

## Asylum Seekers Integration and Policies in Istanbul from The Perspective of Legal Sociology\*

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### Abstract

Türkiye, a major destination for global migration, particularly due to its proximity to conflict regions and the European Union, attracts a diverse range of migrants. Many asylum seekers, particularly in Istanbul, are not temporary, preferring the city for its job opportunities, social diversity, and relative safety. Migration to Istanbul comes from the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, creating cultural clashes, identity loss, and political tensions. This study explores how well migrants integrate into society and assesses policy responses in İstanbul. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 Syrians about their integration, alongside consultations with 5 policy-making institutions to understand their strategies. Results show that Syrians have not fully integrated, often aiming to move to Europe, struggling with language, limited education access, and maintaining isolated communities. This study contributes to the sociology of law by analyzing migration through both legal and sociological lenses.

**Keywords:** Migration; Istanbul; neighborhood; circular; demographic structure

### Introduction

Today, migration and integration are among the most debated issues both globally and in Türkiye. The increasing number of Syrian refugees and immigrants in our country and the socio-economic and legal consequences of this growth bring the issue of integration to the forefront. Both theoretical studies at the academic level and field research conducted in various areas offer solutions to this topic. Before addressing the field research findings in our study, it is necessary to present the theoretical framework of the research topic. In this context, concepts such as migration and integration, recognition and social cohesion, multiculturalism, and assimilation will be discussed. In migration studies, the concept of integration can be used in various meanings, and this situation is considered normal. The terms integration, inclusion, adaptation, cultural adaptation, or social adaptation are often used interchangeably (Göksel,

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\* This work has been supported by the Scientific Research Projects Commission of Galatasaray University under grant number SBA-2024-1246.

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2019: 16). The expression “integration” is generally used to define the goals of post-migration policies in countries that receive immigrants. Integration often means social cohesion, the construction of a common identity, and the shaping of a common ground for the civic participation of various communities through institutions and services (Göksel, 2019: 16). The following definition also confirms this (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020:34).

*“In integration, on the one hand, the adaptation of the immigrant to the society to which they have migrated (both individually and collectively) is in question. This adaptation can be seen both as a process and as a (desired) goal. Integration essentially aims to create a situation that allows immigrants to take a similar position in certain living areas under similar conditions as native groups, and to provide opportunities for immigrants to maintain and develop important aspects of their own culture. Beyond this, integration refers to the process and goal of maintaining and enhancing the cohesion of society at different levels.”*

The emphasis on immigrants maintaining their own cultures and enhancing societal cohesion at different levels in the cited passage underscores the multifaceted nature of migration and integration issues. One aspect of this multifaceted nature is undoubtedly the political and legal dimension. The recent influx of people from war-affected regions into European countries has stirred domestic political environments and raised national security concerns in these nations (Göksel, 2019:14). Far-right parties pledge to their constituencies to halt immigration as much as possible and to implement policies favoring assimilation to protect European identity and national security. European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, and France require refugees and immigrants to sign integration agreements that mandate the recognition of European societal values. In our country, national security and anti-immigrant rhetoric frequently emerge, especially during election periods, with some political parties centering their policies around this narrative (Deniz and Aksu Kargın, 2023). Today, mobility under the influence of globalization is changing the demographic structure of modern societies in all countries. Therefore, the debate on migration and integration, both related to migration and in general, is also intensifying along the “nation-state vs. globalization” axis.

Integration policies of European Union countries are directly relevant to Türkiye due to the migration of Syrians to our country. The year of 2011 marks a turning point in the journey of Syrians coming to Türkiye. The civil war in Syria has led to massive destruction and forced many Syrians to flee their homeland. Türkiye hosts the largest number of Syrians, approximately 60% of the total (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). For a period, Türkiye pursued an “open door” policy and faced an unprecedented wave of migration in its history. This period coincided with the establishment of the Directorate General of Migration Management, responsible for implementing Türkiye’s new immigration law concerning both individual and mass asylum level (Kirişçi, 2014: 8). In response to the intense migration, refugee camps were established for those considered “guests,” but it soon turned out that this approach was unsustainable. Consequently, in 2011, Türkiye issued a directive granting temporary protection status to those forced to migrate from Syria, ensuring a minimal level of fundamental rights such as shelter and healthcare (Kirişçi, 2014: 14; Ihlamur-Öner, 2014: 43-44). In order to regulate the entry, exit, stay of foreigners in Türkiye, as well as the scope and implementation of international protection, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, 2013/6458) was enacted in 2013 and came into force in 2014.



The main objective of this study is to explain whether these migrants were able to integrate. Integration can be considered from many perspectives, and different criteria can be determined. It is analyzed under four headings: Education, socio-cultural integration, integration on labor market and active citizenship. Of course, it is not possible to make such a limitation in the criteria. However, under each heading, the study first provides information on the general situation and then includes the statements of migrants and policy makers. In this way, it can be observed if the conditions of the interviewees match with the general conditions and if the actions taken by policy makers to address this situation.

In the two tables below, first the information of the interviewed migrants and then the information of the policy makers are given.

**Table 1.**

<i>Demographic Information of Participants</i>						
Participant	Age	Sex	Job	Income Status	Marital Status	Turkish Language
P1	19	F	Seasonal worker	Daily wage: 600-700 lira	Single	Beginner
P2	Not specified	F	Housewife	No income	Married	Unknown
P3	24	F	Housewife	No income	Married	Beginner
P4	22	F	Medical student	No income	Single	Advanced
P5	Not specified	F	Housewife	No income	Married	Intermediate
P6	Not specified	M	Transport- driver	Salaried employee	Married	Beginner
P7	32	M	Construction worker	Daily wage	Married	Intermediate
P8	23	M	Barber apprentice	Minimum wage	Single	Beginner
P9	17	M	Unemployed	No income	Single	Beginner
P10	23	M	Textile sector worker	Salaried employee	Married	Intermediate

**Table 2.**

<i>Information of Policy Makers</i>					
Policy Makers	Field Study /Academic Research	Creating Public Opinion	Contribution to Socio-economic Integration	Turkish Education	Legal Support
Mor Çatı / Purple Roof	Both of them	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Istanbul Bar Association	Academic	Yes	No	No	Yes
Migration Research Association	Academic	Yes	No	No	No
Refugee Rights Association	Both of them	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Family Women Support and Disabled People Center (AKDEM)	Field Study	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

## I. Access to the Right to Education and Integration

International agreements to which Türkiye is a party, along with national legislation, grant the right to education to children under temporary protection. According to UNICEF's September 2022 report, approximately 1.125 million out of the registered 3.731 million Syrians are children of compulsory school age. Indeed, most of these children were born in Türkiye and have come to regard it as their home country (UNICEF, 2022: 1). The right to education for Syrian children in Türkiye is not solely based on the temporary protection regulation but is also grounded in fundamental documents such as the European Convention on Human Rights (Pürselim Arning, 2018: 118). Moreover, the agreement signed between the EU and Türkiye in 2016 to halt the irregular migration flow to Europe led to a policy change in

education, as in other areas (Danış, 2022: 33). Initially, Temporary Education Centers were established to teach Arabic, assuming that the individuals would return to their home countries. However, when it was realized that this assumption would not hold, the Ministry of National Education issued the “Circular on Educational Services for Foreigners” in 2014. According to this circular, all foreigners in Türkiye would continue their education in institutions affiliated with Ministry of National Education (Circular on Educational Services for Foreigners, 2014/21). Following the 2016 agreement, Temporary Education Centers were closed with the acceptance that the Syrians would remain permanently. Subsequently, the Ministry of National Education and other collaborating organizations-initiated actions for the gradual integration into the Turkish Education System (Danış, 2022: 33). In practice, when Syrian migrants are granted temporary protection status by the competent authorities in Türkiye, they are entitled to enroll in primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. Additionally, these individuals are granted rights and opportunities for Turkish language education and vocational training (Refugee Rights Türkiye, 2017: 2). While children without temporary protection identity registration can be admitted to primary education as guest students, adults are required to have this identity to access language learning and other educational opportunities. Consequently, the access to the right to education for undocumented migrant children and adults is significantly restricted (Refugee Rights Türkiye, 2017: 2).

Adults face numerous challenges in learning Turkish and acquiring vocational skills, while children encounter various problems both when entering and after being included in the education system. Discrimination, a lack of additional teachers and schools, various prejudices, and insufficient proficiency in Turkish negatively impact school adaptation and attendance rates, and families do not encourage their children to continue their education (UNICEF, 2022: 21). As a result, Syrian boys are often pushed into work at an early age, while girls are married off at a young age. Moreover, some children wish to return to their country to fight. Some Syrian families are reluctant to enroll their children in the compulsory coeducational system due to religious and cultural differences. After school enrollment, the language barrier emerges as the most significant problem (Kamış, 2023). To address these issues, an “inclusive education policy” has been implemented since 2016. Additionally, the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education program has been launched in cooperation with the EU and UNICEF. Despite all these factors, the experienced traumas and language barriers continue to remain the most significant obstacles in education integration.

## **A. Asylum Seekers**

In the study, among the voluntary participants, only P9 is under 18 years old. P4, aged 22, is continuing medical education in Türkiye. Other participants have generally left their school lives behind in Syria and engaged in the workforce in Türkiye. However, it is evident that language education issues pose significant challenges to their integration. Each participant provided different responses to the question “How did you learn the local language, and who assisted you?” For instance, it is observed that P2 has not learned Turkish at all. It is understood that refugee homemakers like P2, who are married, have less social interaction compared to their employed spouses, negatively impacting their language learning. It is noteworthy that despite being homemakers, some participants attempt to continue their language learning through media such as television. P5, although a homemaker, mentioned continuing to learn Turkish online after attending a Turkish course. Participants who attended



Turkish courses have generally achieved intermediate to advanced levels in Turkish. Except for P4 and P5, participants have generally improved their language skills by conversing in the streets or at workplaces. However, this learning method, while sufficient for meeting daily needs, unfortunately does not enable fluent and precise speech. For example, P7, who works in construction and claims to have learned Turkish at the workplace, still struggles to understand complex sentences even after many years: *“I learned Turkish by speaking at work. I have developed it further over seven years, but I still have difficulty understanding some complex sentences.”*

17-year-old P9, who came from Syria, stated that he attended an Imam Hatip school up to the seventh grade but later discontinued his education. His reason for not continuing school was his dissatisfaction with the education system. Instead of studying, he mentioned watching television and playing internet games until morning. Many children, like P9, face attendance issues due to differences in the education systems between Syria and Türkiye and inequalities in academic levels. P9's father, who migrated to Austria five years after coming to Türkiye, provides financial support to the family, but there appears to be no encouragement for P9 to continue his education. However, if P9 remains uneducated as an adult, it will create a mutual integration problem for both himself and the society he lives in. These children are always at risk of feeling a sense of belonging within radical groups. Participant P6, as a father, unlike P9's father, mentioned sending all six of his children to Turkish schools, where he is pleased that they are learning the language properly despite speaking the street language. However, the financial burden of educating six children has put him in a difficult situation. On the other hand, 22-year-old P4 is a young woman who came to Türkiye to study. She stated that her main goal was to study medicine and that she has achieved this goal. After attending a Turkish course for six months, she continues her education. As seen in Table 1, she has advanced her language level parallel to her education. Making more friends with Turks at the medical faculty has been effective in developing her language skills.

## B. Policy Makers

Policy makers were asked two consecutive questions regarding access to education and integration:

- 1) *“How does your organization assist migrants in learning the local language?”*
- 2) *“Could you elaborate on your organization's initiatives to integrate migrants into social life through education and citizenship?”*

From the four institutions interviewed in this context, it was found that neither the Istanbul Bar Association nor the Migration Research Association (MRA) have direct activities in education integration and language teaching. However, MRA is understood to be supportive through joint initiatives in actively organized programs. Addressing education integration, MRA states that adaptation policies to the Turkish education system in practice tend to be more assimilationist. It is noted that initially established Temporary Education Centers operated outside the Turkish education system, and the transition to the Ministry of National Education guidelines in 2016 was considered belated. Moreover, there is a discussion of directing Syrian children towards education based on their identity perceptions. According to GAR, children have been directed to Imam Hatip schools based on their identified Arab and Muslim identities. This aligns with the life story of participant P9 among others. Generally, it

is stated that civil society organizations establish integration schools without providing education aimed at preserving the origin culture, focusing instead on adaptation to Türkiye.

At the Istanbul Bar Association, while there is no service specifically for teaching the local language, there exists a translation support hotline jointly established by the Turkish Bar Association and the UNHCR. This hotline, accessible to lawyers, provides services in Arabic, Persian, English, French, and Dari (Afghan Persian). The Translation Support Hotline is utilized during lawyer-client consultations for legal aid applications. Considering refugee applications independently of the legal aid system is challenging, as they often lack the financial resources to pay for legal services if they require legal assistance. Due to the high volume of legal aid requests and language barriers, legal aid offices typically receive support from civil society organizations working in the migration field. Courts already have appointed interpreters, ensuring necessary procedures such as witness testimonies are conducted appropriately.

Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation is another civil society organization that operates in solidarity with all women who have experienced violence, including registered or unregistered migrants. In response to the questions posed, Mor Çatı emphasizes that for women who have experienced violence, learning Turkish is prioritized. If a woman can speak Turkish, she is supported through normal procedures. If she does not speak Turkish, translation support is provided by volunteer-based organizations assisting refugees. For women staying in shelters after experiencing violence, Mor Çatı assists them in registering for municipal courses if they wish to learn Turkish during their stay. They also refer women, based on their preferences, to organizations that provide direct education, such as Refugee Rights Center, for vocational training and Turkish language courses. The issue of whether school-age children can accompany women to shelters is crucial at Mor Çatı Foundation. While state-run shelters generally do not accept male children over the age of 12, Mor Çatı Foundation does not impose such gender and age restrictions. Therefore, necessary collaborations are facilitated to ensure access to education for migrant children along with their mothers.

Refugee Rights Association can be said to be the organization most directly involved in the field. The association collaborates with Sultanbeyli Municipality to teach Turkish and develop various projects. Turkish conversation clubs aimed at integration are established within social cohesion units. This approach ensures that language education is not only theoretical but also practical. It was noted that more women participate in these conversation groups, as men typically work during weekdays and Saturdays, making it difficult for them to attend. Mixed-gender and nationality communities are conducted without discrimination, adjusting sensitivities as participants age. Representatives of the association believe that older individuals tend to be more sensitive regarding gender and nationality compared to younger groups. Overall, it has been observed that refugees lack motivation to learn the language if they do not have a social life. Families with children are more involved in outdoor activities, which helps them learn the language faster and more motivatedly. According to Refugee Rights Association, it is preferable for children to start language education before entering school, as those who start learning after entering school are often subjected to peer bullying due to their language proficiency. The association provides language support to children who have not yet started school in child-friendly areas they have established. Additionally, they offer extra tutoring opportunities and exam preparation programs for children in disadvantaged learning positions.



Finally, Family Women Support and Disabled People Center (AKDEM) is an organization that focuses on field work, like Refugee Rights Association. They organize literacy workshops for children. The language studies they conduct for women are mostly focused on children due to budget problems.

## II. Socio-Cultural Integration

The socio-cultural integration of migrants is crucial for the development and continuation of integration policies. The rate of socio-cultural integration varies depending on multiple factors. Often, differences are observed between the societal norms of the migrant's home country and those of the host country. These differences primarily include religious rules, language, gender codes, customs and traditions, dress habits, and culinary culture. Acceptance of these differences depends on the individual being recognized within the community they have moved into. The socio-cultural integration challenges faced by Syrians in Istanbul today are evaluated through the paradigm of recognition. According to Honneth, who examines recognition relationships based on principles of individualization and social inclusion within the framework of individual-community-state, individuals' self-realization becomes possible through mutual recognition by society's members (Honneth, 2004:360-361).

This process of recognition consists of three stages sequentially: 1) gaining self-confidence in bonds such as family and friendships, defined as primary love relationships; 2) acquiring self-respect through legal relationships by recognizing others as rights holders; and 3) the final stage involves gaining self-worth through recognition within the community based on personal attributes (Honneth, 2015; Çörek, 2021: 64). Migrants experience the process of recognition and non-recognition through these stages both within their own communities and in the countries, they migrate to. Each experience of non-recognition fuels social conflicts and reduces rates of social inclusion. The socio-cultural integration of Syrians parallels the formation of their identities. Discrimination, hate speech, and practices such as degradation in any region of Türkiye or in Istanbul lead them to lose their self-confidence and self-respect. This loss negatively impacts their relationships with others and prevents the manifestation of their qualities and abilities within the community they belong to (Çörek, 2021: 88; Göksel, 2019: 26-30). If an individual experiences such as exploitation, exclusion, and being looked down upon by society in their mutual relationship with family, state, and society, their integration into the current community or state institutions is deemed impossible (Göksel, 2021: 1077-1078).

Immigrant individuals and groups employ four different strategies when determining the relationship between the culture of the society they migrate to and their own authentic cultures, provided they are not under pressure: Assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Assimilation represents the most extreme form of cultural adaptation. Immigrants who do not wish to preserve their cultural identities and engage in daily interactions with other cultures may employ this as a strategy. The strategy of separation values maintaining ties to the original culture of immigrants while minimizing interactions with other groups. Integration strategy may be used when immigrants participate in community life as an integral part of a larger social network while preserving the integrity of their authentic cultures. Finally, the marginalization strategy can be pursued when immigrants show no interest in either their own culture or the dominant culture (Göksel, 2021: 1081).

Below, discussions with asylum-seekers and policymakers will be evaluated through the recognition paradigm and the four strategies.

## A. Asylum Seekers

Participants were asked three questions related to socio-cultural integration: “Who are your best friends?”, “What are the main differences between your culture and the society around you?”, and “Do you feel at home in this city today?” The question about friendships aimed to gauge how recognized refugees feel in their primary social relationships and their level of self-confidence. In the interviews, approximately half of the participants (P4, P5, P7, P8, P9) were found to have both Turkish and Syrian friends. However, among them, only P5 is a housewife; the others have work experience in their communities. P1, P2, and P3 tend to prioritize family members as friends and mention being able to be friends with Syrians rather than Turks. Participant P6, on the other hand, experiences non-recognition and strategically occupies a marginalized position. P6's response to the relevant question was as follows: “I don't make many friends. I don't trust Syrians or Turks much. I live an insecure life.”

In response to the question about cultural differences, various answers were received. P1, P2, P3, and P9 highlighted differences related to food culture. For instance, P9 mentioned that in their home country, some meals are eaten with hands but noted that this is not hygienic and that using cutlery as practiced in Türkiye is more appropriate. P9 also added that their clothing style is different. P1 expressed a preference for “kuru fasulye-pilav” (a traditional Turkish dish of beans and rice) and was pleased to be able to make “etli dolma” (a stuffed vegetable dish with meat) in Türkiye as they do in their home country. Overall, for these participants, differences in food culture are a priority in terms of cultural adaptation. When evaluating P2 and P4 together, it can be observed that the two participants have different understandings related to gender roles.

The response of P2 is as follows:

*“Syrians are much more sensitive regarding gender segregation. Men and women sit separately. Behaviors such as handshakes and hugs do not occur between men and women. Among Turks, however, this is much more common. This situation poses a challenge for us.”*

P4 holds the following opinion:

*“In Kuwait, I used to wear a black abaya. In Türkiye, I wear more colorful but long clothes. I cannot describe this as better, but I am trying to adapt to the environment. When I wear black at school here, I stand out. In Kuwait, if I wore colorful clothes, I would attract a lot of attention. In Türkiye, it is much easier for a young girl to act independently. I was able to come to Istanbul alone and meet my needs independently. I do not have to go everywhere with my parents.”*

P2 mentioned that they could not apply the gender rules of their own country here, while it can be observed that P4, as a medical student, has achieved cultural adaptation in this regard. P5, on the other hand, believes that they cannot fully understand cultural differences. However, in some situations where they could not express themselves, they stated that Turks labeled them as rude or ignorant, which caused them distress. It is clear that P5 has also experienced a lack of recognition. P6, P7, and P8 generally believe that they can share a common culture. In response to the question about feeling at home, six participants responded negatively. Three participants, however, feel at home in Istanbul.





## **B. Policy Makers**

Two questions related to socio-cultural integration were posed to policymakers: “Does your organization encourage immigrants to integrate with the local population?” and “What cultural concept does your organization implement for these immigrants: Does it expect them to integrate? Does it allow them to preserve their origin cultures?” The aim was to determine where policymakers stand between assimilation and integration. It can be said that Mor Çatı and the Migration Studies Association pursue a passive policy in this regard. Mor Çatı does not prefer any specific cultural concept. They have stated that they act entirely according to the wishes of the women concerning cultural adaptation. The Migration Studies Association explained that while they do not directly promote adaptation to groups, they produce knowledge-based outputs to establish a foundation for coexistence. As previously mentioned, the association believes that Türkiye follows an assimilationist integration policy. Practices aimed at preserving origin cultures are quite limited. Syrians are generally defined and treated based on their Arab and Muslim identities.

The Istanbul Bar Association articulates its cultural integration policies based on rights. The Bar consistently reminds that migrants can seek their rights in courts under specific conditions and should not be regarded separately from Turkish citizens in most aspects. In this context, they believe they contribute to integration in the host country. The Bar aligns its use of concepts with those present in legal regulations.

The Refugee Rights Association emphasizes that social cohesion is a clear policy objective for their organization. All projects and activities within the association are prepared for the mutual cessation of prejudices. As an overarching concept regarding cultural integration, the term “refugee” is used for all migrating individuals. This preference aims to prevent inter-subjective status differentiation in primary recognition relationships. Within established groups, both Turkish and Syrian cuisines are prepared. Through handicraft workshops, Syrians are enabled to preserve their original cultures. The association provides numerous examples of such practices, also highlighting their work on gender codes. For instance, if the norm dictates that women should not be present in public spaces or actively participate in the workforce, the aim is to change the cultural perception associated with this norm.

AKDEM also stated that they are very sensitive about protecting the culture of origin. However, they stated that in some cases they have made policy changes in order not to face the reaction of the local people and that they are more careful about cultural events organized, especially during election periods.

## **III. Access to the Labor Market**

One of the major challenges faced by Syrians in Türkiye is participation in the labor market. Informal employment is quite prevalent in Türkiye. According to data from 2021, it is estimated that the number of Syrians aged 12 and above working in Türkiye ranges between 800,000 and 1,000,000. However, the number of Syrians officially employed in Türkiye is thought to be around 60,000. Consequently, it is evident that informal employment is a significant issue, which has worsened with the pandemic. Syrians have experienced substantial job losses and have been compelled to work in more insecure jobs (Erdoğan, 2022: 210).

The acquisition of work permits for Syrians is regulated by the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners under Temporary Protection, which came into force in 2016. Following the

agreement between the EU and Türkiye in 2016, there has been an increase in the number of Syrians obtaining work permits (Danış & Dikmen, 2022: 36). Prior to 2016, while more than two and a half million Syrians were under temporary protection in Türkiye, only 4,019 work permits were issued in 2015. Although not all Syrians under temporary protection are part of the working-age population, this disparity gives an idea of the extent of informal employment. Today, more than 3 million Syrians are under temporary protection in Türkiye, with approximately half of them aged between 15 and 60. Even though there has been a general rise in the number of work permits issued, only 113,208 were granted to Syrians under temporary protection in 2022<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, informal employment remains a significant problem.

According to the Regulation, individuals under temporary protection can apply for a work permit after six months of obtaining temporary protection status. Applications are submitted by employers through the E-Government portal. Individuals eligible for an independent work permit can apply on their own behalf. Those who work in seasonal agriculture or animal husbandry are exempt from the requirement to obtain a work permit. The Ministry can impose restrictions on the employment of foreigners under temporary protection based on provinces and sectors. The Regulation also stipulates that the number of workers under temporary protection at a workplace cannot exceed 10% of the Turkish citizens employed there. Additionally, Syrians can only obtain work permits in the provinces where they are registered. Since temporary protection registration in Istanbul, which has more job opportunities than other provinces, stopped in 2019<sup>5</sup>, therefore it is very hard for Syrians to get work permits there.

## A. Asylum Seekers

Among the five women interviewed, one is a student, and only one of the remaining four is employed. P1 works as a seasonal laborer and is paid a daily wage. P1 stated that they manage to support their family because their employer pays their rent, despite the fact that they do not have a permanent job. P1 works eight hours a day whenever possible. P2, whose husband found a job in Austria through illegal ways, described life in Türkiye as very difficult, saying, “*Our financial situation is below zero; we cannot make ends meet.*” P2 mentioned that she and her husband had worked as street fruit vendors for a while, but her husband migrated to Austria illegally because they could not adapt to the economic conditions in Türkiye. P3's husband is studying abroad, and P3 supports herself with money sent by her brother who lives abroad. P3 said that economic conditions in Türkiye are very difficult, and since returning to Syria is not an option, she wants to migrate abroad. P4's father has passed away, and P4 said they survive by selling her father's land in Syria and receiving support from her uncle in Mersin when that is not enough.

The economic crisis influences the migrants such as the citizens in Türkiye. P6 works for less than the minimum wage. He previously worked in the textile sector before moving to transportation, finding a job is extremely difficult for him and their economic situation is very

<sup>4</sup> T.C. Çalışma ve Sosyal Güvenlik Bakanlığı (2022). Çalışma İzin İstatistikleri 2022-2009. <https://www.csgb.gov.tr/istatistikler/calisma-hayati-istatistikleri/resmi-istatistik-programi/calisma-izin-istatistikleri/>; Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı (2024). Geçici Koruma İstatistikleri. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>.

<sup>5</sup> Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı (2023). “İstanbul’da 39 İlçenin Yabancıların İkamet İzinlerine Kapatıldığı” İddialarına İlişkin Basın Açıklaması. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/istanbulda-39-ilcenin-yabancilarin-ikamet-izinlerine-kapatildigi-iddialarina-iliskin-basin-aciklamasi>.



bad. P6, who has six children, also receives 500 TL per person from the Red Crescent. P7, who works in construction with his brother, said that his salary is very low, getting leave from work is almost impossible, and the assistance they receive has decreased. P8, on the other hand, finds it easy to get a job because his brother arrived before him and established connections. His brother faced significant difficulties initially but eventually stabilized his life.

P9 and P10 started working when they were children. P9 made the following statement:

*“I started working at the age of 11 but I was caught by the Child Branch Directorate at 13 and faced a lawsuit. I didn’t receive a penalty and now I earn money by selling avatars in online games. My father migrated to Austria five years after coming to Türkiye. The livelihood of eight family members in the house is provided by my father.”*

P10 holds the following opinion:

*“I started working when I was nine in Syria, and it lasted two years. After migrating to Türkiye, I continued. I went to the workplace where my uncle worked. It was also in textile like now and there were lots of Syrians. Then I got used to the job, the people. So, I could find the new one... My father is sick, but he is also still working on minimum wage. I gain more than that, but we can barely live... It was easier to live in Syria before war. We didn’t pay rent. I was working in Syria, too but it was only for school breaks. My father could afford our lives on his own...”*

Out of the ten individuals interviewed, six rely on sources outside of Türkiye for their livelihood. Only three have a work permit, and one is exempt from the work permit. Similarly, only these four individuals earn an income equivalent to the minimum wage or more. Everyone interviewed said that making a living is difficult. Among the active workers, P8 and P10 did not have difficulty finding a job, largely due to P8’s brother and P10’s uncle had helped.

Among the women, three are housewives, one is employed, and one is a student. All the men have been employed at some point. The only unemployed male is under 18, having worked between the ages of 11 and 13, and wants to migrate to Europe. Therefore, considering the individuals and their relatives, finding employment, securing job stability, obtaining work permits, and earning a minimum wage in Türkiye is quite challenging. Most of the interviewees rely on sources outside Türkiye to sustain themselves.

## **B. Policy Makers**

Refugee Rights Association conducts licensing work, CV preparation, and job readiness activities within their labor force service unit. However, the process of gathering documents and the legal application process for obtaining a business license is difficult. Language barriers always pose a problem in job searching. Issues are particularly prevalent in the textile sector, where many refugees work. GAR conducts data-driven advocacy and information campaigns. Workshops addressing labor market issues are conducted with Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions in Türkiye, other unions, and municipalities. These include worker rights workshops in sectors like textiles, where many migrants are employed. Mor Çatı, which helps refugee women facing violence, directs women to vocational courses if they request and supports their entry into the workforce based on their needs.

Policy makers report that the rate of informal employment among Syrians under temporary protection is extreme. According to the Refugee Rights Association, one reason is that these individuals cannot receive aid if they work in a registered job. Given the poor state of the economy, earning the minimum wage is insufficient for their needs. For example, interviewee P6 cannot make ends meet despite receiving aid from the Red Crescent and working. Thus, Syrians under temporary protection need support even if they are working. Another reason, according to the Istanbul Bar Association, is the difficulty in legally obtaining work permits. It takes six months to apply for a work permit, and the employer, not the individual, must apply, which lengthens the process. Therefore, people under temporary protection often do not prefer it. In cases of informal employment, exploitation in the labor market is more common. For example, if their employment contract is terminated without cause, they cannot take legal action. According to Article 54/1 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, working without a work permit is a reason for deportation. Therefore, even if they face injustice in the workplace, they cannot seek legal recourse.

In conclusion, although there are some policies in place, legal problems cannot be solved on an individual level. The difficulty in obtaining work permits, the long wait of about six months, the requirement for the employer to apply, and the quotas at the discretion of the administration directly hinder access to the labor market. The fact that these regulations are made through decrees also presents issues in terms of authority. Article 91/2 of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection states that the acceptance, stay, rights and obligations, and exit procedures of persons under temporary protection will be determined by a decree issued by the President. The regulations that directly interfere with the right to work do not comply with the regime of limiting rights. This situation removes individuals from being rights holders and facilitates arbitrary regulations.

#### **IV. Active Citizenship**

The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, 2013/6458) was enacted in 2013 and came into force in 2014 to regulate the entry and exit of foreigners to and from Türkiye, their stay, and the scope and implementation of international protection. The Temporary Protection Regulation (2014/6883) was issued based on Article 91 of this law, which regulates temporary protection status, and Temporary Article 1 specifically addresses the status of Syrians who have been in Türkiye since 2011. The Regulation ensures that Syrians under temporary protection cannot be returned (Temporary Protection Regulation, 2014/6883: Article 6). However, according to the Regulation, the President of the Republic holds the authority to make and terminate decisions regarding temporary protection (Temporary Protection Regulation, 2014/6883: Article 10-11). This grants discretionary power to the President regarding their stay in Türkiye. Furthermore, the regulation does not impose any limitations on the conditions or duration of temporary protection status (Öztürk, 2019: 9). Syrians in Türkiye have been living under temporary protection status for almost 10 years, since 2014. This uncertain status affects their motivation to integrate. Consequently, many find it appealing to seek refugee status in European Union countries (Şimşek, 2017: 22). However, Syrians cannot easily seek asylum in EU, and they try dangerous ways to reach there. As a result of these policies, they are trapped into unpredictability in Türkiye (Ilcan et al, 2018).

The temporary protection status was implemented with the goal of providing a temporary solution to address the crisis. This status establishes a framework of rights collectively and at



a minimum standard, rather than tailored to individuals. While basic rights are outlined in the regulation, practical access to these rights, especially the right to work, presents barriers to integration (Şimşek, 2018: 382). Furthermore, regardless of the passage of time, individuals under this status cannot gradually approach citizenship status or apply for other international protection statuses (Temporary Protection Regulation, 2014/6883: Provisional Article 1). Therefore, if a lawful return or resettlement to another safe country is not feasible due to insufficiently improved conditions, their legal pathway to integration into Türkiye is effectively closed (Öztürk, 2019: 5-6). This situation adversely affects the individual integration of these individuals and results in a situation of non-recognition. Considering that Syrians under temporary protection status have resided in Türkiye for nearly 10 years, with their children growing up here and themselves securing employment while striving to endure in challenging circumstances, it becomes evident that categorizing everyone as temporary is impractical. However, the lack of legal recognition significantly leads to loss of rights and hinders their integration into the country. The legal aspect of local integration aims to gradually grant individuals access to rights on par with citizens, not limiting them to basic rights alone (Öztürk, 2019: p. 6). Yet, as seen in the field of employment, individuals are unable to access legal mechanisms.

### A. Asylum Seekers

Out of the 10 individuals spoken to, 5 plan to stay in Türkiye. P1 holds temporary protection status and wishes to stay due to having adjusted and learned the language. P5, if given the opportunity to obtain citizenship, would prefer to live in Türkiye, but currently stays out of necessity.

P6 also expressed a desire to stay in Türkiye with following statement:

*“I have lived in Türkiye for 9 years; I don’t want to leave. If I can gain citizenship, my decision will be certain. Lots of people want to settle Schengen area countries but I cannot express my own culture there, that’s why I don’t want to be there.”*

Even though, he also added how the legal procedures make him unsafe in İstanbul:

*“The biggest challenge since coming to Türkiye has been the impossibility of carrying out the legal procedures. Not being able to sign a rental contract for our home or cannot transfer a utility bill into my name are challenging. So, you are always in need of someone in life.”*

P10 stated that as the people in Türkiye are also muslim, it is easier to leave here. But still there are lots of economic difficulties. Therefore, they added their names to the list for migrate to Europe. However, he is not totally sure about his future.

Among the arrivals, only P3 and P4 entered with a visa. P5 was allowed entry without a visa upon arrival in Türkiye. The remaining 8 individuals entered Türkiye without a visa and later acquired identification. None of them are citizens; all of them are under temporary protection. 5 individuals are planning to settle abroad.

### B. Policy Makers

Every policymaker interviewed uses the word refugee as an umbrella term. They make special efforts not to discriminate against forced migrants. However, the efforts of the associations or the bar association are unfortunately not sufficient for the recognition of persons under

temporary protection vis-à-vis the state. According to the Istanbul Bar Association, most migrants, including Syrians under temporary protection, have problems with their stay in Türkiye before they can access their other rights. Problems such as refoulement, failure to obtain or extend a residence permit, and denial of a person's request for protection may arise. In such cases, individuals are referred to legal aid. According to the Refugee Rights Association, people's lack of knowledge of the language causes them not to be taken seriously. For this reason, they try to provide lawyer support to accompany people, especially at the removal center or migration administration. However, it is not easy to reach everyone as people are usually sent to the more distant removal center. The low number of volunteer lawyers and the decrease in funding have made active lawyer support difficult. People are supported through counseling and referred for legal aid.

When their stay is clarified, people may also have other legal disputes. Problems such as divorce, rent disputes, labor cases are common. Especially rent disputes are often a problem for Syrians as well as Turkish citizens due to inflationary policies. In this case, the Refugee Rights Association provides counseling and services. The Istanbul Bar Association also plays an active role in rights advocacy. Referral to legal aid is preferred as a reasonable way. Everyone has certain rights in Türkiye, whether they are Turkish citizens or not. However, the uncertain legal status of Syrians is a serious obstacle to their advocacy. In addition, the language barrier prevents them from expressing themselves. Since they live under temporary protection status, they experience loss of rights. Without legal aid, it is very difficult for them to access lawyer support. Even if policy makers take a position against discrimination in their support, temporary protection status is more insecure than other statuses. Therefore, in addition to the difficulty in accessing legal mechanisms, rights losses are directly related to this.

## Conclusion

This study sheds light on the intricate dynamics of the integration of asylum seekers, particularly Syrians, in Istanbul. The findings reveal a complex and often challenging integration process, marked by socio-economic, cultural, and legal obstacles. Despite temporary protection policies aimed at facilitating their inclusion, Syrians continue to face significant barriers in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and basic social services. These issues not only impede their ability to integrate fully into Turkish society but also contribute to a sense of marginalization and social exclusion. The inconsistent legal status, coupled with a lack of permanent settlement options, fosters a climate of uncertainty, diminishing their motivation to assimilate or retain meaningful cultural ties within their new environment.

The influx of refugees has the potential to cause important social, economic, and political consequences for both the citizens of the receiving country and the migrants themselves. Türkiye, as the host nation, has borne the responsibility of accommodating millions of Syrians over the past decade, yet the structural and policy-level responses have not adequately addressed the complexity of long-term integration. With the stabilization of the situation in Syria, migration from Türkiye to Syria can be considered. However, it is unlikely that there will be a sudden decline in such a large population. It is also possible that the Syrian culture in Türkiye will be a factor that will increase migration flows from Syria (Sirkeci, 2017: 138). Therefore it is crucial to build a peaceful and harmonious society. In order to receive that goal,



immigration policies must be carefully designed and implemented with a focus on both the host community's stability and the immigrants' rights and well-being. Migrants, often nostalgic for their previous life, struggle to adapt to a new country, experiencing difficulties in finding employment, learning the local language, and accessing essential services.

In Türkiye, the burden of ensuring humane living conditions for immigrants lies largely in the hands of policymakers. Rather than leaving critical decisions in the hands of a single figure of authority, it is imperative to collaborate with institutions and experts specialized in migration and integration. These institutions could develop more effective, long-term policies that address the root causes of integration challenges. However, as this research illustrates, despite the substantial time Syrians have spent in Türkiye, many have not successfully integrated. Persistent language barriers prevent effective communication, many children are left without adequate access to education, and employment opportunities are scarce. Those who do find work often do so in informal or illegal settings, without the protections and benefits afforded to legal employment, pushing many Syrians to seek better living conditions in European countries where they hope for a more secure future.

Additionally, the study highlights the often assimilationist nature of Türkiye's current integration policies, which, while aimed at bringing refugees into the fold of society, tend to erode cultural diversity by pushing refugees to conform to dominant societal norms. This approach risks alienating asylum seekers further, preventing them from fully contributing to and enriching the host society through the preservation of their unique cultural identities. The legal limbo created by the temporary protection status exacerbates this issue, as it neither provides a clear pathway to citizenship nor allows refugees to settle into long-term stability, further hindering their socio-economic mobility and integration. Interviews with asylum seekers reveal that many still feel disconnected from Turkish society, unable to forge lasting relationships with locals, and limited in their social interactions by linguistic and cultural barriers. Meanwhile, discussions with policymakers reveal a spectrum of responses, with some advocating for more inclusive, culturally sensitive policies, while others struggle to balance national security concerns with humanitarian needs.

In conclusion, for Istanbul and Türkiye as a whole to successfully navigate the ongoing refugee crisis, a multi-faceted, balanced approach is essential. Such an approach must offer legal security, socio-economic opportunities, and cultural acceptance to asylum seekers. This would require moving beyond temporary solutions and focusing on creating policies that promote sustainable integration, ensuring that both immigrants and host communities benefit from cooperation and understanding. A rights-based, inclusive framework that prioritizes the well-being of refugees while addressing the legitimate concerns of the host society is crucial to achieving long-term social cohesion. Without this, the challenges of integration will continue to deepen, further complicating Türkiye's role as a major host country in the global refugee landscape.

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