services or finding accommodation (Şirin-Öner and Genç, 2015: 12; Erdoğan, 2017). Syrian refugees come from a wide variety of backgrounds and social classes (Chatty, 2015), and they have had to self-settle and take care of themselves. As the years passed, they have dispersed to every city in Turkey (DGMM, 2018). Moreover, the government has been slow to provide them with a legal route to formal employment (January 2016), as a result, Syrians are working in the informal economy under precarious and exploitative conditions (Şenses, 2016). According to Erdoğan (2017), around one million Syrian refugees are estimated to work in the informal economy.

Since Turkey's temporary protection regime fails to address their problems, many Syrian refugees have tried to move to Europe in search for better protection, work, and education opportunities. Their exodus from Turkey became one of the defining events of 2015, with their mass movement to reach Europe, their perilous journeys in unsafe boats, accidents, and drownings covered daily by the Turkish media. As discussed in the following sections, Turkish society was touched by their forced migration, particularly by the death of children. However, Turkish people have had paradoxical attitudes about Syria's forced migrants. As the findings of this research revealed, they complained, expressed their discomfort, worries and unease yet simultaneously tried to welcome and support them.

Finally, any discussion on Syria's forced migrants in Turkey should also consider the framework of hospitality. The arrival of Syrian refugees in Turkey has been discussed within this framework since the beginning. More specifically, the government described the Syrians refugees as 'guests' and called Turkish society to 'receive' them as brothers, sisters, guests, and war victims. This discourse reflected rhetorical and rational choices. Hospitality and respect for guests are strongly cherished values in traditional Turkish society. Anthropologically and historically, they constitute important characteristics of it.[13] Turkish society is described as hospitable with emphasis on various particularities of Turkish hospitality, such as receiving guests in special rooms, preparing special food or at least sharing one's own food and drink, showing respect and making them feel comfortable (Araz, 1997: 86). Traditional beliefs consider guests as the

[12] The Temporary Protection Regime was adopted in October 2014. Its basis is Article 91 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection. For detailed discussion on the regime and its shortcomings, see Şirin-Öner and Genç 2015. For the regime, see Çorabatır 2014a - access date 06/01/2015; Çorabatır 2014b - access date 06/01/2015; Resmi Gazete, Bakanlar Kurulu Karar Sayısı: 2016/8375 Geçici Koruma Sağlanan Yabancıların Çalışma İzinlerine Dair Yönetmelik. www.resmigazete.gov.tr (15/01/2016), [Official Journal – Decision of Council of Ministers] - access date 19/01/2016.

[13] See, for example, a social and psychological analysis of the concept of hospitality in traditional stories (Simsek, 2014).

holders of nine blessings, who eat one while the eight remaining chances are left for the happiness of the host (Araz, 1997). Guests are therefore considered as a blessing from God who bring good luck. In line with these beliefs, and in contrast to other societies, calling Syria's forced migrants 'guests' may have given them legitimacy, reduced possible negative reactions from Turkish citizens, and contributed to their social acceptance.

4. METHOD

Research Design

This study presents findings of a qualitative study of forced migration of Syrians to Istanbul. The study is built on field notes and notes of the interviews with *muhtars* of Istanbul's urban neighborhoods (see Table 1).[14] Interviews were conducted face-to-face and over phone, and they were carried out between October 2014 and August 2015. The authors used snowball sampling in selecting the interviewees for the face-to-face interviews, and convenience sampling for the telephone interviews.

Neighborhood, *mahalle* in Turkish, is "an administrative unit, within the borders of the Municipality, with similar needs and priorities and neighborly relations between its inhabitants" (Law on Municipality, 2005, Article 3).[15] Together with the Council of Elders, *muhtar* is responsible for fulfilling an important number of tasks related to the neighborhood and its inhabitants. As E. Massicard defines, the role of the *muhtar* is a matter of acting as "institutionalized intermediaries" linking up different social and institutional orders. The way in which the *muhtar* is designated (by election) and his social and geographic proximity to the inhabitants means that they act as a figure of intermediation (Massicard, 2015).

The authors interviewed *muhtars*, because they are one of the most valuable data sources regarding Turkey's neighborhoods and villages. First, they are directly elected and authorized to give opinions on matters which concern the neighborhood. Second, they are elected on a party-independent basis from within the neighborhood. They cannot become members of any political party and many

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[14] As shown in Table 1, 25 counties with 509 neighborhoods are located on the European side while 14 with 277 neighborhoods are on the Asian side. There are more than 53,000 *muhtars* in Turkey with approximately 13,000 in urban neighborhoods (T. C. İçişleri Bakanlığı, 2011).

[15] Article 3, Law 5393 (2005) on the Municipality. The number of inhabitants in these neighborhoods varies substantially. There are neighborhoods with just 55 (Mercan/Fatih) or 120 (Emekyemez/Beyoğlu) inhabitants as well as those with many inhabitants such as 75,157 (İçerenköy/Ataşehir) or 71,549 (Zümrütevler/Maltepe).

try to avoid political polarization.[16] Third, they have to have inhabited the neighborhoods they are elected from, for at least six months prior to the local elections, which makes them a truly representative of local public opinion (Massicard, 2015: 256). Lastly, their work brings them into direct contact with local inhabitants so they know their concerns, needs, problems, health issues, and even marriage problems. Thus, Istanbul's *muhtars* can say a lot about the forced migration of Syrians to Istanbul.

Following the first report on Syrian refugees in Istanbul (Yılmaz, 2013), Fatih county was chosen for the pilot study. 37 of Fatih's 57 neighborhoods were screened during September 2014. Based on these findings, the screening process was extended to involve Başakşehir, Zeytinburnu, and Bahçelievler counties. The authors conducted face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 16 *muhtars* from these counties. These data were complemented by phone interviews. Calls were made to the *muhtars* of all neighborhoods of all counties of Istanbul between October 2014 and August 2015. This enabled authors to reach *muhtars* in 358 out of 786 Istanbul urban neighborhoods. 236 of these neighborhoods were located on the European side and 122 of them were on the Asian side.

Table.1: Counties in Istanbul

European Side				**Asian Side**	
Arnavutköy	30	Esenyurt[17]	20	Adalar	5
Avcılar	10	Eyüp	21	Ataşehir	17
Bağcılar	22	Fatih	58	Beykoz	25
Bahçelievler	11	Gaziosmanpaşa	16	Çekmeköy	17
Bakırköy	15	Güngören	11	Kadıköy	21
Başakşehir	9	Kağıthane	19	Kartal	20
Bayrampaşa	11	Küçükçekmece	21	Maltepe	18
Beşiktaş	23	Sarıyer	30	Pendik	31
Beylikdüzü	10	Silivri	22	Sancaktepe	18
Beyoğlu	45	Sultangazi	15	Sultanbeyli	15
Büyükçekmece	24	Şişli	25	Şile	5
Çatalca	12	Zeytinburnu	13	Tuzla	17
Esenler	16	*Europe Total*	509	Ümraniye	35
				Üsküdar	33
				Asia Total	277

[16] "Kutuplaşma Araştırması: Ayrı Dünyaların İnsanlarıyız", (01/02/2016), (Research on polarization: We are from separated words) http://www.diken.com.tr/kutuplasma-arastirmasi-ayri-dunyalarin-insanlariyiz/ (Access date 22/04/2016).

[17] The number of neighborhoods of Esenyurt increased to 43 in December 2014. At the time when the neighborhoods of this county were called, new neighborhoods were being set up and they did not have *muhtars*, yet. For this reason, 20 (former) neighborhoods of the county were included in the study (Esenyurt Rehber. "Esenyurt'un yeni mahalle isimleri", 2014. Accessed August 27, 2015. http://www.esenyurtrehber.com/icerik/haber/38/esenyurt_un_yeni_mahalle_isimleri.html).

Research Questions and Analysis

The main aim of the study was to report and analyze the attitudes of the local people of Istanbul regarding the mass migration of Syrians into their neighborhoods. With this goal in mind, semi-structured interviews with *muhtars* centered on the following questions: Do you have Syrian inhabitants in your neighborhood? When did they settle in the neighborhood? Why do you think they settled in your neighborhood? Do you have any information on your Syrian inhabitants, such as their education, work, health, etc.? Are there any particular difficulties local inhabitants face from the arrival of the Syrian migrants? Do you receive any comments or complaints? What do you expect for the future of Syrian migrants in Turkey? What do you think about Turkey's immigration policy?

After the fieldwork was completed, the authors conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the interview notes. In order to reveal the prevalent themes, interview transcripts were perused several times and the text was coded by the authors separately. The authors then performed a second round of coding by grouping the codes under main themes.

5. FINDINGS: PARADOXICAL ATTITUDES

From the interviews, it was possible to identify various themes concerning the *muhtars'* perceptions and attitudes towards Syrians as well as each neighborhood's inhabitants' feelings about the arrival of Syrians. "Worry" was the key theme raised in every county, both in counties where Syrians settled and where there were few Syrians. *Muhtars* from different parts of Istanbul referred to common themes in expressing their views on Syrian migration and their attitudes towards Syrian refugees. When they described the inhabitants' general feelings about the recent Syrian migration to Istanbul, the predominant themes were "worry" and "uneasiness". Although many neighborhoods had not reported any concrete complaint or any incident and even where the local inhabitants had no major criticisms about Syrian refugees, the *muhtars* still claimed that their inhabitants were "worried" about the arrival of Syrian refugees in their neighborhood:

> "There is no particular complaint but, you know, many people consider this situation negative, they don't think that it is a good thing. They don't want them here." (Muhtar No.114, Tuzla)[18]

> "They [local inhabitants] are worried. They worry about their daughters, their goods. Thank God, no incident has been reported until now." (Muhtar No. 327 - Pendik)[19]

[18] Telephone interview, 06/03/2015.
[19] Telephone interview, 10/11/2014.

In the neighborhoods with many Syrians, the feeling of worry and uneasiness was reported angrily:

> "They don't sleep until morning. They don't work. They are shouting all the night! [...] There is visual uneasiness." (Muhtar No. 50 - Fatih)[20]

The in-depth interview notes revealed that the pace of the movement into Turkey, the failures in managing it, the lack of information on the exact numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey, Istanbul, and in the neighborhoods, and failures in the registration process were the main sources of worry and uneasiness. *Muhtars* frequently raised the question of what happened if an unregistered Syrian refugee committed a crime in Turkey and left the country. Moreover, many *muhtars* stated that "the Syrians ran away from fighting for their own country or defending their own country". They added that if they had been in their situation, they would have returned and fought for their own country as soon as they found a safe place for their family in the neighboring country. Moreover, following this reasoning, many *muhtars* referred to stereotypes and prejudices about Arabic people in Turkey and said that they did not believe the Syrian refugees would contribute to Turkey:

> "This is what Arabs always do. Run away from fight!" (Muhtar No. 50-Fatih)[21]
>
> "Arabs stab in the back!" (Muhtar No. 32, Fatih)[22]

Secondly, *muhtars* from all counties complained about beggars. When the data of the study were collected, begging was one of the main problems, in particular in those neighborhoods with high number of Syrian inhabitants. For many others, beggars from Syria come to their neighborhood on market days, and to the mosques especially on Fridays before and after the Friday prayer. They felt so uncomfortable about Syrian beggars from Syria that they even longed for Turkish beggars.[23] In addition, they criticized begging as an illegitimate economic activity:

> "Their habit: free Money!" (Muhtar No.145 - Arnavutköy)[24]

Thirdly, *muhtars* thought that forced migrants' practices and understanding about hygiene are different. According to them, Syrian forced migrants had poor hygiene practices compared to Turkish people. Similarly, they noted that they had different understandings about using public spaces. According to them, these differences made Syrians misfit for their neighborhoods:

[20] Interview notes, 09/02/2015.
[21] Interview notes, 09/02/2015.
[22] Interview notes, 03/03/2015.
[23] Telephone interview, 05/02/2015.
[24] Telephone interview, 11/11/2014.

> "They don't respect the cleanliness of the neighborhood; we are receiving complaints about this issue. We informed higher authorities such as the governorate but they don't do anything." (Muhtar No.5 - Fatih)[25]

> "They go to the marketplace with their children and their children mess up!" (Muhtar No.108 - Pendik)[26]

Fourthly, *muhtars* explained their inhabitants' worries about Syrians' aggressive behaviors by referring to the tensions among the refugees themselves and between refugees and natives. Though they could not provide any official documents proving any fights, there were a few serious cases involving the police. Many *muhtars*, especially from neighborhoods with high number of Syrian refugees mentioned their discomfort about aggression, quarrels, and fights:

> "Quarrels take place very frequently. They [Syrians] attack each other." (Muhtar No.56-Fatih)[27]

> "Their human relations are savage, violent." (Muhtar No.59-Zeytinburnu)[28]

> "They are aggressive! Quarrels, fights every day!" (Muhtar No. 147-Arnavutköy)[29]

Fifthly, *muhtars* emphasized the problem of housing. They reported that large Syrian families lived together in small houses and flats. Moreover, as they did not have regular income, they shared their flats with other Syrian families, too. Consequently, according to the *muhtars,* local inhabitants complain about increase in rents, and hygiene and security problems in buildings:

> "Rent prices were maximum at 400 TL, now you can't find a flat at 500." (Muhtar No.145-Arnavutköy)[30]

> "Local inhabitants don't want to live in the same building with Syrians. Actually, I agree, I wouldn't like to do so. You don't know who enters the building." (Muhtar No. 367- Şişli)[31]

Muhtars blamed real estate agencies but also the landlords for renting flats and houses to Syrian refugees at very high prices when they first arrived. According to them, this practice harmed everybody since rents in these counties increased while landlords with Syrian tenants had problems collecting their rents:

> "Before, the landlords were very happy. But now the Syrians started not to pay the rent. The owners are coming to complain.

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[25] Telephone interview, 14/04/2015.
[26] Telephone intervew, 20/02/2015.
[27] Telephone interview, 11/11/2014.
[28] Telephone interview, 17/04/2015.
[29] Telephone interview, 14/04/2015.
[30] Telephone interview, 15/04/2015.
[31] Telephone interview, 26/03/2015.

> What can we do? Who told them to rent their house to Syrians!" (Muhtar No. 271-Ümraniye)[32]

Begging, aggressive behaviors and housing problems were also seen as security problems that make inhabitants worried about the Syrian migration to Istanbul. Security problems seemed to be more serious in certain neighborhoods in Sancaktepe, Pendik, Ümraniye, and Arnavutköy, where Syrian involvement in theft, sex-work, and drug dealing were reported. Though none of the *muhtars* were sure about their involvement to these criminal activities, it was important to show how they perceived Syrians and associated them with criminality.

Lastly, *muhtars* from different parts of the city expressed their concerns and thoughts about the sheer number of Syrian refugees, believing that Turkey accepted too many refugees without preparing itself. They thought that the number of Syrian refugees in Istanbul and their neighborhoods was constantly increasing. Statements like the following were common:

> "Is there any neighborhood in İstanbul without Syrians?" (Muhtar No. 179 - Bayrampaşa)
>
> "There are too many Syrians. Their number is increasing. Their number is increasing all the time!" (Muhtar No. 31 - Fatih)[33]
>
> "They walk through the *Muhtarlik* [his office place]. I am saying to myself: Oh! Dudullu [neighborhood] has been invaded by Syrians!" (Muhtar No.255 - Ümraniye)[34]

Regarding the local management of the mass migration to Istanbul, generally they were perplexed, reporting a lack of management. A woman *muhtar* exploded when asked how her neighborhood absorbed the arriving Syrians:

> "Nobody is absorbing! We cannot absorb!" (Muhtar No.369 – Şişli)[35]

Although many claimed that there was mismanagement of the crisis, almost all were aware of Turkey's conducive migration background, and none questioned Turkey's reasons for opening its borders. Thus, while many criticized the government's mismanagement of the crisis, and for attempting to intervene in Syria's internal affairs, no one suggested closing the borders or returning the refugees. Although many used very harsh words for the Syrians during the interview, ultimately they calmed down and ask:

> "Where would they go? They would of course come to Turkey!" (Muhtar No. 258-Ümraniye)[36]

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[32] Telephone interview, 06/04/2015.
[33] Interview notes, 21/01/2015.
[34] Telephone interview, 06/04/2015.
[35] Telephone interview, 26/03/2015.
[36] Interview notes, 12/10/2014.

They mainly considered Syrians as poor people who needed help and compensation which could and should be provided by the Turkish state and society. Despite their negative perceptions, muhtars expressed their solidary with Syrians in the form of humanitarian aid.

Independently of their worries and political approaches to the massive arrival of Syrians, these local actors showed empathy with their Syrians neighbors which made their perceptions and attitudes paradoxical. As a muhtar, who was highly critical to the arrival of Syrians, affirms that those people had to be supported:

> "They have already been devastated. Personally I couldn't live their life even in a movie! There are places here worse than camps. I think their (*Syrians*) children have to be sent to school. They have to be educated, no matter in Turkish or in English, they have to learn something. Something has to be done for the children of this people for the sake of Allah! They (*the government*) brought these people as hosts, we can't leave them starving." (Muhtar No. 29-Fatih)

Some of the muhtars were motivated to support and welcome Syrians not only for personal and humanitarian reasons. They were aware of their lower position in the public administration hierarchy. They had to follow the government policy, and they had been informed about the official policy on Syrians by the district governors (*kaymakam*). They had been asked to welcome and support Syrians in their neighborhoods:

> "We received directives from the Ministry of Interior, from the governorate of Istanbul and from our district governorate. We have been told that 'Syrians are our guests please protect them'. I do so." (Muhtar No. 38-Fatih)

In addition, in line with Anatolia's historical migration dynamics, many *muhtars* themselves had migratory backgrounds, for example from Yugoslavia, southeastern Turkey (Diyarbakir) and the Black sea region (Trabzon). In fact, only a handful were born in Istanbul, almost all were migrants. Several of them emphasized this, noting that they themselves were 'guests' too. One *muhtar* joked about this by recalling a Turkish proverb:

> "A guest would not want another guest; the host would not want any one of them." (Muhtar No. 43 – Fatih)[37]

[37] Interview notes, 27/03/2015.

Yet, many returned to the framework of the host-guest relationship to gather their thoughts. Despite the complaints and problems, they acknowledged that Syrian refugees were "our guests and we should host and respect them."[38]

Muhtars either underappreciated or remained unaware of legal concepts of international migration, such as asylum-seeker, refugee or displaced person. Instead, they considered themselves 'hospitable' (*misafirperver*), and approached Syrians in this way:

> "Turkish people's genes are helpful, hospitable. They embraced them [Syrian refugees] when they first came." (Muhtar No. 61-Zeytinburnu)[39]

The worry and unease, the security concerns linked to beggars, aggressive behaviors and housing problems, the hygiene issues and the problems of migration management were the main concerns of Istanbul *muhtars* regarding Syrian mass migration. Although the *muhtars* viewed the arrival of Syrians as a source of worry and problems, in the first years following their arrival, the local management of this mass migration was organized through the concept of hospitality rather than legal framework of integration in İstanbul.

6. CONCLUSION

Neither migrations nor migrants are new for Turkey. The country has experienced waves of migration before and after its foundation. After early migration waves, which brought people of Turkish descent or culture, Turkey started to receive asylum-seekers in the late 1970s, mainly from its neighbors. Thus, the current mass influx of Syrians is the latest of such movements. As explained in the earlier paragraphs, Syrians have sought asylum in Turkey via regular and irregular ways of entry. Drawing on its exploratory qualitative field research, this paper aimed to take a picture of the Syrian migration to Istanbul in the period between October 2014 and August 2015, and it reports the attitudes of *muhtars* in this period regarding this forced movement.

As seen from the field research, *muhtars* knew a lot about the Syrian migration itself, government's rhetoric, failures in registration processes, and negative incidents in Southeastern cities. At the same time, they had been able to observe Syrian forced migrants, coming and going, working, quarrelling, etc. in their neighborhoods. According to the *muhtars* from different counties of Istanbul, Turkish inhabitants felt disturbed and worried, and there was a sense of uneasiness in the neighborhoods. While the number of Syrians seemed to be an important source of anxiety, *muhtars* also frequently asked what would happen if an

[38] Telephone interview, 06/04/2015.
[39] Interview notes, 15/04/2015.

unregistered Syrian committed a crime in Turkey. They also criticized their flight from Syria by stressing that they would not have left their country but would have stayed and fought for it.

Examining these main complaints and how they were expressed showed that many *muhtars* thought of Syrians in Turkey as a homogenous group, mainly made up of low income, unskilled people, who mainly engaged in begging in Turkey. It was thus unfortunate to find out that Syrian beggars had created an image for all Syrians in Istanbul. Other main complaints concerned poor hygiene, public disorder, increased rents, their numbers, and the way they lived in the neighborhoods. However, it was interesting to note that these complaints were not only raised in neighborhoods with many Syrian inhabitants but all over the city. It seemed that many complaints and the *muhtars*' reactions to Syrians' flight from the war were rooted in general stereotypes and prejudices about Arab nationals in Turkey. These have had long depicted an image of a dirty, cowardly, and uncivilized person. Hence, we note that the *muhtars* had very negative perceptions of these forced migrants.

In line with these preliminary findings, socio-psychological explanations seemed more relevant than rational, labor market competition theories to explain attitude formation towards Syria's forced migrants in İstanbul. Labor market competition was emphasized by *muhtars* of only 4 neighborhoods out of 358. Differently from labor market competition, *muhtars* noted fears, anxieties, and perceptions of realistic and symbolic threats, rooted mainly in stereotypes and prejudices about Arab nationals. As *muhtars'* explanations revealed, even in those neighborhoods where no incident was reported, there was a "perceived threat" targeted against their inhabitants' security and peace. Furthermore, the pace of the Syrian migration should also be emphasized since the sudden demographic change caused by Syrians' arrival in many neighborhoods had been influential in attitude formation by fueling fears and negative perceptions of both realistic and symbolic threats.

In addition to the conceptual framework on attitude formation provided by this literature, hospitality also appeared as a useful concept to understand and analyze the *muhtars'* attitudes towards Syrian forced migrants in Istanbul. Turkish government approached Syrian refugees as guests for a long time. Though recent studies show that this approach and rhetoric does not have any repercussion in the Turkish society anymore, it had a reflection in the early phases of the movement (Erdoğan, 2017; 2018).

Muhtars, respected and directly elected members of the Turkish society, tried to understand, give meaning to, and approach Syrian migration through the framework of hospitality. This encourage us to question the relationship between

"host" and "guest", the connection and separation points between them, and the new rules for permanent residence. When does the guest lose his/her blessedness? Are Syrians still guests or are they becoming strangers, perhaps even "stranger"? These questions make us think about the superficial and paradoxical character of hospitality. The longer they stay, the more these guests become invisible in the host society, becoming strangers while the ties between host and guest break. As Syrian refugees stayed longer, *muhtars* complained more frequently and severely. Here, hospitality changes its form, blessedness gives way to uneasiness and fear felt about the stranger. Yet, the emphasis that *muhtars* put on hospitality and the tradition that the concept has in Turkish society constituted a non-negligible advantage while welcoming Syrian refugees. As we understand today, the government used this advantage in the early years of the movement.

Muhtars had negative perceptions, worries and discomforts. Anti-immigrant wordings and attitudes were not rare. In the neighborhoods with many Syrian refugees, there were many negative thoughts and complaints. However, we could not conclude that there was low social acceptance for Syrian forced migrants in Istanbul. Many *muhtars* believed that Syrian refugees were here to stay and that, one way or another, they would find ways to succeed in the city, as almost all Istanbul's current inhabitants had done before them. Similar to the findings of this research, recent studies by Kaya (2016) and Erdoğan (2017; 2018) confirmed that Turkish society is worried about the future of the Syrian community in Turkey. According to Erdoğan (2017) Turkish people wanted to support and welcome the people who escaped from persecution and war in the first years of the Syrian forced migration, but today, they are not ready to share their future with them. As this recent study notes, Turkish people otherize Syrians. They keep their social distance with them, and unfortunately, in line with our study, majority of the interviewees define them as "lazy, distanced, bad, rude, dirty, untrustworthy and dangerous" (Erdoğan, 2017: 19). Kaya (2016), on the other hand, reveals the same stereotypes underpinning the image of traitors for Syrian refugees. Interview notes from his study confirmed the same thoughts in different counties. In the light of the findings from these recent studies (Kaya, 2016 and Erdoğan, 2017; 2018) it is understood that the bridge between Turkish society and the Syrian refugees has become more fragile. As it is discussed in our study, though they were anxious, worried, sometimes even angry, *muhtars* and the Turkish society had social acceptance for Syrians since the early years of their forced migration. The recent studies show that this social acceptance has become so fragile that it has reached almost to its limits (Erdoğan, 2018). Today, there is little doubt that many Syrians will become permanent elements of the Turkish society. As a conclusion, we note that though the framework of hospitality appeared as a key concept in government's approach to Syrian refugees in the earlier years of the Syrian migration, in the light of the recent studies, we note that common future dictates

well-prepared thorough integration policies to overcome the fragility and vulnerability in the relationship between Turkish society and the Syrian refugees.

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