

# ‘Welcoming’ Guests: The Role of Ideational and Contextual Factors in Public Perceptions About Refugees and Attitudes about Their Integration

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# ‘Welcoming’ Guests: The Role of Ideational and Contextual Factors in Public Perceptions About Refugees and Attitudes about Their Integration

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## ABSTRACT

In this study, we aim to explore the ideational and contextual sources of perceptions about refugees. Contrary to many studies focusing on the interaction with and integration of refugees in developed countries, we examine the effect of social identity and refugee exposure on the perception of refugees in Turkey, which pose a substantive case with a background of ethnic conflict and scarce resources. We contend that social identities provide individuals with cues; however, we argue that identity type and its salience are key to understanding in-group vs. out-group formation processes, hence the perceptions about refugees. Moreover, we argue that socioeconomic status affects an individual’s support for refugee integration, as it challenges the existing status quo of access to scarce resources. Our findings challenge the conventional wisdom in migration studies by employing an original face-to-face survey among over 1,100 respondents in three cities (Istanbul, Diyarbakir, and Gaziantep) in Turkey. We find that those prioritizing national vs. religious identities reveal different levels of perceived threat. Additionally, we show that those belonging to lower-income socioeconomic groups are less supportive of refugee integration when the presence of refugees sets the ground for competition for economic and social resources where they reside.

**Keywords:** refugees, perceived threat, identity, socioeconomic change, Turkey

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## Introduction

Millions of people have migrated in recent decades, predominantly from scarcity of material resources, civil conflict, and human rights violations, to regions such as Western Europe and North America that promise better life quality. Massive degrees of migration exhibit a high

potential to redefine the political arena, as both electorate and governments in democratic systems reflect on policies to handle immigration and integration of refugees.<sup>1</sup> Governments can employ policies that could help with the successful integration of refugees within host societies; however, this becomes a painful process when their constituents perceive newcomers negatively. Hence, exploring these perceptions and attitudes at the individual level is vital for predicting the successful integration of refugees in host countries.

Previous accounts on the revival of anti-refugee attitudes in North America and Western Europe usually refer to three competing explanations,<sup>2</sup> including 1) the *group threat perspective* with a focus on hostile sentiments as a response to perceived changes in demographics and economics that are threatening for the dominant ethnic majority;<sup>3</sup> the *social contact perspective* with an emphasis on the lacking inter-group interaction between newcomers and the host communities;<sup>4</sup> and 3) the *socio-cultural perspective* drawing attention to the importance of cultural characteristics, symbols, values and beliefs of native populations in understanding anti-refugee sentiments.<sup>5</sup>

Considering these existing perspectives, one should investigate what happens to refugees when they arrive in a social context that already has conflicts surrounding social identities and scarce resources. Along similar lines, this study argues that in a social context where different social identities are already in conflict, individuals use their identities as a cue to adopt attitudes toward outsiders. After all, identities provide various cues to individuals based on the similarities and distinctions between the native population and “outsiders.”

In this paper, we stress that support for refugee integration should not be seen as non-monolithic. Instead, individuals with different socio-economic backgrounds adopt different views on how their government should handle refugee integration. In a developing country with scarce resources, lower classes might be very skeptical about the status of the refugees in their country. Regardless of their education level, refugees are more significant threats to low-skill jobs. Therefore, we argue that support for refugee integration also decreases as socioeconomic status decreases. However, this relationship is conditional on the local context, with members of low socio-economic segments living in smaller urban areas with even scarcer resources and economic opportunities being more negative toward refugee integration than their fellows who live in bigger cities.

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- 1 J. Hainmueller and D. J. Hokins, “Public Attitudes Toward Immigration”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 17, 2014, p. 225-249.
  - 2 Steven P. Vallas et al., “Enemies of the state? Testing Three Models of Anti-immigrant Sentiment”, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, Vol. 27, No 4, 2009, p. 201-217.
  - 3 Herbert Blumer, “Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position”, *The Pacific Sociological Review*, Vol. 1, No 1, 1958, p. 3-7; Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority Group Relations*, New York, John Wiley, 1967; Lawrence Bobo and Vincent L. Hutchings, “Perceptions of Racial Group Competition: Extending Blumer’s Theory of Group Position to a Multiracial Social Context”, *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 61, No 6, 1996, p. 951-972.
  - 4 Gordon Willard Allport et al., *The Nature of Prejudice*, Reading, MA, Addison-Wesley, 1954.
  - 5 Jeffrey C. Dixon and Michael S. Rosenbaum, “Nice to Know You? Testing Contact, Cultural, and Group Threat Theories of Anti-Black and Anti-Hispanic Stereotypes”, *Social Science Quarterly*, Vol. 85, No 2, 2004, p. 257-280.

Turkey has the features of an appropriate social context for testing our theoretical expectations. Turkey hosts more than four million Syrian refugees who fled a violent long-lasting civil war.<sup>6</sup> We draw our conclusions based on original face-to-face survey data<sup>7</sup> collected from the residents of three Turkish cities, namely Istanbul, Diyarbakır, and Gaziantep. We strategically select these cities varying by location and resources available to native-born and refugees, as well as native ethnic (Turkish and Kurdish) resident sizes, to examine how social identity and social status conditional on the local context influence perceptions about refugees.<sup>8</sup> Our findings reveal that, compared to those who prioritize their national identity, individuals who prioritize their religious identity perceive less threat from the Syrian refugees, mostly Muslims. Additionally, members of lower-income socio-economic groups are less supportive of refugee integration when the presence of refugees sets the ground for competition for economic and social resources where they reside.

## 'Welcoming' Guests: Attitudes towards Refugees

Previous literature on perceptions about and attitudes toward refugees builds, for the most part, on the threat to security due to the likelihood of repercussions of international or civil conflict. Brown<sup>9</sup> points out various problems caused by refugee mobilization, such as drawing the host country into conflict, widening existing conflicts and posing threats to international peace and security. Studies empirically find evidence that the likelihood of conflict spillover increases as more refugees move from nearby conflict-torn countries.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, refugees are associated with the spread or diffusion of terrorism across pairs of states, which supports the idea that refugees can trigger security concerns in host countries.<sup>11</sup> Yet, this is not the only threat hosting societies may perceive, as there might be other reasons for intergroup antagonism. According to social identity theory, individuals who have more robust identification with in-groups are more likely to enjoy the psychological benefits extracted from just being a member of a social group and, therefore, are also more likely to perceive a threat from outsiders even though it is

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6 For more information, please check UNHCR Turkey fact sheet – February 2022 via <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2022/03/UNHCR-Turkey-Factsheet-February-2022.pdf>

7 The data used in this research has been collected in Turkey between December 2016 and January 2017 upon the ethical approval of Binghamton University's IRB – Protocol Number: 3936-16.

8 While the Turkish case has some exceptional characteristics to test our hypotheses, it also has some limitations. The most important limitation of our study is that it is a single case study, which causes external validity problems. Another important limitation is the date (2016-2017) when the survey was conducted. A lot has changed since then, and our empirical results do not account for those changes. However, we did our best to address those changes in the discussion.

9 Michael E. Brown, "Causes and Implications of Ethnic Conflict", Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex (eds.), *The Ethnicity Reader*, Cambridge, Polity, 2010, p. 92-109.

10 Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War", *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No 2, 2006, p. 335-366; Idean Salehyan, "The Externalities of Civil Strife: Refugees as a Source of International Conflict", *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 52, No 4, 2008, p. 787-801.

11 Daniel Milton et al., "Radicalism of the Hopeless: Refugee Flows and Transnational Terrorism", *International Interactions*, Vol. 39, No 5, 2013, p. 621-645; Vincenzo Bove and Tobias Böhmelt, "Does Immigration Induce Terrorism?", *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 78, No 2, 2016, p. 572-588.

not directed to their self-interest.<sup>12</sup> Especially under conditions that refugees stay longer than expected in a host country, natives might perceive their existence as a potential threat to economic welfare (i.e., realistic group conflict) and social and cultural life (i.e., symbolic threat).

According to the realistic group conflict theory,<sup>13</sup> one's economic position within the social hierarchy influences threat perceptions. In other words, preexisting in-group and out-group power dynamics can affect attitudes toward outsiders.<sup>14</sup> For instance, the native population might feel injustice or unfairness when an out-group receives more than they "deserve" relative to their efforts. This is described as "relative deprivation,"<sup>15</sup> which refers to the individual judgment of one's group being worse off than other groups and, therefore, personal feelings of anger and resentment. Under these conditions of "relative deprivation," people might develop negative attitudes towards those groups to fulfill the justice they seek.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, when people associate refugees with using specific resources, benefits, or status change, they can keep outsiders responsible for the negative economic state of the host country.<sup>17</sup>

Alternatively, natives adopt negative perceptions and attitudes towards refugees due to possible threats to their social and cultural background, which is described as a symbolic threat. Tajfel and Turner<sup>18</sup> show that real or meaningful conflicts over resources are insufficient for the emergence of in-group favoritism and out-group negativity. Instead, reflections of social and cultural differences may be the source of an inter-group conflict resulting from the fear of loss of collective social and cultural identity,<sup>19</sup> and the beliefs that outsiders' lack of will to adapt with conventional values of the society.<sup>20</sup> Stephan and Stephan<sup>21</sup> and Stephan et al.<sup>22</sup>

12 Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Relations", Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Chicago, Nelson-Hall, 1986, p. 7-24.

13 Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority Group Relations*; Muzaffer Sherif and Carolyn W. Sherif, *Social Psychology*, New York, Harper & Row, 1969; Robert A. Levine and Donald T. Campbell, *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*, Oxford, England, John Wiley & Sons, 1972.

14 Lawrence Bobo and Mia Tuan, *Prejudice in Politics: Group Position, Public Opinion, and the Wisconsin Treaty Rights Dispute*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2006.

15 Heather J. Smith and Thomas F. Pettigrew, "Advances in Relative Deprivation Theory and Research", *Social Justice Research*, Vol. 28, No 1, 2015, p. 1-6.

16 Gudmund Hernes and Knud Knudsen, "Norwegians' Attitudes Toward New Immigrants", *Acta Sociologica*, Vol. 35, No 2, 1992, p. 123-139.

17 Joel Fetzer, "Economic Self-interest or Cultural Marginality? Anti-immigration Sentiment and Nativist Political Movements in France, Germany and the USA", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 26, No 1, 2000, p.5-28.

18 Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Relations".

19 Christian Dustmann and Ian P. Preston, "Racial and Economic Factors in Attitudes to Immigration", Discussion Paper Series, CDP No. 01/04, University College London, Centre for Research and Analysis of Migration, 2004; Kevin O'Rourke and Richard Sinnott, "The Determinants of Individual Attitudes Towards Immigration", *European Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 22, No 4, 2006, p. 838-861; Jens Hainmuller and Michael J. Hiscox, "Educated Preferences: Explaining Attitudes Toward Immigration in Europe", *International Organization*, Vol. 61, No 2, 2007, p. 399-442.

20 Elias Dinas and Joost Spanje, "Crime Story: The Role of Crime and Immigration in the Anti-Immigration Vote", *Electoral Studies*, Vol. 30, No 4, 2011, p. 658-671.

21 Walter G. Stephan and Cookie White Stephan, "Predicting Prejudice", *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, Vol. 20, No 3-4, 1996, p. 409-426.

22 Cookie White Stephan et al., "Women's Attitudes Toward Men: An Integrated Threat Theory Approach", *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No 1, 2000, p. 63-73.

claimed that competition for scarce resources and conflicting values could simultaneously affect perceptions about the out-group. Under their classification, there are four different types of threats: realistic threat, symbolic threat, intergroup anxiety, and harmful stereotypes,<sup>23</sup> which were collapsed back to realist and symbolic threats in the revised version of the theory.<sup>24</sup>

Today, the conflict between the authoritarian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad's regime and opposition forces continues in Syria. The involvement of the U.S., Russia, Turkey, and Iran attracted the attention of the international audience. According to the numbers of UNHCR,<sup>25</sup> Turkey hosts around 4 million of these displaced people. Due to the ongoing conflict in Syria, we assume that Syrian refugees will stay in Turkey for an undetermined period, which brings up an important question: What happens when refugees arrive in a country with mobilized ethnic conflicts with scarce resources? What shapes the local population's threat perception and their support for policies targeting the integration of refugees in a country with an unsettled national identity and limited economic resources? There is a growing literature on Syrian refugees in Turkey focusing on the local population's attitudes towards Syrian refugees,<sup>26</sup> refugee inflow's impact on voting behavior,<sup>27</sup> the issue of Syrian refugee integration,<sup>28</sup> policies addressing Syrian refugees,<sup>29</sup> and our study aims to contribute to the scholarly effort by analyzing the effect of social identity and local context on the local population's threat perceptions and policy preferences.

- 23 Blake M. Riek et al., "Intergroup Threat and Outgroup Attitudes: A Meta-Analytic Review", *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 10, No 4, 2006, p. 336-353.
- 24 Walter G. Stephan and C. Lausanne Renfro, "The Role of Threat in Intergroup Relations," Diane M. Mackie and Eliot R. Smith (eds.), *From Prejudice to Intergroup Emotions: Differentiated Reactions to Social Groups*, New York and Hove, Psychology Press, 2002, p. 191-207.
- 25 UNHCR, "Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Turkey", <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/refugees-and-asylum-seekers-in-turkey> (Accessed 25 April 2023).
- 26 Aysenur Dal and Efe Tokdemir, "Siyasi Haber Alma Pratiklerinin Suriyeli Göçmenlerle İlgili Tehdit Algıları Üzerindeki Etkileri", *Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol. 9, No 2, 2021, p. 417-439; Emre Erdoğan and Pinar Uyan Semerci, "Attitudes towards Syrians in Turkey-201", *German Marshall Fund Discussion on Turkish Perceptions of Syrian Refugees*, Ankara, Turkey, 2018; Murat M. Erdoğan, "'Securitization from Society' and 'Social Acceptance': Political Party-Based Approaches in Turkey to Syrian Refugees", *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Vol. 17, No 68, 2020, p. 73-92; Anna Getmansky et al., "Refugees, Xenophobia, and Domestic Conflict: Evidence From a Survey Experiment in Turkey", *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 55, No 4, 2018, p. 491-507; Emre Hatipoğlu et al., "Automated Text Analysis and International Relations: The Introduction and Application of A Novel Technique For Twitter", *All Azimuth: A Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, Vol. 8, No 2, 2019, p. 183-204; Ahmet Icduygu, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: The Long Road Ahead", *Migration Policy Institute*, 2015, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/syrian-refugees-turkey-long-road-ahead> (Accessed 25 April 2023).
- 27 Onur Altındag and Neeraj Kaushal, "Do Refugees Impact Voting Behavior in the Host Country? Evidence from Syrian Refugee Inflows to Turkey", *Public Choice*, Vol. 186, No 1, 2021, p. 149-178.
- 28 Sebnem Koser Akcapar and Dogus Simsek "The Politics of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: A Question of Inclusion and Exclusion through Citizenship", *Social Inclusion*, Vol. 6, No 1, 2018, p. 176-187; Daniela V. Dimitrova et al., "On the Border of the Syrian Refugee Crisis: Views from Two Different Cultural Perspectives", *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 62, No 4, 2018, p. 532-546.
- 29 Basak Yavcan, "On Governing the Syrian Refugee Crisis Collectively: The View from Turkey", *Near Futures Online*, Vol. 1, No 8, 2016, p. 201; Umut Korkut, "Pragmatism, Moral Responsibility or Policy Change: The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Selective Humanitarianism in the Turkish Refugee Regime", *Comparative Migration Studies*, Vol. 4, No 2, 2016, p. 1-20; Fulya Memisoglu and Asli Ilgit, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Multifaceted Challenges, Diverse Players and Ambiguous Policies", *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 22, No 3, 2017, p. 317-338.



## Social Identity as the Predictor of Threat Perceptions

Adopting the conceptualization of social identity theory, we assume that members of an in-group might perceive a threat to their group's status when outsiders arrive in their existing social context.<sup>30</sup> This threat may be targeting the overall security of the in-group's material resources, e.g., the replacement of native workers with refugees since the latter offer cheaper labor,<sup>31</sup> as well as their welfare and lifestyle.

Our societies are polarized by nationality, ethnicity, race, political ideology, religion, and other numerous group distinctions. Being a member of one or more of these social groups shapes our identity and, eventually, our lives. As Stephan et al. (2016:255) claim, all these different social groups are defined by specific membership criteria and boundaries that build distinctions between those who are included and those who are not. Yet, there is no reason to believe that national boundaries between identity groups do not lead to any tension, especially when millions of refugees with distinct social identities come to a society that already has ethnic, social, economic, and political tensions between preexisting groups.

People live in groups with which they develop strong bonds, and therefore, it is not surprising for people to feel threatened even under circumstances where none of those threats exist. This general tendency is consistent with the bias people display to avoid costly errors.<sup>32</sup> According to a simple cost and benefit analysis, compared to perceiving threats when they are authentic, perceiving them when they do not exist is less costly. This is why Stephan et al.<sup>33</sup> state that by default, individuals "may be predisposed to perceive threats from out-groups."<sup>34</sup>

Going back to our study context, we argue that national and religious identities carry a heuristic value that members of Turkish society will rely on when forming attitudes toward Syrian refugees. Especially in a social context, where several identities have a relatively high degree of saliency due to the leading social cleavages (e.g., religious vs. secular and Turkish vs. foreigner), individuals will depend on their strong group belongings when they form attitudes toward Syrian refugees.

In times of crisis or chaos, the likelihood of favoring in-group members and feeling hostility toward out-group members increases.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, when a massive influx of refugees

30 Nyla R. Branscombe et al., "The Context and Content of Social Identity Threat", Naomi Ellemers, Russell Spears and Bertjan Doosje (eds.), *Social Identity: Context, Commitment, Content*, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley-Blackwell, 1999, p. 35-58.

31 Arun Roy, "Job Displacement Effects of Canadian Immigrants by Country of Origin and Occupation", *International Migration Review*, Vol. 31, No 1, 1997, p. 150-161; George J. Borjas et al., "How Much Do Immigration and Trade Affect Labor Market Outcomes", *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Vol. 1, 1997, p. 1-67.

32 Martie G. Haselton and David M. Buss, "Biases in Social Judgment: Design Flaws or Design Features?", Joseph P. Forgas, Kipling D. Williams, and William von Hippel (eds.), *Social Judgments: Implicit and Explicit Processes*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 23-43.

33 Walter G. Stephan et al., "Intergroup threat theory", Todd D. Nelson (ed.), *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2016, p. 43-59.

34 Ibid

35 Nyla R. Branscombe et al., "Perceiving Pervasive Discrimination Among African Americans: Implications for Group Identification and Well-being", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 77, No 1, 1999, p. 135-149; Tajfel and Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Relations".

arrives in a country, host community members may gather around a simple heuristic to handle the emerging uncertainty. Social identity as a mental shortcut would be perfectly accessible for reaching quick and easy judgments about how these newcomers would fit (or not) into the existing social space in their locality. Hence, we claim that considering the national and local dynamics would help explain the attitudes of host communities toward newcomers.

We acknowledge that multiple identities have non-homogenous effects on individuals' threat perceptions. Arguing that individuals' attitudes toward the members of an outside group can be better understood by analyzing how various social group identifications are perceived as an attribute granting access to limited resources, we claim that the degree of a perceived threat from refugees will be conditional on the saliency of an individual's identity. Members of the local population who prefer to identify with national components of their group belongings might focus more on the distinctions and differences between Syrians' cultural norms, values, and habits. At the same time, they evaluate outsiders' 'temporary' presence in their country.

We assume that the Turkish national identity (being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey) still has various exclusionary elements reinforced by Turkish nationalism. Since the early Republican era, the Turkish national identity has been officially described by Turkish ethnicity.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the Turkish national identity is constructed on Turkish norms, language, and history. While it is challenging to address clear-cut differences between the Turkish ethnic and national identities, individuals who put their national identity in front of all other social group identities will see the Syrian refugees as a threat, regarding, for instance, the competition over scarce resources such as jobs or the security of their fellow citizens with whom they at least share *Turkishness*. Based on realistic and symbolic group threat components of integrated threat theory, we derive the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1: When individuals prioritize their national identity (being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey), they will be more likely to see Syrian refugees as a threat.*

National identity is not the only salient identity in Turkey. Since the early years of modern nation-state formation in Turkey, people with stronger religious beliefs and greater devotion to religious practices tend to identify themselves as Muslims. After the military coup of 1980, the dominance of Sunni Islam was institutionalized through various policies, such as mandatory socialization of young generations to Sunni Islam in schools, which are parts of the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis."<sup>37</sup> AKP, the incumbent party since 2002, inherited this synthesis and called Syrian refugees 'guests' upon their initial arrival, which we interpret as strategic use of a discursive frame to control the level of discontent among the people of Turkey. Despite

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36 M. Hakan Yavuz, "Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol. 7, 2001, No 3, p. 1-24; Mehmet Gurses, "Is Islam a Cure for Ethnic Conflict? Evidence from Turkey", *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 8, No 1, 2015, p. 135-154.

37 Kemal Kirişçi, "Minority/Majority Discourse: The Case of the Kurds in Turkey", Dru C. Gladney (ed.), *Making Majorities*, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 227-248.



the ethnic differences, Turkish, Kurdish, and Syrian, these groups share the same religious identity, Sunni Islam. To this, the AKP government built its strategy on this common religious identity, i.e., the discourse of ‘brotherhood’ based on shared Muslim identity, to convince people, especially its supporters, to accept Syrian refugees as guests.<sup>38</sup> Those who identify as Sunni Muslims would focus on the commonalities between Syrian refugees and their own in-group. Additionally, religion provides the moral aspect of feelings towards the believers of the same faith despite other differences Syrian refugees have, such as ethnicity, language, etc.

*Hypothesis 2: When individuals prioritize their religious identity (Sunni Islam), they will be less likely to see Syrian refugees as a threat.*

## Explaining Preferences for Refugee Integration in Turkey

Refugee integration is crucial to welcoming outsiders, eventually creating social circumstances determining how safe and integrated they will feel within the hosting society. Şimşek<sup>39</sup> prefers to call the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey ‘class-based integration.’ In other words, refugees with higher skill sets and investment resources are favored for integration. For instance, in February 2016, the government passed a bill about giving working permits to Syrian refugees. According to the Labor Ministry of Turkey, the rate of refugees in the workplace cannot surpass 10 percent, except for seasonal agricultural jobs that most natives do not prefer. Another important public policy issue concerns granting Syrian refugees with citizenship. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signaled this highly contested policy in the summer of 2016. One year after Erdoğan’s announcement, the government declared its plan to initially give citizenship to Syrian refugees with white-collar labor skills, such as teachers, doctors, and engineers.

The income level as a proxy for socio-economic status is another important indicator of realistic group threat perception. According to the realistic group threat theory, individuals in each social class or socio-economic segment of society might feel threatened by outsiders from a lower class or segment, especially when they believe that these newcomers will pose a threat to their economic well-being. They can be more receptive to the scenarios such as outsiders’ potential to steal their jobs or get government funding to be paid by citizens’ taxes. Thus, in the case of refugee integration, individuals with a similar socio-economic status might feel threatened in a like manner by the members of the outside group and develop hostile attitudes.

We expect lower-income individuals to feel higher degrees of realistic threat coming from the refugees because they are more likely to compete for limited resources and constitute a more significant portion of the population. Lower skills jobs is under a significant threat

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38 Feyzi Baban et al., “Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Pathways to Precarity, Differential Inclusion, and Negotiated Citizenship Rights”, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol. 43, No 1, 2017, p. 41-57.

39 Doğu Şimşek, “Integration Process of Syrian Refugees in Turkey: ‘Class-based Integration’”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 33, No 3, 2020, p. 537-554.

when millions of refugees flood into a country as the number of people already qualifying for those jobs (including those with higher levels of education) increases dramatically. The alleged exploitation of Syrian refugees as cheaper labor also feeds into the gravity of competition for lower-income Turkish citizens in economic sectors, including construction, agriculture, and manufacturing.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, we derive the following hypothesis regarding the socio-economic position of individuals:

*Hypothesis 3: Individuals with lower income levels are more likely to oppose the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey.*

Additionally, we argue that neither the social identity nor income level fully captures the local dynamics of the relationship between the refugees and the local population. The social space which people share and experience at the local level might be an important factor in shaping attitudes toward refugees. We expect Turkish citizens' support for refugee integration to vary conditional on the likelihood and the type of interactions and everyday life experiences they may have with refugees. We argue that the effect of income level on preferences over refugee integration will be moderated by location. Whether people live in a city at the Syrian border with a significant crowd of refugees, such as Gaziantep, will moderate the relationship between their income level and their views on Syrian refugees' future in Turkey.

Among the three cities (Istanbul, Diyarbakır and Gaziantep) we focus on, Istanbul provides an urban context with refugees settled in with desires of finding jobs, sending their kids to relatively better schools, and using numerous other opportunities that a big city provides. Since 2015, Istanbul has become the city with the most considerable number of refugees. As of December 2022, Istanbul hosted about 543,973 registered Syrians.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Syrian refugees constitute about 3.7 percent of Istanbul's population.

Unlike Istanbul, Diyarbakır, a Kurdish stronghold city, does not offer the same level of social and economic opportunities for refugees. As of December 2022, only 21,670 Syrians were living in Diyarbakır, which makes up only 1.2 percent of the total population.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, Gaziantep is an industrialized medium-sized city bordering Syria. As of December 2022, there are more than 461,000 refugees living in Gaziantep, making 22.2 percent of the city's total population. Hence, compared to the two other cities, refugees are likelier to have a readily observable impact on Gaziantep's demographics and socio-economic conditions.

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40 Ximena V. Del Carpio et al., "The impact of Syrians Refugees on the Turkish Labor Market," *World Bank Policy Research Working Paper*, no. WPS 7402, 2015, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/505471468194980180/The-impact-of-Syrians-refugees-on-the-Turkish-labor-market>; Ihsan M. Kuyumcu and Hülya Kösematoğlu, "Suriyeli Mültecilerin Türkiye Ekonomisi Üzerine Etkileri", *Türk Sosyal Bilimler Arastirmalari Dergisi*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2017, p. 77-93.

41 International Crisis Group's report on Syrian refugees, "Turkey's Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions," provides detailed information on Turkey's movement and living conditions.

42 The numbers describing the number of refugees and their rate to total population in these cities are taken from: <https://multeciler.org.tr/turkiyedeki-suriyeli-sayisi/>

One possible source of divergence between the locals and refugees is cultural differences. While natives living at the Syrian border share more cultural characteristics with refugees, this is less likely in metropolitan areas. Another critical difference is the possible competition between locals with low socio-economic backgrounds and refugees for low-wage jobs, especially considering the informal economy observed in Turkey.<sup>43</sup>

We argue that the effect of income on demand for refugee integration changes conditional on location. Metropolitan areas such as Istanbul promise more job opportunities in various economic sectors, while those opportunities are more limited in smaller, less-industrialized cities. Therefore, lower-income individuals might have different views on refugee integration since the extended stay of Syrian refugees might mean higher economic and materialistic threats for lower income levels in smaller cities. In contrast, in bigger cities, the degree of this threat is lower. Hence, we hypothesize:

*H4: Individuals with lower income levels are more likely to oppose the integration of Syrian refugees in Turkey, conditional on whether the individual resides in Gaziantep, where the arrival of refugees has dramatically changed the social-economic opportunity structure.*

## Research Design

To test whether identity type, salience, and income shape individuals' threat perceptions about Syrian refugees, we collected original survey data in Turkey. By using a mixed-sampling strategy, we conducted face-to-face surveys on a randomly drawn sample of citizens from three predetermined cities, namely Istanbul, Gaziantep, and Diyarbakir. In this way, we maximized the probability of the participation of a sufficient number of people living close to the border zones and the cities heavily affected by the refugee flow, given that most Syrian refugees live in major cities and not inside formal refugee camps.

As a result of our convenience sampling method in selecting the cities and random sampling in choosing respondents from each city, our sample is representative of the actual ethnic and socio-economic distribution of the selected cities. Based on these sampling methods, 1,136 respondents (Istanbul (N=518), Gaziantep (N=315), Diyarbakir (N=303)) over the age of 18 were interviewed between December 24, 2016, and January 22, 2017<sup>44</sup> when the conflict was continuing in Syria and refugees were still crossing the border between Syria and Turkey in large numbers. The average time for respondents to complete the survey was 19 minutes.

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43 Del Carpio et al., "The impact of Syrians Refugees on the Turkish Labor Market".

44 Please find the replication material in the link: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/40DDRM>

Our sampling procedure<sup>45</sup> was as follows: In total, we randomly chose 141 sub-districts from İstanbul, Diyarbakır and Gaziantep. This gave us a representative sample within each city. Using official records of street lists, we randomly chose four streets from each sub-district followed by two houses also selected randomly from each street. Cases of no-response from a household was handled by skipping three houses and attempting to interview the household members of the fourth one. The survey company (i.e., Infakto) made sure that the enumerators chosen for conducting the interviews represented the ethnic and religious characteristics of the cities and districts of focus.

### *Dependent Variables*

In this study, we examine two dependent variables, with Hypotheses 1 and 2 referring to perceived threat and Hypotheses 3 and 4 referring to support for refugee integration. We first measured respondents' attitudes towards refugees via their evaluations of refugees as a threat to a) national security, b) the country's economy, and c) the welfare of citizens. Then, to measure their support for refugee reintegration, we asked respondents to what extent they support a) opening the borders for all Syrian refugees, b) issuing work permits, and c) offering citizenship to them. Response options were on a five-point Likert scale, taking values ranging from 1 as 'strongly disagree' to 5 as 'strongly agree,' with higher values indicative of a more significant threat perceived by respondents and support for their reintegration. A confirmatory factor analysis with varimax rotation located respondents' attitudinal positions in appropriate dimensions of the threat perception items constituted one dimension, and the level of demand for integration items constituted another. The resulting continuous dependent variables were acquired via the normalization of perceived threat and demand for reintegration scores.

The integration questions are designed to see the change in public support for the most common policies governments offer in various countries that accept refugees from different countries. It starts with an open border question, and then the last two questions are about the permanence of refugees. We know permanence is necessary but not a sufficient condition for peaceful integration. However, work permits and citizenship were the most popular topics discussed by the public when we conducted our survey.

### *Independent Variables*

We had two sets of independent variables. To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we used a question in which individuals reported which of their identities (i.e., religious, ethnic, national, sectarian, economic class) they felt most important. Based on the responses, we dummied out national identity (being a citizen of the Republic of Turkey) for Hypothesis 1 and religious identity (being a Muslim) for Hypothesis 2. We then employed them individually as binary variables when running the analysis (see Online Appendix for the survey questions).

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<sup>45</sup> The dataset has been previously used in a previously published work. Hence, the data collection and sampling procedures were also explained in Dal & Tokdemir (2021) and Tokdemir (2021).

One of the shortcomings of this approach, i.e., employing identity as the primary independent variable in surveys, is that respondents might not be sincere in some contexts. In conflict zones or locations close to a conflict, people can hide or intentionally give wrong information due to security concerns, especially regarding their ethnic backgrounds and saliency. Hence, a respondent from a minority group may avoid reporting prioritizing their ethnic identity intentionally. However, we believe that our sampling method addresses this problem. The ratio of respondents identifying as ethnically Kurd is 34.6% of the total sample, which is relatively high.

To test Hypothesis 3, we used respondents' household income to measure their socio-economic status. We measured the income ordinally, ranging from 1 to 10, with each level referring to an income interval.

Lastly, we used the survey's location for the third set of independent variables. We dummied out each city as Istanbul, Diyarbakir, and Gaziantep to employ them separately in the analyses as binary variables. In the moderation models, we used Gaziantep as our constituent term, the city near the border where all the refugees initially flow; hence, we interpreted coefficients relative to Diyarbakir and Istanbul.

### ***Control Variables***

We included several control variables in our models to account for other aspects that might affect people's threat perceptions. Demographic variables we controlled for include age, gender, education, employment status as well as the urbanity of the respondents. Our controls also captured the potential factors behind respondents' political views. We controlled for individual's self-assessment of their welfare (in the range of 0-10) and the country's economic status (in the range of 1-4) given that some studies reveal that individuals might prioritize egocentric or socio-tropic evaluations in the assessment of their welfare. We also accounted for religiosity ranging from 0 (not religious at all) to 10 (very religious). Finally, we added a control variable indicating whether the respondent was interviewed alone or in the presence of others during the face-to-face interview. Our summary statistics are in Table 1.

### ***Empirical Strategy***

We run ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to predict the role of national and religious identity, income, and location in explaining our dependent variables, which were constructed by the factor scores we calculated using multiple survey questions with higher values indicating greater threat perception or support.<sup>46</sup> Tables 2 and 3 summarize our main findings.

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<sup>46</sup> As a robustness check, we estimated an ordered logistic regression (OLR) as well by simply summing up survey questions for each dependent variable with an index ranging from 3 to 15 for both variables. Moreover, we also ran OLS and OLR models taking each component of perceived threat (i.e., national security, economic, and social threat) and support for reintegration (i.e., opening borders, granting work permits and citizenship) as separate dependent variables. Our findings were robust to the variable operationalization and alternative model types.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Threat to National Security	3.667	1.329	1	5	1095
Threat to Economic Security	3.864	1.284	1	5	1099
Threat to Social Welfare	3.784	1.287	1	5	1099
Perceived Threat (factor)	0	1	-2.644	1.559	1072
Perceived Threat (additive)	11.312	3.634	3	15	1091
Demand for Open Border for Refugees	2.409	1.368	1	5	1100
Demand for Work Permit to Refugees	2.254	1.338	1	5	1095
Demand for Citizenship to Refugees	1.866	1.248	1	5	1093
Demand for Integration (factor)	0	1	-1.625	2.876	1072
Demand for Integration (additive)	6.505	3.442	3	15	1086
Prioritize Religious ID	0.526	0.5	0	1	1085
Prioritize National ID	0.37	0.483	0	1	1085
Income	4.597	2.466	1	10	1015
Gaziantep	0.277	0.448	0	1	1136
Istanbul	0.456	0.498	0	1	1136
Diyarbakir	0.267	0.442	0	1	1136
Kurd	0.346	0.476	0	1	1125
Discriminated	0.141	0.348	0	1	1091
Male	0.51	0.5	0	1	1136
Employed (constant income owners)	0.468	0.499	0	1	1117
Urban	0.878	0.328	0	1	1136
Age	37.621	13.372	18	77	1136
Education	4.175	1.515	1	8	1134
Religiosity	6.684	2.36	0	10	1109
Egocentric Evaluation	5.374	2.92	0	10	1133
Sociotropic Evaluation	2.149	1.091	1	4	1095
Interviewed Alone	0.75	0.433	0	1	1136

## Results

Hypothesis 1 suggests that those who prioritize their national identity will perceive a larger economic, social, and security threat from the Syrian refugees, as they will frame them as “outsiders.” Embracing national identity and prioritizing “citizenship of Turkey” over other alternative identities will create in and out-group processes around citizenship. Therefore, regardless of other associations, Syrian refugees will be perceived as an ‘out-group’ by the citizens of Turkey, who are among the ‘in-group.’ In line with our expectation, prioritizing national identity over other identities leads citizens of Turkey to perceive a more significant threat from refugees, as shown in Models 1 and 2 of Table 2.

The results are not only statistically significant but also substantively meaningful. In our analysis, since we estimate OLS, the interpretation of the coefficients is straightforward.



Yet, given that our dependent variable consists of predicted factor scores, we provide further information here. As reported in Table 1, our dependent variable has a normal distribution with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Its value ranges from -2.3 to 1, which means the distribution is skewed to the right. Considering this information, compared to others, those who embrace the national identity are revealing 0.23 points more perceived threat based on Model 3.

**Table 2.** Identity Salience and Perceived Threat from Refugees

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Prioritize National ID	0.161* (0.063)	0.253** (0.078)	0.228** (0.076)			
Prioritize Religious ID				-0.179** (0.062)	-0.218** (0.074)	-0.185* (0.072)
Kurd		-0.014 (0.086)	0.014 (0.095)		-0.052 (0.082)	-0.018 (0.094)
Discriminated		0.171 (0.098)	0.127 (0.096)		0.150 (0.097)	0.109 (0.095)
Male		0.021 (0.076)	0.022 (0.073)		0.020 (0.076)	0.019 (0.073)
Employed (cons. income)		-0.212* (0.084)	-0.205* (0.080)		-0.214* (0.084)	-0.206* (0.080)
Income		-0.021 (0.017)	-0.066*** (0.019)		-0.021 (0.017)	-0.066*** (0.019)
Urban		-0.033 (0.100)	-0.118 (0.104)		-0.043 (0.101)	-0.127 (0.105)
Age		-0.003 (0.002)	-0.004 (0.002)		-0.003 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.002)
Education		0.062* (0.026)	0.067* (0.026)		0.059* (0.027)	0.065* (0.026)
Religiosity		0.037* (0.016)	0.032* (0.016)		0.042** (0.016)	0.036* (0.016)
Egocentric Evaluation		-0.040** (0.013)	-0.038** (0.012)		-0.040** (0.013)	-0.038** (0.012)
Sociotropic Evaluation		-0.197*** (0.036)	-0.175*** (0.035)		-0.195*** (0.036)	-0.174*** (0.035)
Interviewed Alone		-0.078 (0.077)	-0.046 (0.077)		-0.070 (0.077)	-0.042 (0.078)
Gaziantep			-0.203 (0.107)			-0.190 (0.108)
Istanbul			0.309** (0.113)			0.319** (0.113)
Constant	-0.060 (0.040)	0.398 (0.239)	0.558* (0.240)	0.093* (0.044)	0.589* (0.234)	0.720** (0.237)
Observations	1024	859	859	1024	859	859
R <sup>2</sup>	0.006	0.121	0.153	0.008	0.119	0.150

Robust standard errors in parentheses, \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001

According to Hypothesis 2, prioritizing religious identity has a reverse effect on the perceived threat. Given that a vast majority of Syrian refugees are Muslim, regardless of their ethnic and sectarian identity, citizens of Turkey that act primarily based on their religious identity will be more likely to count them as part of the in-group. Accordingly, contrary to those prioritizing their national identity, Syrian refugees are not 'outsiders' but part of a Muslim community, making them 'in-group' members. Likewise, the findings in the Models 4-6 confirm Hypothesis 2, with those prioritizing their religious identity exhibiting 0.19 points (Model 6 of Table 2) less likelihood of perceiving threat from the refugees.

In Table 3, we examine our claims stated in Hypotheses 3 and 4. Contrary to our expectations for the income level to predict demand for refugee integration, both the empty (Model 1) and full models (Model 4) in Table 3 reveal that support for the integration of refugees into society is not statistically related to respondents' household income. Considering these findings, we fail to reject the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 3. Moving forward with Hypothesis 4, in Models 2 and 3, we focus on the role of location in predicting the support for the integration of refugees since location sets the ground for the socio-economic context where refugees interact with the locals. In Model 2, we demonstrate that those who live in Gaziantep are less likely to support the integration of refugees. In Model 3, we report the results from Istanbul and Diyarbakir residents, as Gaziantep serves as the base category. Both Istanbul and Diyarbakir residents are more likely to support refugee integration policies. We believe this is a result of the dramatically changing demographics in Gaziantep and the problems resulting from such changes.<sup>47</sup>

Even though city-level analysis distinguishes Gaziantep, a city with high refugee density, from Diyarbakir and Istanbul to better test the theoretical mechanism, we should again focus on the micro-level. After all, if it is because refugees are a socio-economic threat to people with lower income, and that is why, the latter does not support the integration of the former, then we should also see the variation in Gaziantep, as well. In Model 5, we report the interaction results revealing the support of low-income individuals to refugee integration, conditional on their city. The interaction term is statistically significant, showing that income is a significant predictor yet conditional on the city. Figure 1 presents the findings based on Model 5 of Table 2. Here, the role of income conditional on two cities is reported. While there is no significant differentiation among low vs. high-income respondents in their support for the integration of refugees, we see a statistically significant difference between these two groups in Gaziantep. As expected, support for the integration of refugees is decreasing with the decrease in household income level in Gaziantep. Further, Gaziantep differs from Diyarbakir and Istanbul regarding reported support for integration. This, too, is in line with our argument, as it is Gaziantep that attracts millions of refugees and, as a result, observes a dramatic change in its demographic and socio-economic conditions.

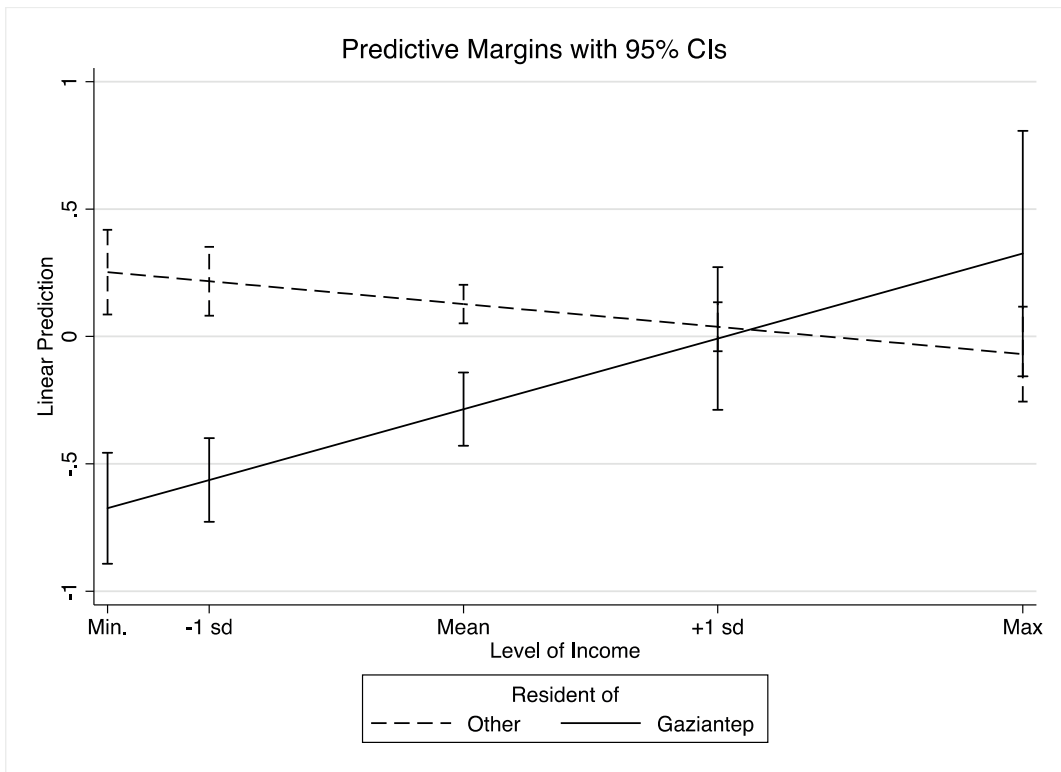
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47 The survey was conducted in 2016-2017, and therefore, our results do not account for the effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic as well as ongoing economic crisis and high inflation in Turkey. We are aware of this limitation, and we kindly ask our readers to accept our results with a pinch of salt.

**Table 3.** Impact of Income Level and Social Context on Demand for Refugee Integration

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Income	0.003 (0.013)			0.003 (0.018)	-0.036 (0.018)
Gaziantep		-0.496*** (0.067)		-0.469*** (0.083)	-1.073*** (0.165)
Istanbul			0.323*** (0.068)		
Diyarbakir			0.819*** (0.089)		
Gaziantep $\times$ Income					0.147*** (0.039)
Kurd				0.102 (0.081)	0.035 (0.081)
Discriminated				0.023 (0.113)	0.011 (0.113)
Male				0.005 (0.080)	-0.007 (0.078)
Employed (cons. income)				0.027 (0.086)	0.074 (0.083)
Urban				-0.311** (0.107)	-0.320** (0.104)
Age				-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)
Education				-0.003 (0.025)	-0.003 (0.024)
Religiosity				0.041** (0.015)	0.043** (0.015)
Egocentric Evaluation				-0.020 (0.013)	-0.021 (0.013)
Sociotropic Evaluation				0.057 (0.035)	0.055 (0.034)
Interviewed Alone				-0.050 (0.079)	-0.044 (0.078)
Constant	-0.042 (0.072)	0.142*** (0.035)	-0.355*** (0.057)	0.163 (0.245)	0.363 (0.248)
Observations	966	1072	1072	892	892
$R^2$	0.000	0.050	0.090	0.081	0.100

Robust standard errors in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

**Figure 1.** Effect of Income Level on Demand for Integration Conditional on the City

Tables 2 and 3 also reveal that employment status, income level, education level, and both egocentric and socio-tropic evaluation of the current conditions influence the perceived threat from Syrian refugees. Those with higher educational attainment, job security, and a better economic situation seem to perceive fewer threats from refugees. Finally, a similar pattern can also be seen with the association between having positive assessments regarding one's personal and societal situation and perceiving low levels of threat from the refugees.

## Conclusion

This study investigates the predictors of hosting communities' perceived threat coming from the Syrian refugees in the case of Turkey. By employing the realistic group conflict theory within the social identity theory framework and examining the role of social context, we analyze who sees refugees as a threat and to what extent and under what circumstances they support their integration into society. Using the Turkish context, we specifically explore what happens when refugees arrive in a developing country with an ongoing ethnic conflict and an unsettled national identity. We show that while threat perceptions related to national security, economy, and social welfare are high among individuals who prefer to identify themselves with the national identity, those who prefer to identify themselves as Muslim, a shared religious identity between the hosting and the refugee communities, perceive such a threat to a smaller extent. Moreover, we find that although an individual's income level alone does not predict support for refugee integration,

once the refugees' presence is made salient and imminent by the potentially worsening socio-economic conditions, as in the case of Gaziantep with a dramatically changing demographic scene, an individual's support for refugee integration is significantly affected.

Our findings have several key policy implications. First, we stress that a significant majority of the hosting community in Turkey saw Syrian refugees as a threat. If "outsiders" are perceived as a threat, it might cause serious social problems, such as discrimination and violence toward the Syrian refugees.<sup>48</sup> Being aware of the social pillars of the discontent about and rage over the refugees, governments must adopt appropriate policies that could help with smoother integration. Based on the results of our study, it is obvious that governments should take necessary measures to locate refugees in various places rather than forcing them to stay in locations close to their hometowns. Cases like Gaziantep reveal that the local populations can perceive more threat if the influx of refugees changes the demographics of their locality. Therefore, contrary to the conventional wisdom, methods of relying on and signifying the role of shared identities between the hosting and the refugee community might not be enough for a peaceful coexistence.

Finally, given that the threat perceptions from the Syrian refugees are significantly higher among the individuals who are unemployed and with lower-income, and support for their reintegration is low among low-income status groups in a high-refugee presence context, we suspect that prospective policies should aim at the grievances among lower-class segments of society especially given the ongoing economic crisis in Turkey. Our findings also show that hosting refugees in underdeveloped or developing countries amplifies the risks of social tension between the hosting communities and the incoming *guests*.

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