



An Examination of the Link Between Syrian Migrants and Nationalism in Modern Turkey

Laidlaw Scholarship Programme

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Laidlaw Scholarship Programme for providing me with this opportunity to pursue this research and supporting me throughout. Shraddha Prasad and Flo Zeng were instrumental in guiding me through the Laidlaw program and assisting me with my research throughout the summer. Professor Murat Inan was the one who helped me pursue my passion for this topic and guided me through all steps of the research. Without his help and guidance, from the proposal to the following report, I would have not been successful. Lastly, I would like to thank my grandparents, brother, and father for always being there for me and for being what motivates me every day.

Introduction

Rising nationalism has become an issue worldwide. From the election of Donald Trump in the US to Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, global political spheres have seen a shift toward populism and hyper nationalism. Migration and the increase in displacement of people has been attributed to causing this shift in many countries. I wanted to investigate whether there was a link between rising migration and rising nationalism and xenophobia. Whilst investigating these trends worldwide, I wanted to examine a situation that could best represent the global scale. Upon further research I came upon Turkey; a country which is both geographically and culturally a crossroads between the western and eastern hemisphere. Turkey is a nation that has been the center of the global political stage and also of the migrant crisis. Due to the Syrian Civil War, which has caused a large displacement of Syrians, the U.N. has estimated that there are more than 3.6 million Syrian refugees in Turkey. (Kenyon, 2022)

With this large influx of migrants within the country, Turkey has seen a spike in nationalism similar to the US, India, Brazil, and other countries. This can be seen through the election of many far-right parties in recent elections, such as the “Victory Party,” led by Umit Ozdag. (Cornell, 2019) With nationalism on the rise, there has also been an increase in xenophobia and hate crimes against Syrian refugees. (Communication, 2021) Such acts of violence have made investigating the link between nationalism and migrants an even more pressing matter. This situation is very common to what is happening in countries like the US, where Asian and African-American hate crimes have been on the rise. This proves that the situation in Turkey is still very emblematic of what is happening around the world. An intended outcome of this research is to assist communities and political structures in diagnosing and solving the rising violence against minorities and migrants within their respective countries.

With the invasion of Ukraine there has been a renewed interest in the situation in Turkey, as it has become a crucial contingent point within the broader Global political landscape. Turkey has always stated that it does not want to be a refuge for fleeing migrants, but refugees have given the nation lots of leverage within NATO and the EU. (Kenyon, 2022) As Ukraine has now interest in joining NATO and other Scandinavian nations wish to be a part of the EU, the far right politics of Turkey has been placed in the spotlight. Turkey is also a vital corridor for both Ukrainian and Russian transport, which has made the country's national political situation even more important and relevant today.

My research will examine how and to what extent does the influx of Syrian migrants contribute to the rise in nationalism and xenophobia in modern Turkey. My intended outcomes for this paper are to show how rising migration has caused a rise in nationalism in Turkey and how that is emblematic of what is happening around the world. I also want to show how the recent increase in xenophobia and hate in Turkey can be linked to right-wing nationalist parties using fear as a political tool.

Methodology

To examine the rise of nationalism and xenophobia and its correlation with the influx of migrants, I examined a range of sources that assisted in the investigation and ultimately helped reached a conclusion within the paper. The sources I analyzed included: books, journals, archives, and news articles. The two scholarly books I chose to analyze were, *Turkey's Syrians: Today and Tomorrow*; *The Precarious Lives of Syrians*. These scholarly books were found after reading and researching books that best fit within my research question. I have also compiled eleven newspaper articles within the last five years that focus on the political manipulation of far

right parties and the rising nationalism within Turkey. These newspaper articles were found through keyword searches of: nationalism, hypernationalism, migrants in Turkey, political state of Turkey, and other relevant keywords.

These sources will assist in exploring how and why nationalism is rising in Turkey. I am planning on analyzing historical immigration flows which will provide historical context to the investigation on how previous migrants were treated, and the effects of migration on nationalism. Furthermore, by utilizing sources such as books and news articles, I plan to show how Turkish perspectives are both beneficial and critical in relation to the investigation. This will benefit my investigation as it will examine more deeply the causes and roots of why nationalism is developing. I also plan to use articles and sources that look at how migrants in Turkey are living and interacting with the local communities. This will examine the levels of tensions between migrants and communities, indicating whether xenophobia is influencing the rise of nationalism.

With the invasion of Ukraine and the rising importance of the “Victory Party,” I found it very important to note that my sources are quite dated and relevant to the investigation. This is also a component of why many of the sources utilized within the investigation are newspaper articles, as they provided the greatest relevance to the examination and outcomes. The examination will be conducted in three sections, the first section will analyze the nature of Syrian migrants and of Turkey itself; the second section will analyze Turkish government policies and treatment of migrants in the region; and the last section will analyze the political situation in current day Turkey and the rise of right wing parties.

The Nature of Turkey and Syrian Migrants

This section of the paper will examine both the nature of Turkey's cultural sphere and that of the Syrian migrants. It will prove that the nationalistic hold on Turkey and separate identities between Syrian Migrants and Turkish nationals has contributed to the link between rising nationalism and the influx of migrants. Turkey has historically been a nation with nationalistic qualities, since the Ottoman Empire's decline and dissolution in the 20th century, the Turkish people have felt that foreign influence and factors are threatening to their way of life. (*Nationalism in Turkey*, 2019) This may explain how and why the recent influx of migrants have caused a rise in nationalism. The Turkish people may be more inclined to feeling fear of foreign migrants, such as the Syrians, because they feel that they are changing their way of life. It is not a question of whether these Syrian migrants are shifting Turkish ways of life, rather it shows how the nature of Turkey's history has led it to have fear against current day Syrian migrants. The idea of separate identities is also very important, because it shows the natural dehumanization of Syrian migrants. Residents of these camps are always known as non-citizens, alienated from socio-political life, reduced to their membership in bare life. (Utku, 2017) This display of how Syrians are recognized and classified within Turkish society brings to light how the dehumanization of these migrants can make it easier for xenophobia and a ethnically motivated nationalism to rise. This ethnic nationalism has also been seen in many rural areas of Turkey, where Syrians are employed in low wage jobs and in the agricultural industry. (Uysal, 2019) The nature of Syrian's vocations have also led to more harassment and a further ability for xenophobia to rise. With the economic downturn in Turkey, many Syrians may also be scapegoated for the downturn. Economic downturns usually lead to rise in populism and right-wing ideologies, this could be exacerbated by the large number of Syrians in low wage

sectors. To also prove the link between migration and rising nationalism, it is important to examine how past waves of migration affected Turkey's political spheres. Much of Turkey's past immigrant waves were met with disdain, expulsion, or even violence. (Kirisci, 2003) This is important as it shows that the historical nature of Turkey's past migrant waves led to some rise in nationalism or xenophobia within the country. This can show how the nature of Turkey's socio-political sphere is subject to rises in hypernationalism with large influxes of migrants, such as the current one with Syrians. Discussing the nature and history of the migrants and the nation of Turkey has led to show how the link between the influx of migrants and rising nationalism can be attributed in part to the vocation and identity of Syrians and to the nationalistic and xenophobic nature of Turkey's socio-political sphere. Though, to further show causation, it is important to examine how the Turkish government has responded to the recent influx of Syrian migrants.

The Turkish Government's Treatment of Syrian Migrants

This section of the examination will analyze what kinds of policies the Turkish government has enacted in response to the influx of migrants and how they have been treated by official government representatives and agencies. It will ultimately show how the treatment of migrants is an example of the rising xenophobic presence in Turkey. A large initiative pushed by the government in Turkey centers around cracking down on migrant crime, though this is purely a falsehood, as in fact migrants do not contribute to the crime rate in Turkey. (Kayaoglu, 2022) This crackdown on migrants and the reality of how migrants do not affect crime show that the government's policy is not based on a reactionary response, rather it is a signal of a nationalistic and xenophobic sentiment that has been propagated to the public. Having a "strong" response to

migrants in the country is an example of how the government of Turkey is reacting to the recent surge. Using these migrants as a scapegoat is a sign of hypernationalistic tendencies, and shows the how the migrants are connected to and the subject of the rising xenophobia within the nation. More so, after the surge of migrants in 2014, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) placed a policy limiting refugee's mobility within the country and creating discriminatory policy over identities. (Utku, 2017) As shown before, racism and discrimination are signs of hypernationalism within a nation. The Directorate General's actions, on behalf of the administration of President Erdogan, has allowed for discrimination and general racism towards Syrian migrants to rise. This action can allow populism and sense of national identity for Turkish people to become stronger, which in turn can create more nationalistic agendas and support for right-wing policies such as the ones Erdogan has enacted. Soon after the policy's implementation, a survey conducted revealed that 86% of Turkish citizens believe that the influx of refugees should stop. (Utku, 2017) This further proves that the government's intent to spread a nationalistic and right wing agenda is working as the great majority of Turkey's population does not feel inclined to accept more refugees. This is not something to do with refugees either, as they provide a great benefit and have been shown to invest their lives in the social, cultural, political, and economic realms of Turkey. (Baban et al., 2021) The government's policies have also changed the dynamics of the situation and migrant crisis in Turkey. In the beginning many of the Turkish people were very welcoming to many of the refugees escaping conflict, though as time went many Turkish citizens' support started to wane. (*Turkey's Syrian Refugees*, 2018) This further shows the result of government policies, as hypernationalism and sense of ethnic identities rapidly rose after the implementation of anti-immigrant sentiment policies. The examination of past policies has shown how nationalism and xenophobia has correlated with the

influx of migrants and that of the agenda of the government of Turkey. The situation today has become much more complex, with the rise of new political parties and the war in Ukraine, Turkey's political situation is now in the spotlight. It will be important to examine how the current political dynamics of the country are showing a link between growing migration and nationalism.

The Rise of Right-Wing Parties and the Current Political Dynamic in Turkey

This section of the examination will look at the recent rise of right-wing and hypernationalistic parties within Turkey. It will also examine how the international political landscape has made Turkey's migrant and refugee situation linked within the current domestic political dynamic. This section will ultimately show how the dangerous right-wing rhetoric in the country is at an all time high and how this is a result of the influx of migration, which has radicalized much of the nation's nationalistic population. One of the main reasons that there is a rise in right-wing parties in Turkey is because many politicians and activists have realized that there is more political gain in having nationalistic agendas and extremist platforms. Many of these parties are more successful in elections when they argue for populism and display xenophobia. (Bakhshalizada, 2022) This is why the influx of migrants have been such crucial contention points as many conservative parties will usually scapegoat such migrants and use them on many of their political platforms. This shows the connection between how the influx of migrants has led to a rise in nationalism, to no fault of their own, migrants have been used as political pawns by nationalist parties who would like to see their party members be successful. Migrants are feeling this hate and violence as well, many of them have been scared to go out in public or speak their native language. This fear has been a result of the largest and most

controversial right wing party in Turkey, the “Victory Party.” Its main goal is to expel migrants and has gained a lot of popularity in the suburban and rural sectors of Turkey. (Vohra, 2022) Rise of extremist parties is nothing rare, as examined before, though the rise and popularity of a party whose sole focus is to expel Syrian migrants is something that is very new. This speaks on to the trend of how nationalism has become so connected with migrants and migration within Turkey. Umit Ozdag, who leads the “Victory Party” in Turkey has become the spokesperson and face of the extremist organization. As economic catastrophes hit Turkey in 2020 and 2021, much of the country was in shambles. Lack of jobs and cash had halted most of the country’s economic capacity and power. This created a perfect scenario for Umit Ozdag, who used the economic backdrop to attack migrants for the poor economic situation. This put current President Erdogan in a political bind. He appeared too weak against refugees and his approval ratings quickly slipped. These actions led him to take tough actions against the migrant corridor, closing much of it. He also tightened trade corridors from Russia and Ukraine, as the Russo-Ukraine war began. (Istanbul, 2022) These actions are growing signs of the shifting political dynamic within Turkey. The surge of migrants and nationalistic agenda has reached its peak within the nation. These actions and political quarrel show to a greater extent how the influx of migrants has allowed for the political dynamic to become hostile and potentially violent. Such dangers are side effects of growing populism, xenophobia, and nationalism within a country. The political dynamic in Turkey has become dangerous and as nationalism continues to rise it will only get worse, this section has shown how right-wing parties have used migrant communities as political capital in their fight to grow and remain in power.

Conclusion

Through the examination, it has been shown to a greater extent that the influx of Syrian migrants has led to a rise in nationalism and xenophobia within the country. The examination looked at the nature of Turkey and its nationalistic past to dissect how the country's past migration waves led to similar effects as the current one is resulting in as well. Turkey's nature and inclination to have a population that is nationalistic and prone to populism and xenophobia was also displayed. It also looked at how the nature of Syrian migrants' vocation has led them to be in lower wage jobs which have resulted in backlash from rural Turks and the general population. The nature of Syrian migrants' language and identity was discussed and showed how separate ethnic identities and inter-communal relationships have led to a rise in xenophobia within the Turkish population. The second section of the examination investigated the treatment of Syrian migrants and the policies that the government has enacted against them. It showed how migrants have been very poorly treated by the government, and even though they have tried to positively invest within their new community, they have been shut down or harassed. It showed how migrant crime is largely a falsehood and how the Turkish government and current administration has used such "crackdowns" to enact tough policies of control on migrants. The section also discussed how government agencies of the Erdogan administration had constrained opportunities and created classification categories for migrants, resulting in discrimination and lack of growth for the migrant communities. The last section of the examination looked at the rise of right-wing parties and extremism within the political landscape of Turkey. It also briefly showed how the war in Ukraine has resulted in hostile policies by the Erdogan administration. The section examined the rise of Umit Ozdam and the "Victory Party" as well as showing how parties such as Ozdam's use the migrants as scapegoats and for political manipulation. Upon the

completion of the three sections, it can be seen how the influx of migrants, to a greater extent, has been linked with rising nationalism and xenophobia within the nation of Turkey. This was shown through the nature of Turkey and Syrian migrants, the treatment of Syrian migrants by the government, and the rise of right-wing parties within Turkey. With the examination complete, it can hopefully provide light and direction to countries, such as the US, on how to counter xenophobia and fear of migrants. It will also hopefully show the dangers and violence that comes with rising nationalism and how it is an issue that needs to be taken seriously and action against before it is too late.

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