
SYRIAN IMMIGRATION IN TURKISH PARTY POLITICS

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SYRIAN IMMIGRATION IN TURKISH PARTY POLITICS



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Contents

ABSTRACT	6
1. INTRODUCTION	7
2. SYRIAN IMMIGRANTS BETWEEN XENOPHOBIA AND ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION	9
3. IMMIGRATION AS A NEW ISSUE DIMENSION IN TURKISH POLITICS	11
3.1 AKP AND THE LIMITS OF ISLAMIC SOLIDARITY	13
3.2 MHP (MILLİYETÇİ HAREKET PARTİSİ — NATIONALIST ACTION PARTY)	14
3.3 HDP: UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS	16
3.4 CHP: SYRIANS AS AN ECONOMIC BURDEN	17
3.5 İYİ PARTY AND THE POLITICS OF ANTI-IMMIGRATION	18
3.6 PARALLELS WITH THE EUROPEAN FAR-RIGHT	21
CONCLUSION	24
ENDNOTES	26
ABOUT AL SHARQ STRATEGIC RESEARCH	32

ABSTRACT

Syrian immigration to Turkey has become a controversial topic since the first wave of refugees arrived in 2011. While the immigration issue initially largely remained outside of party politics, it began to occupy a more central place in political debates over the second half of the last decade due to the increasing number of Syrians and their prolonged stay. More specifically, security concerns, increasing economic distress, and the emergence of anti-immigrant parties in Turkish politics transformed the issue into a polarizing element of party politics. By analyzing the position of the five largest political parties in the Turkish Grand National Assembly on Syrian immigrants, this piece illustrates that immigration has become a new dimension of party politics in Turkey. It excludes both smaller parties (i.e., Saadet and Demokrat Parti) and newly established parties such as Gelecek, DEVA, Memleket, and Zafer from the analysis, as these newly established parties have not yet participated in an electoral race and thus lack fully-fledged electoral manifestos. In general, both AKP and HDP adopted pro-immigrant policies, while MHP's initial emphasis on anti-immigrant policies ceased to exist after its electoral alliance with AKP. In contrast, CHP has recently begun to adopt a more anti-immigrant position as the 2023 Presidential elections approach. Finally, İYİ Party appears to have the strongest anti-immigrant position which shows certain parallels with the European far-right. Future research would particularly benefit from analyzing the position of Zafer Partisi (Victory Party), which has an even more extreme position towards Syrian immigrants compared to İYİ Party.

1- Introduction

The humanitarian cost of the Syrian civil war so far is beyond comprehension; causing more than 600,000 deaths and displaced 12 million people, while more than 14,300 individuals were subjected to torture.¹ Nonetheless, a peaceful resolution remains out of hand. Turkey, with the longest borders with Syria and deep social and historical connections, became involved in the conflict since the very onset of protests. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) government viewed Syria as the “jewel in the crown” of its ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy. Party elites were therefore confident they could convince the Assad regime to undertake democratic reforms.² AKP quickly realized the futility of such efforts, however, and declared Turkey’s support for the mainstream opposition in Syria and displayed solidarity by pursuing an open-door policy for those fleeing from the conflict.

Turkey’s anti-Assad stance made the country a safe zone for millions of Syrians. Turkey received the first wave of refugees with the arrival of 58,000 Syrians on 29 April 2011. This number soon exceeded 1.5 million towards the end of 2014, 2.5 million by the end of 2015, and 3 million by early 2017.³ As of December 2021, there are 3,737,369 Syrian refugees living in Turkey under “Temporary Protection” status.⁴ Given that based on the 1951 Geneva Convention Turkey only grants refugee status to immigrants from European countries, Syrians are left in a legally ambiguous position with limited access to fundamental rights and services, making them more vulnerable to xenophobic attacks.

Without a legally defined status, Syrians have become the object of political polarization. Furthermore, Turkey’s own domestic political and economic instabilities and regional crises made their presence an even more contested topic. The 2013 Gezi Park protests, the failed coup attempt on July 15, 2016, and the polarizing elections in 2018 (national) and 2019 (local) deepened the existing cleavages in Turkish politics.

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In addition, Turkey suffered substantial losses that were directly and indirectly related to the ongoing conflict in Syria. In 2012, a Turkish scout plane was shot down, terrorist attacks targeted the cities of Reyhanlı and Cilvegözü near the Syrian border,⁵ while terrorist attacks from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the YPG, the military wing of the PKK's Syrian offshoot PYD, further destabilized the country. Furthermore, the increasing tensions with Russia caused by the downing of a Russian jet in Syria in 2015 brought Turkey to the verge of a military conflict and suffered significant economic losses from the consequent Russian embargo. In short, the political turmoil of the 2010s transformed the issue of Syrian immigrants into a question of national security as well as polarized party politics, making Syrians more and more vulnerable to increasing xenophobia.

This study analyzes the positions of the five largest political parties in the Turkish parliament (AKP, CHP, HDP, İYİ Party, and MHP) toward Syrian refugees. In general, this piece argues that AKP and HDP adopted pro-immigrant attitudes. While the former justifies the presence of Syrians in the context of religious solidarity, the latter refers to universal human rights and freedoms. Furthermore, MHP appears to be less hostile towards refugees especially since its formal electoral alliance with AKP, while CHP began to adopt a more anti-immigrant position that depicts Syrians as an economic burden. Finally, this piece contends that İYİ Party has an anti-immigrant policy position that shows certain similarities with the European far-right given the strong emphasis on cultural differences.

The next section gives an overview of the general perception of Syrian immigrants in Turkish society as well as the economic exploitation that they are subjected to. In this first section, the goal is to present how and why Syrian immigrants have become a polarizing issue in Turkish society and politics. The following part analyzes parties' positions and shows that immigration was a novel issue in party politics in Turkey. The penultimate section presents a comparative analysis of the politics of immigration by focusing on the policies adopted by far-right parties in Europe. The final section presents concluding observations.

2- Syrian Immigrants between Xenophobia and Economic Exploitation

Official statistics indicates that number of Syrian refugees residing in Turkey as of December 2021 is 3,737,369. They are largely scattered across Turkish cities, while only 51,159 of them live in the temporary refugee centers (See Figure 1).⁶ As Syrians become more visible in urban life, they have become subjected to greater anti-immigrant sentiments and economic exploitation. Figure 1 illustrates that refugees are mostly concentrated either in the largest cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and İzmir) or Southeastern Turkey (Gaziantep, Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Kilis).

The media exacerbates concerns over limited economic resources (jobs, social services, and funds), safety of daily life, and the integrity of Turkish culture

Like many refugees around the world, Syrian immigrants in Turkey also suffer from stereotypes and overgeneralizations. Media plays an important role in breeding certain stereotypes and shaping Turkish citizens' negative perception of refugees.⁷ Generally speaking, pro-government media outlets maintain a positive approach towards Syrians by depicting them as our "brothers in need," thus emphasizing the need for religious solidarity. On the other hand, opposition media promotes negative portrayals such as "feeding Syrians," "coward Syrians who run from war," "traitors," "lazy Arabs," and "radical Islamists."⁸ Furthermore, social media platforms have become instrumental in promoting an ethnocentric understanding of citizenship and nationalism.⁹ More specifically, social media posts disseminate disinformation by spreading rumors that Syrians receive salaries from the government, are exempt from university entrance exams, and that they start gangs and form crime ghettos.¹⁰

In general, the media exacerbates concerns over limited economic resources (jobs, social services, and funds¹¹), safety of daily life, and the integrity of Turkish culture, thus creating barriers between ordinary citizens and refugees and impeding possible avenues of cultural dialogue and exchange. By over-politicizing the issue, the Turkish media has contributed to discrimination against refugees, which has even led to attempted lynchings and violent attacks. One recent example was the violent riot in Altındağ neighborhood of Ankara which targeted Syrian individuals and businesses on 11-12 August 2021.¹² The violence against Syrians intensified with the death of three Syrian workers in İzmir who were set ablaze.¹³

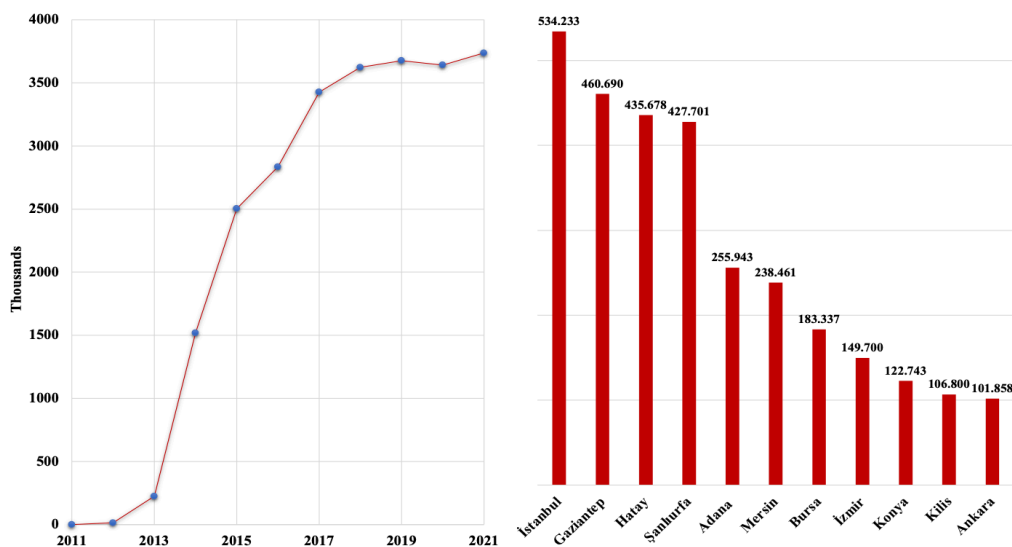


Figure 1: Number of Syrians under Temporary Protection since 2011 (left); Number of Syrians under Temporary Protection by top ten cities (right), visit Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı (Directorate General of Migration Management), <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

In general, feelings of “loss” frame the negative perception of Syrians, whether loss of economic gains, urban space, or national cohesion

As a result, a large portion of Turkish society prefers a certain distance from Syrians. Survey results from 2021 show that 67% of the Turkish electorate wants the government to seal the borders against refugees, 60% of respondents are not happy with the presence of Syrian refugees, 52% thinks that these refugees have a tendency to commit crime, another 43% believes that Syrians increase unemployment, while 37% thinks that they negatively affect Turkish national identity.¹⁴ Another survey conducted the following year shows that Turkish citizens in general are against the idea of granting political rights to refugees (87%) and prefer refoulment (73%).¹⁵ Last but not least, over 70% of Turkish society disapproves of the AKP government’s policy towards Syrian refugees and 27.2% consider Syrians as the top problem in the country.¹⁶ What is worrisome is that this negative perception of Syrians is shared regardless of party identity. In short, these results show that Turkish society on average tends to have a negative perception of Syrians.

In general, feelings of “loss” frame the negative perception of Syrians, whether loss of economic gains, urban space, or national cohesion.¹⁷ While low-skilled workers feel threatened by the new coming “cheap” labor force, the general public expresses concerns over deterioration of public services, increasing criminal activities, and Arabization of Turkish identity and urban life.¹⁸ The anti-immigrant sentiments of low-income Turkish citizens on the other hand are fueled by increasing rental costs, especially in bordering cities, and the loss of jobs in the informal economic sector.¹⁹ In addition to the criminalization and economic demonization of Syrians, domestic political tensions contribute to negative perceptions, as opponents of the AKP government also tend to have a negative view of refugees.²⁰ However, what is largely overlooked by the media, political elites, and the general public is the fact that a large portion of the financial aid to Syrians is funded by the EU and other international donors while the perception of Syrians’ complete financial reliance on Turkish state is a false narrative promoted by the opposition and incumbent elites.

Nonetheless, entrepreneurs continue to enjoy the cheap Syrian work force which has significantly lowered labor costs in Turkey.²¹ In general, Syrians are forced to work in the informal sector where they are overworked, underpaid, subjected to irregular or even non-payment of their wages, and have no social security rights whatsoever.²² In order to prevent this economic exploitation, the AKP government passed labor legislation in 2016 allowing

Syrian refugees to apply for work permits which would entitle them to certain rights, such as social security coverage and eligibility for private health insurance.²³ Even though approximately 1 million working-age Syrians continue to work informally, the number of work permits has increased substantially over the past years. While 140,301 Syrians obtained work permits between 2011-2019, 31,185 of these permits were issued in 2019 alone.²⁴

In summary, there is a general discontent among Turkish citizens towards Syrian immigrants. Due to overgeneralizations, Turkish society has a negative view of Syrians on average and disapproves of AKP's open-door policy. The media's xenophobic portrayal of Syrians contributes to the existing social polarization on immigration thus leaving Syrians unprotected against rising xenophobia. Syrians also lack certain fundamental rights and freedoms because of their temporary "guest" status, leaving them vulnerable to economic exploitation.

3- Immigration as a New Issue Dimension in Turkish Politics

Migration and cross-border mobility became central to domestic politics and national security in the West following the end of the Cold War with the increasing immigrant influx to Western countries.²⁵ Foreign workers and immigrants have been controversial issues for most European political parties especially since guest workers started arriving in the 1960s. More specifically over the last decade, immigration has been further politicized by radical right parties which champion anti-immigrant positions and have made immigration a more salient aspect of European politics.²⁶ The immigration issue took a new turn with the arrival of Middle Eastern and Afghan refugees. Statistical analyses show that increasing number of refugees are associated with the rising vote share of the radical right in Germany,²⁷ Denmark,²⁸ Austria,²⁹ and Greece.³⁰ By over-politicizing the issue of Syrian immigrants, these parties raised their vote share and forced mainstream parties to adopt more restrictive positions regarding multiculturalism.³¹

In Turkish politics on the other hand, the issue of immigration is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, the Turkish refugee regime was mostly limited to the reception and settlement of refugees of Turkish ethnic origins.³² Before the Syrian immigrants, the two biggest waves occurred when more than 350,000 Bulgarian Turks in 1989 and 400,000 Iraqi Kurds in 1991 sought refuge in Turkey due to inhospitable conditions in their homelands.³³ Furthermore, Turkey maintained the geographical limitation criteria in the 1951 Geneva Convention to exclude non-European asylum

AKP no longer prioritizes the policy of citizenship for all Syrians, but rather seems to prioritize resettling Syrian refugees in the newly created Turkish-backed opposition-controlled areas

seekers from refugee status. However, due to the emergencies created by the arrival of approximately 4 million Syrian refugees, Turkey amended its migration regime and enacted legislation to better integrate Syrians into social and economic life.³⁴ While some scholars view these legal changes as an important opportunity for Turkey to reconcile with its Ottoman multicultural past,³⁵ it appears that it will take a long time and serious political debates to pass more inclusive legislation on immigration given the issue's highly contested nature.

Even though Syrian refugees are continually framed as “guests,” the Regulation on Temporary Protection in 2014 and granting of work permits to foreign workers in 2016 show that the AKP government is more at peace with the reality that Syrian refugees will likely not return any time soon.³⁶ In 2016, President Erdoğan even mentioned the possibility of granting citizenship to Syrians. However, his commitment to the principle appears to have waned over time.³⁷ Currently, approximately only 174,000 Syrians have been granted citizenship.³⁸ The citizenship issue remains a topic of political debate due to lack of transparency in the application process. Hence, anti-immigrant politicians such as Ümit Özdağ, head of Zafer Partisi, easily exaggerated the numbers of Syrian who were granted citizenship and claimed that 900,000 Syrians had obtained Turkish citizenship.³⁹

AKP no longer prioritizes the policy of citizenship for all Syrians, but rather seems to prioritize resettling Syrian refugees in the newly created Turkish-backed opposition-controlled areas following the Turkish military operations in Northern Syria.⁴⁰ The problem is that these areas lack the necessary infrastructure and economic resources to host millions of people. Nevertheless, there is an explicit shift in the party's approach towards Syrians which might be associated with Turkish society's general discontent with the immigrant presence. The party also tends to perceive this “discontent” as a driver of its worsening electoral performance, especially in the 2019 local elections.⁴¹

In general, political parties in Turkey differ widely regarding their positions towards Turkey's “temporary” guests. Despite the securitization of the immigration issue and increasing anti-immigrant sentiments in society, the AKP government has largely

maintained its protective approach towards Syrian refugees, likely because it views the issue as a religious moral responsibility and channel to exert its influence as an ambitious regional power. However more recently, the party has revised its position from open-door humanitarianism to resettlement of immigrants in the Turkish-backed opposition-controlled areas along the Northern Syria.⁴² AKP's recent shift and other parties' increasing criticism of immigration can be explained by a combination of economic and political factors.

First of all, Turkey's worsening economic performance starkly reflects itself in increasing inflation and unemployment and the depreciation of the Turkish lira vis-à-vis US Dollar. The economic hardships increase the pressure on AKP and promote the perception of Syrian immigrants as an economic burden to the country and a threat to Turkish citizens' economic well-being.⁴³ Secondly, AKP's loss of the mayorship of Ankara and İstanbul in the 2019 local elections was partly associated with voters' negative perception of the heavy presence of Syrian immigrants.⁴⁴ Hence, AKP's Syrian policy started to be seen as electorally costly. Thirdly, the fall of the Afghan government, the rise of Taliban and the possibility of a new refugee wave coming from that country further increased the immigration issue's political salience.⁴⁵

As a corollary of these developments, the AKP government feels extra pressured with regard to its protective approach towards immigrants. On the other hand, electorally prominent parties in Turkish parliament such as İYİ Party and CHP view the immigration issue as an opportunity to mobilize their supporters. The next part describes the position of AKP and its electoral ally MHP on Syrian immigrants.

3.1 AKP and the Limits of Islamic Solidarity

At the onset of the Syrian conflict, AKP elites presumed that the Assad regime would fall quickly, and Syrian immigrants would quickly return. Hence, the party did not hesitate to adopt an open-door policy without preparing the legal and administrative ground necessary to host millions of immigrants. Since the arrival of the first wave of refugees in 2011, AKP has emphasized the importance of religious solidarity and portrayed Turkey as the protector of fellow Muslims in the region in order to legitimize its open-door policy.

In the context of Islamic solidarity, the AKP government constantly referred to the relationship between the *Ensar* of Madina who hosted the *Muhajirin*, or immigrants of Makka, during the Prophet's life to motivate Turkish citizens to welcome the refugees.

Accordingly, Syrian refugees are viewed as an “*emanet*” (entrustment from God), making it a moral and religious obligation to take care of them.⁴⁶ However, this rhetoric does not resonate with the many Turkish citizens who hold secular worldviews.

In general, AKP avoids viewing Syrian immigrants as a matter of social and national security.⁴⁷ However, it also carefully avoids using the term “refugee” given the legal responsibilities it implies. Rather, the party insists on using the term “guests” under temporary protection. Nonetheless, AKP is committed to welfare transfers to the immigrants particularly in the forms of health services and access to education, while poor Syrian families are supported with cash welfare programs.⁴⁸ Furthermore, it continued to positively frame Syrian immigrants during its 2018 presidential and 2019 local election campaigns. It has emphasized the importance of Turkish education to better integrate Syrians into Turkish society and new regulations regarding child labor with the hope of preventing immigrants’ further exploitation in the informal economy.⁴⁹

Despite its welcoming attitude towards Syrians in domestic politics, AKP tends to instrumentalize immigrants in its relations with the European Union. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan often blamed EU countries for their indifference towards the humanitarian crisis taking place in Syria.⁵⁰ Despite the EU’s monetary support for the Syrians living in Turkey,⁵¹ Erdoğan did not hesitate to threaten the EU by opening Turkey’s borders to let a refugee influx into Europe when Turkish relations with Germany and Netherlands were tense.⁵² He stressed that Turkey is neither obliged to take care of nor feed refugees, a statement akin to nationalist parties’ anti-immigrant discourse.⁵³ Erdoğan reacted similarly when the EU countries criticized Turkey’s military operations in Syria. Critics viewed AKP’s use of Syrian immigrants as a “blackmailing strategy” that tarnished its humanitarian efforts.⁵⁴

In short, AKP, at least at the level of leadership, continues to hold a positive view of Syrian immigrants. However, as discussed above, its constituency does not share the same positive attitude towards Syrians. More recently, the party’s initial welcoming attitude began to slowly fade as it has started to adopt a more pragmatic approach largely due to the weakening economic conditions and its electoral performance in İstanbul and Ankara in 2019 local elections. Currently, AKP is expressing the possibility of resettling Syrians in the Turkish-backed opposition-controlled areas along the Syrian-Turkish border more strongly, while it is also less hesitant to instrumentalize immigrants within the context of Turkey-EU relations

3.2 MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – Nationalist Action Party)

On the other hand, a positive policy shift can be observed within MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – Nationalist Action Party), which has had a relatively less hostile immigration policy since

A positive policy shift can be observed within MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi – Nationalist Action Party), which has had a relatively less hostile immigration policy since 2018 largely because of its electoral alliance with AKP

2018 largely because of its electoral alliance with AKP. Until the alliance was formalized, MHP openly criticized AKP's position on Syrian refugees and Syrian crisis. For instance, party leader Devlet Bahçeli viewed Syrians as temporary guests who should not be granted citizenship rights, thus criticizing Erdoğan's more inclusive approach towards citizenship,⁵⁵ a position similarly shared by İYİ Party.

MHP initially viewed Syrian immigrants as a potential threat to national security, emphasized a false perception of increasing crime rates among Syrians and their adverse impact on Turkish workers.⁵⁶ The party called for urgent measures to send refugees back to end these social and economic problems.⁵⁷ In a similar fashion, MHP directed strong criticism against Turkey's foreign policy in Syria prior to its electoral alliance with AKP. MHP was in favor of Syria's territorial integrity and invited AKP to prioritize aiding Syrian Turkmens and addressing their grievances towards the June 2015 general elections.⁵⁸ In addition, the party shared its concerns towards the rising Kurdish militant activism in Northern Syria and its possible adverse effect on Syrian Turkmens.⁵⁹ Given that Turkey's relationships with the armed Syrian Turkmen groups took a positive direction, it can be argued that MHP had a substantial impact on Turkey's foreign policy in Syria.

In general terms, MHP viewed immigration as a matter of social security, championed Syria's territorial integrity against the rising Kurdish political and military/militant activism and demanded policies that directly prioritized the well-being of Syrian Turkmens. Following the political alliance with AKP, MHP's critiques were mostly directed towards the EU, which allegedly avoided taking its fair share of responsibility over the refugee crisis.⁶⁰ The party continued to associate the Syrian presence with increasing crime rates, rental costs, the spread of infectious diseases, beggars, and cheap labor force. The party mostly presented these issues without directly targeting the AKP government. Currently, immigration is not a policy priority for MHP despite its nationalistic ideology. MHP is also less critical of AKP's open-door policy. It remains to be seen however to what extent MHP will continue to use its non-hostile rhetoric towards immigrants if its coalition with AKP fractures as the result of a possible electoral defeat.

3.3 HDP: Universal Human Rights

HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – The People’s Democratic Party) has a positive view of Syrian immigrants that is similar to AKP. Contrary to AKP’s Islamic solidarity discourse on refugees, HDP emphasizes universal human rights. The party’s voter base also has a relatively more positive perception of refugees which distinguishes them from supporters of MHP, CHP, and İYİ Party.⁶¹ In addition, HDP thinks that Turkey’s geographical limitation criteria on the 1951 Geneva Convention should be lifted and the path for citizenship rights for Syrian refugees opened.⁶² Finally, HDP criticizes AKP for its view of Syrians as temporary “guests.” The party encourages other parties to take the necessary steps to grant Syrians legal status in order to minimize xenophobic attacks.⁶³

During its 2015 and 2018 electoral campaigns, HDP continued to emphasize Syrians’ right to enjoy humanitarian conditions and have a decent life.⁶⁴ This was within a framework that defined their rights and freedoms within the context of international law instead of religious solidarity.⁶⁵ In a speech in 2015, party’s co-chair Selahattin Demirtaş said that Syrian refugees can stay in Turkey as long as they want, and apply for citizenship in the meantime if they would like to.⁶⁶ In this respect, HDP became the first party with a clear support for a more inclusive citizenship regime.

HDP’s pro-immigrant attitude was also reflected in the party’s approach towards informal workers. The party showed its disapproval towards the xenophobic attacks and crimes against refugees as well as their economic exploitation in the informal job market and called for legal regulations on immigrants’ working conditions.⁶⁷ In its 2018 manifesto, HDP promised to provide immigrants with safety of life and property, better accommodation opportunities, an end to informal working conditions, the right to unionize, education in their native language, and equal opportunities for immigrant women. In short, HDP promotes inclusive immigration policies contrary to MHP, İYİ Party, and CHP.

Despite having a similar positive attitude towards refugees, HDP significantly departs from AKP regarding its military operations in Syria. Like MHP’s championing of policies prioritizing Syrian Turkmens, HDP adopts a similar ethnocentric position and calls for cooperative measures involving the Kurds in Syria and better treatment of refugees

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with Kurdish origin.⁶⁸ HDP also shows its sympathy for the Kurdish military groups (PYD and YPG) viewing them as the only legitimate warriors in Syria, and supported the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous region that is secular and pluralist.⁶⁹ Due to its pro-PYD/YPG position, HDP was accused of having ties with the terrorist organization on several occasions which overshadows the party's pro-immigrant attitude.

3.4 CHP: Syrians as an Economic Burden

At the onset of the refugee influx, CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – Republican People's Party) was primarily interested in the economic consequences of the influx.⁷⁰ Although the party acknowledged that Syrian immigrants should be able to enjoy humanitarian assistance, CHP constantly referred to the adverse economic impact on Turkish labor and increased rental costs.⁷¹ The party also tends to stigmatize refugees by portraying Syrians as a “trouble” caused by the AKP.⁷² However, when it comes to anti-immigration, CHP is not as monolithic as İYİ Party whose officials and party program are distinctly anti-Syrian. CHP includes both politicians with harsher immigration policies compared to AKP and HDP and a wing with less hostility towards immigrants on the other hand.

On several occasions, party leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu has emphasized that Syrians must be sent back regardless of a peaceful resolution in Syria.⁷³ CHP refused to view immigration as a matter of domestic politics, but rather foreign policy.⁷⁴ The party strongly condemned AKP's foreign policy activism in Syria, calling it an “adventurous policy” or “palace diplomacy.”⁷⁵ CHP argued that Turkey's Syria policy needs fundamental revision starting with the restoration of diplomatic relations with the Assad regime. In addition, the party is against Turkey's intervention in Syria's internal affairs and urged the governing party to cooperate with the incumbent regime.⁷⁶ Finally, CHP criticizes AKP's instrumentalization of refugees in foreign policy.

Starting from the 2018 elections, CHP adopted a harsher anti-immigrant position. The party continued to view immigrants as an economic burden and maintained its commitment to send Syrians back without incurring humanitarian costs.⁷⁷ Most recently, CHP has made a “right-turn” and voiced even stronger anti-Syrian sentiments. When Turkey was “threatened” by another wave of refugees, this time from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover, CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu stated that they would send all refugees back to their countries of origin in just two years after his party comes to power.⁷⁸ He further used the populist-nationalist slogan “borders are our honor” in the face of this possible influx.⁷⁹ However, the CHP leader avoided explaining a realistic plan and the possible humanitarian costs that would be incurred by this newly embraced extremist position.

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CHP's populist stance on immigration was further consolidated by Tanju Özcan, the party's mayor of Bolu, who passed a series of anti-Syrian legislation in the city council. Özcan passed a new tax bill on water and solid waste which aimed to charge foreign nationals residing in the Black Sea city 10 times higher rates, which was later annulled in court. The mayor defended his racist legislation on the ground that Turkish hospitality had gone too far, saying that he would not back down no matter what.⁸⁰ Despite Özcan's radical statements and anti-immigrant legislation, CHP ruling elite, including the party leader Kılıçdaroğlu, neither denounced Özcan's policies, nor forced him to resign from his post, but largely remained silent in the face of growing criticism. Instead, Kılıçdaroğlu reinforced Özcan's position by repeatedly emphasizing that CHP would send Syrians back in two years with a flourish of trumpets ("*Suriyeli kardeşlerimizi davulla zurnayla yolcu edeceğiz*").⁸¹

In short, CHP initially acknowledged that Syrian refugees must receive humanitarian assistance. However, the party continually draws attention to the economic costs of AKP's open-door policy which contributes to the increasing fear of the loss of welfare which has dominated Turkish society especially since 2018. Nonetheless, even though the party has increasingly adopted anti-immigrant discourse, CHP is not as monolithic as İYİ Party when it comes to Syrians and hosts a social-democratic faction which has a softer tone towards Syrians and emphasizes the need for better integration policies and humanitarian assistance. Nevertheless, it appears that CHP is increasingly utilizing harsher discourse as the 2023 Presidential elections approach.

3.5 İYİ Party and the Politics of Anti-Immigration

İYİ Party (Good Party) was founded on 25 October 2017 by former members of MHP (mostly) and CHP. Meral Akşener formed the party after she failed to overturn Bahçeli's leadership through the party congress following the MHP's substantial losses in the November 2015 national elections. In short, İYİ Party emerged out of internal splits within MHP following its support for AKP in the controversial 2017 constitutional referendum. The party is currently in an electoral alliance with CHP against the coalition of AKP and MHP. Both İYİ Party and its voter base have the most negative attitude towards Syrians and AK Party's open-door policy.⁸²

A brief analysis of the demographic characteristics of the İYİ Party's voter base can be helpful to understand why AKP's welcoming and Islamic-oriented policy towards Syrians is not appealing to the İYİ Party's electorate

A brief analysis of the demographic characteristics of the İYİ Party's voter base can be helpful to understand why AKP's welcoming and Islamic-oriented policy towards Syrians is not appealing to the İYİ Party's electorate. Survey results show that a large part of the party's supporters are secular nationalists, thus distinguishing İYİ Party's nationalism from the nationalism of AKP and MHP, which has a more conservative character.⁸³ The party's voters tend to live in more secular coastal cities in the Aegean and Mediterranean regions, and show significant similarities with CHP's popular base, such as having similar income levels and worldviews (i.e., similar view of Atatürk, religion, and nationalism).⁸⁴ The party's voter base tends to view Syrian immigrants as a direct threat to secular Turkish identity. Therefore, İYİ Party faces little to no difficulty in mobilizing its voter base against Syrian immigrants.

Throughout its 2018 national and 2019 local election campaigns, İYİ Party promoted a negative portrayal of Syrian refugees. The party's primary electoral pledge was to send Syrians back and "fast" with them in Syria in Ramadan of 2019.⁸⁵ While voicing its anti-Syrian policies, the party tends to blame the governing party. In other words, İYİ Party views the refugee crisis as a result of AK Party's "incompetent" foreign policy. İYİ's solution to this crisis is to send all Syrians back through the restoration of diplomatic relations with the Assad regime.⁸⁶ Finally, İYİ Party rationalizes its anti-Syrian policy on the grounds that "everyone would be happier in their own homeland." Some party officials have openly used threatening language (i.e., "they [Syrians] will return either voluntarily or involuntarily"⁸⁷), warning Syrian entrepreneurs that their trade licenses will be abolished, and that immigrants in the informal labor market would be banned from work.⁸⁸ Party leader Akşener made it clear that Syrian refugees will not be offered Turkish citizenship.⁸⁹

The party's former Vice Chairman, Ümit Özdağ, was the most vocal figure towards Syrian immigrants and even expressed conspiratorial views. According to him, immigration is a trap set by imperialists who want to manipulate Syrians to incite civil war in Turkey and eventually divide it like Iraq and Syria.⁹⁰ According to him, Syrians did not come to Turkey because they were bombed in their homelands,

İYİ Party has a very negative view of Syrians' ethnic and religious identity given that a large majority of refugees are Arabs who, on average, tend to not be secular

but rather were bombed so that they would flee to Turkey.⁹¹ Allegedly, this was with the aim of altering Turkey's demographics against Turks. On several occasions, Özdağ resorted to racist remarks, calling Syrians "despicable" (*Suriyeli reziller*) while criticizing AK Party's policy of granting Syrians citizenship.⁹² In a similar fashion, he showed strong contempt towards Syrian women's higher birthrate, which according to him will be used to strategically alter Turkish demographics.⁹³ Özdağ accused pro-immigrant media of being puppets of imperialists and accused AK Party of building a new caliphate upon the Syrian immigrants, most of whom are "jihadi Salafists."⁹⁴

Özdağ's racist remarks were not openly disowned by his party. In fact, this racist view of Syrians was adopted by several other prominent members of the İYİ Party. Former Vice Chairman Lütfi Türkkan –himself of Macedonian origin– said that Syrians are no different from invaders and advised them that it would be better to pack their stuff and prepare to leave.⁹⁵ Party spokesperson Aytun Çıray said that sending Syrians back is not necessarily a racist policy. Çıray also criticized those who compared Syrian refugees with Balkan and Caucasian immigrants, as they, unlike Syrians, were fleeing from an ethnic cleansing campaign.⁹⁶ Therefore, the party clearly favored non-Arab immigrants over Syrians. Lesser figures in party ranks adopted an even harsher language. For instance, İlay Aksoy, a member of the founding committee and party candidate for Istanbul's Fatih Municipality, became popular on social media for her distinctly anti-refugee rhetoric.

In general, İYİ Party has a very negative view of Syrians' ethnic and religious identity given that a large majority of refugees are Arabs who, on average, tend to not be secular. İYİ Party maintained its anti-immigrant discourse even after the 2019 local election campaign and organized a workshop titled "Return of Syrian Refugees" in December 2019 where the party introduced its gradual plan for sending refugees back by abolishing the open-door policy, lifting economic privileges, eliminating the possibility of citizenship, and imposing new taxes on those under the temporary protection regime.⁹⁷ Party leader Meral Akşener promised to re-establish direct talks with the Assad regime without involving any mediators. She also stated that Syrians who visited Syria for Eid would not be accepted back.⁹⁸ However, the extent that this plan is viable is contested. Up until now, the Assad regime has not displayed any willingness to admit Syrians –most of whom are Sunnis– back to Syria.

In short, contrary to the other parties in the Turkish parliament, İYİ Party appears to be highly committed to its distinct and monolithic anti-immigrant position embraced by the party's official circles, who have not shied away from making openly racist remarks. Contrary to CHP's emphasis on economic costs and criticism of AKP policies, İYİ Party specifically and openly targets Syrian refugees' Arab and Islamic identity. İYİ's only solution to the refugee crisis is to send them all back in cooperation with the Assad regime. Hence, the party shows certain similarities to the European far-right's strong anti-immigrant stance.

3.6 Parallels with the European Far-Right

The burden of Syrian immigrants is largely shared by Syria's neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Despite all the efforts directed at creating a European fortress and strengthening border controls to keep immigrants out, European countries ended up eventually hosting over 1 million Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees with 70 percent being hosted in Germany (59%) and Sweden (11%).⁹⁹ However, the unprecedented refugee inflow and terrorist attacks in several European cities politicized the refugee issue across Europe and contributed to the rising electoral success of radical right parties. By successfully harboring anti-immigrant rhetoric in their electoral campaigns, far-right parties in Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Spain transformed themselves into mass parties and successfully rolled back multiculturalism in their countries.

European far-right parties tend to emphasize European culture's distinctiveness (and occasionally superiority) while referring to immigration from the "Orient." This political discourse is built upon an Islamophobic view, within which Muslims in general and Arabs in particular are considered as the primary threat to European values and culture.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, the far-right promotes a "Eurabia" narrative and believes that the Islamic culture of Syrian immigrants can be neither assimilated, nor integrated into the Western world.¹⁰¹ A similar rhetoric is promoted by the İYİ Party officials who believe that Syrians cannot be culturally integrated into Turkish society. The European far-right similarly views immigrants as "invaders" who must be sent back.¹⁰² The German extremist group PEGIDA¹⁰³ for instance views itself as in a war against Muslim infiltration into European lands, and urges its supporters to be prepared to protect Christian and European values.¹⁰⁴ In general, the European far-right calls for anti-immigrant measures, such as enforcing strict immigration quotas, putting extra barriers on asylum applications, deportation of foreign/immigrant criminals, and increasing border controls and police forces to ensure the safety of daily life.¹⁰⁵

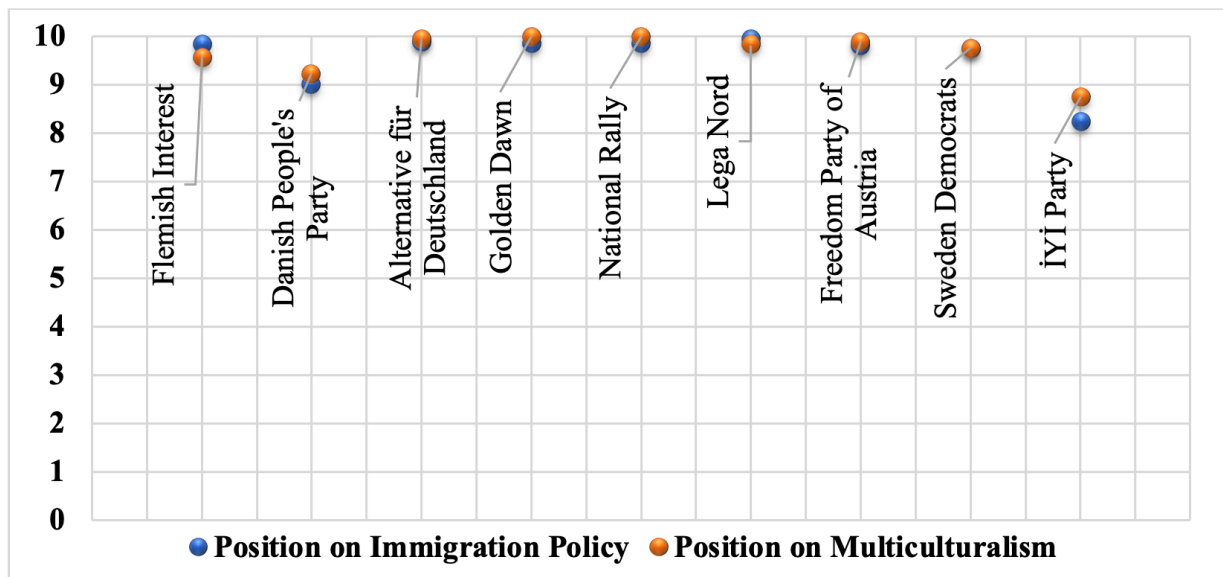


Figure 2: Comparison of selected far-right parties with İYİ Party with respect to their issue positions on immigration and multiculturalism. Blue dot shows the party's score on immigration while the orange one denotes the party's position with regard to multiculturalism (Source: 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey, <https://www.chesdata.eu/2019-chapel-hill-expert-survey>).

Certain parallels can be drawn between the European far-right and İYİ Party with regard to their shared anti-immigrant attitudes. To begin with, similar to the far-right parties, İYİ Party holds Syrian refugees in contempt, and promises its followers to send them back if the party ever captures a position of power. Like far-right leaders, prominent İYİ Party officials view immigrants as invaders who could potentially harm Turkish identity and culture and Islamize daily life. The party further associates the immigrants with Jihadism and Salafism.¹⁰⁶ İYİ Party prefers to ignore the humanitarian aspect and securitizes the immigration issue like European far-right policies. Instead of presenting a roadmap to safely send refugees back to their homeland, İYİ Party is committed to sending refugees back to Syria even without a peaceful resolution. Both the far-right and İYİ reject multicultural projects such as increasing cultural exchange and co-existence.

Given these parallels, İYİ Party occupies a similar position to the European far-right with respect to immigration. Figure 2 shows data from the 2019 Chapel Hill Expert Survey on the positioning of political parties on immigration and multiculturalism.¹⁰⁷ Experts measure a party's position on immigration along a continuous scale with 0 denoting that the party "strongly favors a liberal policy on immigration" and 10 indicating that the party "strongly favors a restrictive policy on immigration." In order to measure a party's position towards integration of immigrants and asylum seekers, a similar continuous measure is used where a score of 0 demonstrates that the party "strongly favors multiculturalism" while 10 shows that the party

“*strongly favors assimilation.*” From this data, I selected the rising radical right parties in Belgium (Flemish Interest), Denmark (Danish People’s Party), Germany (Alternative für Deutschland), Greece (Golden Dawn), France (National Rally), Italy (Lega Nord), Austria (Freedom Party of Austria), and Sweden (Sweden Democrats) to compare their political ideology on these two issues with İYİ Party’s. Figure 2 demonstrates that ideologically, İYİ Party scores quite similar to these radical right parties in terms of its attitude towards immigration and multiculturalism. Even though İYİ Party appears to be slightly less restrictive than those parties regarding these issues, the party’s position makes it difficult to distinguish it from an ordinary European far-right party.

Table 1: A general summary of Turkish political parties’ attitudes and policy suggestions toward the Syrian immigrants.

Political Party	Is Immigration a Policy Priority?	General Attitude	Policy Emphasis	Policy Suggestions
AK Party	Yes	Pro-Immigrant	Islamic Solidarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive policies, welfare transfers, and working permits. • More recently: resettling immigrants in the Turkish-backed opposition-controlled areas.
CHP	Yes (more recently)	Initially ambiguous & currently anti-immigrant	Economic Burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation with the Assad regime & sending Syrians back • Weak emphasis on the need for humanitarian assistance
HDP	No	Pro-Immigrant	Universal Rights and Freedoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Granting refugee status and possibility of citizenship • Cooperation with the Kurds in Syria
MHP	No (more recently)	Previously anti-immigrant & currently neutral	Security considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reducing criminalization among immigrants • Protecting Syrian Turkmens
İYİ Party	Yes	Anti-Immigrant	Identity and Cultural Threat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation with the Assad regime & sending Syrians back regardless of a peaceful solution • New taxes on Syrians & lifting the existing trade privileges

Conclusion

Political parties are essential institutions to democratic regimes to channel demands for representation and articulate and aggregate political interests. Parties are the main avenues through which new generations of politicians gain access to state power, and citizens express their preferences, organize support and opposition, and establish information channels. In this regard, a comparative analysis of party positions towards Syrian immigrants is critical as these institutions substantially shape citizens' perception of refugees. Political parties in Turkey play an active role in aggregating voter interests and representing preferences on various issues, including immigration and multiculturalism. This analysis shows that following the refugee influx, immigration and national identity became central to Turkish politics. As a corollary of this centrality, a surge of anti-immigrant attitudes among politicians and political parties similar to European far-right can be observed.

By and large, Turkish political parties were caught unprepared by the challenges of immigration influx, but soon revised and consolidated their positions with regard to the social and economic crises generated by the presence of millions of Syrians. In general, both AK Party and HDP have pro-immigrant policies, while MHP's initial anti-immigrant position is neutralized mostly because of its electoral alliance with AK Party following 2016. On the other hand, İYİ Party's negative portrayal of Syrians seems to be reciprocated among CHP ruling elite as the latter has been moving towards the former's anti-immigrant position. İYİ Party's 'negative' impact on CHP's policies might be long-lasting given İYİ party's vital position to CHP's electoral coalition. By portraying Syrians as a cultural threat to Turkish society and way of life, İYİ party occupies a similar position to European far-right parties. As the 2023 Presidential elections approach, both CHP and İYİ Party are less likely to revise their positions, but will rather consolidate their anti-immigrant attitudes to garner more electoral support. Finally, the distinctly anti-immigrant Zafer Partisi established by former İYİ Party Vice Chairman Ümit Özdağ currently spearheads anti-Syrian propaganda in the country. The immigration issue is likely to further polarize Turkish politics during the upcoming elections.

If the immigration issue continues to be tackled through populist lenses, the issue will be likely to remain divisive. This analysis shows that Turkish political parties were largely underprepared for the challenges of the refugee influx, thus resorting

By and large, Turkish political parties were caught unprepared by the challenges of immigration influx, but soon revised and consolidated their positions with regard to the social and economic crises generated by the presence of millions of Syrians

to populist rhetoric while addressing the issue. While AK Party found it difficult to transcend the discourse of Islamic solidarity while legitimizing the presence of millions of refugees, İYİ Party pursued the politics of overgeneralizations and promotes stereotypical understandings of Syrians. Instead, parties can play a more positive role by presenting more realistic solutions to the refugee crisis starting with better integration policies, reducing Syrian's economic exploitation, and preventing hate crimes against refugees. Given that Turkey's geopolitical position is sensitive to new refugee waves, political parties can preempt future crises by prioritizing compromise and cooperation while engaging in refugee politics, rather than polarizing their voter base against the newcomers.

In the background of these politics, Syrians are still deprived of a legally defined status. The temporary protection regime which identifies Syrians as "guests" renders them vulnerable to xenophobic attacks and economic exploitation. Due to their ambiguous socio-political status, Syrians are unable to enjoy the rights and liberties of legally-defined refugees. Their future is filled with uncertainty and the mechanisms to better integrate them into Turkish society remain largely undefined. Currently, Syrians are subjected to various overgeneralizations and stereotypes some of which are promoted by political parties, prominent politicians, and more specifically, media and social media platforms. They, therefore, have become a polarizing element of Turkish politics and an instrumental foreign policy tool. Without obtaining clearly defined legal rights and freedoms, Syrians will continue to be a controversial topic in Turkish politics.

Instead, parties can play a more positive role by presenting more realistic solutions to the refugee crisis starting with better integration policies, reducing Syrian's economic exploitation, and preventing hate crimes against refugees

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