Social Cohesion in Turkey: A Process Stuck Between Policies, Discourses and Perceptions

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Turkey is one of the countries most affected by the civil war that started in Syria in 2011. Since 2014, it hosts the largest number of refugees in the world. As a result of the "open-door" policy by the Government towards refugees from Syria in the beginning of the war, there are today around 4 million refugees[1] in Turkey, 3.6 million of whom are Syrians[2]. In the first years of the migration from Syria to Turkey, the political discourse of acceptance vis-à-vis the Syrian refugees was based on an expectation of "temporariness" and the notions of *"ensar" and "muhacir"*, which refer to solidarity in a religious, cultural and humanitarian sense. However, Turkish politics after a couple of years of the Syrian war acknowledged the fact that the presence of the Syrians in the country would not be as short as initially expected.

The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)*, 2013*

In 2013, Turkey adopted its first migration and asylum law, the *Law on Foreigners and International Protection* (LFIP). Without mentioning Syrians or any other groups, the law defines in its Article 96 Turkey's model of integration with the concept of "harmonization" (social cohesion) by emphasizing the "mutuality" between host community and "foreigners" and by underlining the importance of multi-actor and multi-level cooperation in such harmonization activities. Based on the LFIP, a year later, also the Temporary Protection Regulation was adopted, which defines and regulates the legal status of Syrian refugees in the country with the associated rights and responsibilities. In addition, it assigns responsibility and authority regarding public policy and various public service areas for Syrians. In its sixth part entitled "Services", the Regulation lists the public services under the titles of health, education, access to the labor market, social assistance and services, and translation. Following the other pieces of legislation reflecting Turkey's policies regarding Syrian refugees in the country, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) of the time[3] introduced its *National Strategy on Harmonization and the National Action Plan (NSHAP) for 2018 to 2023.* The Plan clearly shows the acknowledgment of the longer-term implications of the Syrian refugees in the country, together with the efforts to sustain the official discourse of temporariness. In addition, it identifies the year 2019 as a "harmonization year" and encourages all State actors and the public to organize social cohesion activities all around Turkey, which is also important in terms of declaring clearly to the public that the social cohesion policy is the main priority of Turkey's migration management.

Turkey's migration management today

Today, Turkey's migration management policy is based on the three dimensions, in line with the promoted model by UNHCR's three durable solutions for refugees: voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration. There is no hierarchy between these; rather, it is an integrated

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[1] Turkey applies a geographical limitation to the 1951 Geneva (Refugee) Convention, which means that Turkey only grants refugee status to individuals coming from Europe (referring to Council of Europe member States) and carrying the conditions of a "refugee" described in the Convention. In this article the term "refugee" is used in a sociological concept, and not in a legal context.

[2] By the date of 28 July 2022, the exact number of Syrians under Temporary Protection status is 3.652.633; and the first 3 nationalities application for international protection are from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran (respectively). For more information on the statistics, see the Ministry of Interior Presidency of Migration Management (PMM); https://en.goc.gov.tr/ (accessed: 03/08/2022)

[3] With the Presidential Decree published in the Official Gazette dated 29 October 2021, the status of the General Directorate was changed to the Presidency.

approach that combines all three dimensions and that is implemented in close cooperation with other actors including the host community and refugees themselves. When we look at Turkey's situation in these three solution areas, as stated by the Minister of Interior, around 500 thousand Syrians voluntarily returned to Syria (to Turkey's "safe zone" in Northeast Syria) by the end of June 2022, around 19 thousand Syrians were resettled to third Countries between 2014 and 2022, and around 35 thousand were resettled within the scope of the "1-1 formula" of the Turkey-EU Agreement of 18 March 2016. While returns and resettlement can be measured numerically, this is not possible for social cohesion, as it is a process and a complicated concept that brings together many different elements. Striving for social cohesion is a policy that may lead to social tensions and conflict when it is not well-managed but that may also reduce socioeconomic inequalities and fractures in society when implemented successfully. In addition, perceptions and social interactions are as important as the policies of the State. For this reason, this paper aims to examine the factors impacting social cohesion with respect to Syrian refugees in Turkey. In doing so, we will first look at the perceptions of both host and refugee communities, and secondly, we'll examine how the language of especially political leaders and the media on refugees affects the attitudes of both communities towards each other. In this context, this paper analyzes the perception of both communities under four main categories: (i) cultural similarity, (ii) social distance, (iii) social acceptance, and (iv) "living together" in future[4]. Looking at these questions and analyzing the different aspects of Turks' social cohesion with Syrians, this study also aims to give an overall picture of the Syrians' situation in Turkey.

Perceptions of cultural similarity

Although Turkey and Syria are neighboring countries and share a common (Ottoman) history, both societies do not perceive their cultures as close to each other. However, it has been shown that Turkish society considers itself to be culturally distant from the Syrians, despite religious similarities[5]. The number of those who think that they have no similarities is at the high rate of 77,6% in total, while those who responded "they have (many) similarities" only make up 8,8%. It is particularly noteworthy that those living in border cities (83,4%) reject more cultural similarities than the other cities. In that region, the rate of those who said "we have (many) similarities" is also below Turkey's average.

On the contrary, most of the Syrians (41,4%) feel culturally very similar to Turkish society. However, it should also be noted that in comparison with previous years, there has been a remarkable decrease (15,7%) in this perception. Interestingly, while there was no significant increase in the percentage of those who suggested that Syrians were not culturally similar to Turks, the share of those who said Syrians were culturally "neither similar, nor not similar" grew to a substantial 12,2%. These changes show that once cohabitation started, perceptions of cultural similarity or proximity quickly changed.

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[4] The analysis of this part of the article including the four defined questions of the perception are based on the research titled; **Syrian Barometer (SB): A Framework for Achieving Social Cohesion with Syrians in Turkey- 2020**, chaired and drafted by Prof.M. Murat Erdoğan with support of UNHCR Turkey. It is conceived of as a regularly held study to be simultaneously conducted on Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey and the Turkish society on a macro-scale with nation-wide participation in Turkey.

The most comprehensive study in its field, SB is based on survey research conducted on large representative samples, which is further complemented with focus group discussions. To read the 2020 Report; https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/publications (accessed: 03/08/2022)

[5] Ibidem

Social distance[6]between the two communities

Although Turkish society keeps itself at a "distance" from the Syrian refugees, the Syrians (85,6%) consider themselves "very close" to Turkish society. However, the change over the years shows that the distance of Turkish society, compared to previous studies, has slightly decreased, while the Syrians' tendency to get closer to Turkish society has stagnated. It is again observed in the border cities that social distance rises to 71,2% while it is 61,4% on average in Turkey. This shows that in cities with a high number and density of Syrians, the social distance is higher, regardless of the cultural closeness. These findings also suggest that Syrians do not yet intensively feel the negative opinions and perceptions of Turkish society against them. This, in turn, may partly be a result of the closedness of Syrians as a community and on the other hand a consequence of the still high level of social acceptance within Turkish society, which does not display an active hostility despite growing anxieties.

The "social distance" between Turks and Syrians has a close linkage with the level of "social interaction" between these communities. In order to realize a "living together" in the future, it is obvious that the existence or non-existence of different types of relationship must be examined. With this aim, according to research, it is understood that for both communities the most common type of relationship is casual conversations, the second is being engaged in commercial activities, and the third is to have business relationships. More intimate types of relationship such as romantic ones or marriage are very rare among these communities. This shows that the scope and extent of individual contact and interactions between these two communities very much differs by type of relationship.

Anxieties and social acceptance[7]

It is observed that anxieties in every field were found to be on a rising trend. As the crisis in Syria, which was expected to be quickly resolved in 2011, continued and the number of refugees reached beyond millions within a short while, it can be observed that feelings of solidarity have weakened while anxieties have been mounting. However, like previous studies have shown, SB−2020 has found that Syrians do not seem to be aware of Turkish society's anxieties. In other words, it appears that Syrians either do not feel or are ignoring the anxieties of Turkish society. This finding also shows that despite the existence of harsh discourse and anxieties, there is a different reality being experienced in the daily life where social acceptance is still strong even if it is only toleration.

What "social cohesion" means for Turks and Syrians

There is an important question quickly coming to the minds of people before considering the possibility of living together with Syrians in the long run, which is whether they will return to Syria or not. In fact, this is a wish of Turkish society more than a question. However, recent studies show that 90% of society think that at least half of the Syrians will stay in Turkey. Again, the most skeptical group regarding Syrians' eventual return appears to be those living in the cities on the border with Syria. While the overall share of the answer "None of them will return" is 47,4%, it

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[6] The concept of "social distance", developed by Emory S. Bogardus in 1925 provide a tool for discussing the terms of social cohesion. And this social distance scale is used in SB study to determine the social distance between Turkish society and Syrians.

[7] The concept of "social acceptance" introduced by Prof. M. Murat Erdoğan and he discuss the concept and its impact on the social cohesion in his study titled "Syrians in Turkey: Social acceptance and integration" (2015)

stands at 62,2% in those border cities. It should also better be underlined that, although the statement "they will be permanent here" is mentioned, it is understood that the "will" of living together remains very weak.

For Turkish society, one reason not to believe that they can live together with Syrians in the future is that they are skeptical of the Syrians' ability to integrate and do not think that social cohesion has been achieved. However, when Syrians were asked about their integration in Turkey, the results showed the opposite, as they think that they have integrated well into Turkish society.

It is also important to open a parenthesis here and discuss what "social cohesion" means for Syrians and Turkish citizens respectively. According to most Syrians, social cohesion is a process through which the newcomers learn about and absorb the language, culture and norms of the host society. Moreover, we see that many Syrians put more emphasis on the transformation that the native society needs to undertake. In short, social cohesion can be said to have been achieved once the Turkish society stopped seeing Syrians as foreigners and has started seeing them as natural members of the public. According to the third-most supported view among Syrian respondents, social cohesion is a mutual process of getting used to the new social context and does not require any group to change itself as long as the other makes no effort either. For Turkish citizens, knowing the language (Turkish) and obeying the rules and norms of everyday life are the basis of the social cohesion. Some also emphasize the need to have sufficient interaction and communication between the communities without conflict and tension. And for a few of them, social cohesion requires a kind of transformation of the "newcomers" as well as the display of a sense of belonging.

Public opinion on "living together" in the future

As seen above, although the Government has made an effort to (re)construct a policy on migration management in Turkey and has strengthened the legal basis of the rights of foreigners, including refugees and the concept of social cohesion, it is understood that there still exist concerns within Turkish society due to a lack of "hope" regarding the possibility of living together in the future, which lead to an increase in social distance between the Turkish and Syrian communities. It is clearly seen that the refugee issue has had and will continue to have an impact on the demographic, political and social situation of the country. And this issue will probably continue to head Turkey's list of most problematic areas for a long time. Precisely for this reason, the discourse on refugees emerges as an important instrument in politics. Given the Turkish public's strongly negative views on and their significant social distance from Syrians, there is an increase in populist discourse both at the national and local level on election eve. Some politicians no longer hesitate to use racist and discriminative language in their public speeches and do not even realize that this is hate speech, which triggers conflict and tension in society.

The discourses of the media and the social media

It is obvious that polarization and confrontational discourses not only affect society but also the media. Since the media (especially conventional media) in Turkey is strongly linked to political discourse and public attitudes, this causes a fragmentation and politization of Turkey's media as well. That is the reason why today it has become normal in society to describe media outlets as close or opposed to the government, which diverges from the principals of a free, independent and objective media. This situation also prevents the media

from fulfilling its main function which is to investigate and deliver trustworthy and accurate reporting.

Another main factor that shapes Turkish society's perception are social media channels, which are also called "alternative media" and has become more popular in recent years. However, unlike traditional media, social media is a field that is more difficult to control and where there is much more and faster information flow. Moreover, social media has also become an uncontrolled eco-chamber of the widespread concerns about Syrians in society. The social media has a largely oppositional and anti-Syrian attitude, and has opened up space for critical takes on the issue as well as on the government. Besides, social media became a platform where a lot of disinformation could spread instantly. For instance, what we see as a tendency on social media platforms recently is the stigmatization of anyone who is thought to be Middle Eastern based on their physical appearance as "Syrian", an attribution of individual criminal cases to all Syrians, talk about irregular migrants as "illegal" and a labeling of all Afghans in Turkey as "illegal migrants". Besides that, misconceptions, rumors and false information about Syrians, which all are assumed to be true, are very common today, which harms the social cohesion process and increases Turks' negative perceptions of the Syrian refugees.

To combat and prevent all these negative and manipulative discourses used against refugees in general and mostly Syrians in particular, there is no doubt that there is a need for a communication strategy and to share regular, transparent data and information on the social cohesion process and refugee-related issues in the country. This issue is the responsibility of all relevant institutions and organizations, especially the Presidency of Migration Management that has a leading role in the implementation of the social cohesion process at all levels.