

## COVERING SYRIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE TURKISH PRESS

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## ***Abstract***

*The war in Syria has not lost its intensity since 2011. The situation is affecting the region and world politics. Inevitably, Syrian asylum seekers became a crucial topic of Turkish media and political agendas in recent years. At the moment, Turkey is one of top countries in terms of the number of hosted asylum seekers. The issue is shaping Turkish domestic politics and it is affecting Turkey's relationship with the world, and especially with the EU. There are some recent publications about the Syrian asylum seekers (e.g. Efe, 2015; Erdoğan, 2015). This study seeks to add new findings to the literature by looking at a different text sample. The study is based on a sample of 5 newspapers (Hürriyet, Sabah, Posta, Sözcü, Zaman) and looking at news reports and columns published in the year of 2014. The papers were chosen according to their political stance and their circulation figures. PRNET digital archive was employed to reach the data. The news items were collected by entering the keywords "Syrian refugees" and "Syrian asylum seekers".*

**Keywords:** *Syrians, Asylum seekers, Turkish press, Content analysis*

# **COVERING SYRIAN ASYLUM SEEKERS IN THE TURKISH PRESS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a preliminary work based on a wider research project titled “Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Syrian Asylum Seekers in Turkish Press”. The project investigates the representation of Syrian asylum seekers during the Syrian civil war in the Turkish press in relation to the representation of social issues and actors in media coverage. The research aims to bring a multi-dimensional point of view by using various methods as corpus analysis, critical discourse analysis and semiotic analysis. Content analysis is the first stage to figure out how and around which themes and subjects Syrian asylum seekers are defined and discussed in the newspapers. In this paper, the findings obtained from the content analysis are going to be presented. The investigated content of the representation of Syrian asylum seekers is gathered from the news reports and columns that published in 2014 in five national newspapers. The purpose of studying the content of the news reports and columns is to uncover positive, neutral or negative meanings that media produce about Syrian asylum seekers and to determine media’s point of views on the issue. These produced meanings are significant in terms of their effects on the thoughts about Syrian asylum seekers and how the issue of Syrian asylum seekers is discussed in public sphere.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The influence of media representations upon the attitudes of society towards minority groups, especially, asylum seekers is mostly discussed within the framework of “information gap” between the citizens of receiving country and asylum seekers (Haynes et al., 2004). This information gap is rooted not only in the physical isolation of asylum seekers (i.e. in refugee camps, resettlement centers etc.) but also in the social distance from majority groups. In this context, the interaction channels among asylum seekers and the citizens of hosting country are negatively affected by the restrictions of employment, the will to choose residence location, the right for movement and the poor economic conditions. Due to these obstacles, the information channel of the receiving society about the asylum seekers is occupied and shaped by media. Whereas the news reports regarding asylum seekers are open to question and criticizing of public audience, solely a section of associated reality is presented to readers by virtue of the interests of powerful elites (van Dijk, 1993; 1985).

Following the beginning of the civil war in 2011 in Syria, the human tragedy faced by Syrians during immigration is stated as the worst case since World War II in various studies (UNHCR 2014; Norton 2015). Comparing with other countries that are influenced by the Arab Spring, the situation in Syria has brought more desperate consequences and eventually, the case of Syria is turned into a proxy war through which the hegemonic powers of the world test each other on the field. The issue has plenty of aspects that are relevant for Turkey. The initial point is certainly about the fact that Turkey as well as Jordan, as main destinations for Syrian asylum seekers, accepts the highest number of Syrian asylum seekers in the world.<sup>3</sup> Another crucial issue is that the issue of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey is not only a topic for foreign policy but also a decisive parameter in domestic political agenda.

## **MEDIA CONTENT AND SYRIAN ASYLUM-SEEKERS**

Among the scholarly analysis of Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey, “Türkiye’de Suriyeliler: Toplumsal Kabul ve Uyum” (Syrians in Turkey: Social Recognition and Harmony) published by Murat Erdoğan (2015) is a significant study. A section of the work comprises the content analysis of the news reports and commentaries about “Syrian asylum-seekers” on the websites of national and local newspapers. As the scope of the research, the web content of 21 national and 56 local newspapers were investigated. Considering the main findings of the study, it is revealed that the representation of Syrian asylum-seekers is produced within the boundary of Turkey’s internal affairs. In this aspect, the pro-government newspapers represent asylum seekers in need of protection while praising the social policies of the government devoted to Syrian asylum seekers. On the other hand, the newspapers distanced from the government and disregarding a strong opposition against the political regime in Syria portray asylum seekers as criminals and burden for Turkey. The newspapers opposing the government and having a left-wing point of view have a tendency to take the issue within the frame of human rights. An interesting point unfolded in the study is that the newspapers of which the approaches to the government can be defined as “unstable” (i.e. Milliyet, Hürriyet, Posta, Vatan, Akşam) have an inclination to appropriate not only a negation towards Syrian asylum seekers but

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3 The Ministry of Interior, Directorate General of Migration Management Director Atilla Toros (January 2016) has announced that the number of registered Syrian asylum seekers in Turkey is 2,523,554. However, according the current data of UNHCR, the number of registered Syrian asylum seekers is 2,715,789. See <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (Web, 28.03.2016).

also a perspective to narrate them as victims. Although the ideological stance of national press can be found on the local press, the local press covers more specific events experienced by Syrian asylum seekers than the national coverage (Erdoğan, 2015). However, the media analysis of this issue conducted by Murat Erdoğan constitutes solely a section of the work and hence does not provide a comprehensive investigation. In a similar study, Efe (2015) demonstrates the variation of perspectives of different newspapers according to time periods and the political positions of newspapers. Subsequently, Efe (2015), through examining the websites of 8 national newspapers between 2011-2015, argues that the approaches of newspapers based on humane, political and security discourses are far away from providing real solutions to the problems.

## **METHOD and SAMPLE**

For the analysis of news texts and columns, in the first place, the categories were determined and values that generate these categories were specified. Defining categories requires the separation of the features of representation (Bell, 2001: 16). Accordingly, the values are potential contents of the categories. For instance, if we want to see how Syrian asylum seekers are named, “naming or label” constitutes a category, and the potential answers which can take place under this category constitute values such as “refugee”, “asylum seeker”, “immigrant”, “illegal immigrants” etc.

These categories and values are consistent with the notions observed during the literature review (bkz. Mollard, 2001: 6), and these are developed with the observations of new categories and values during analysis. After setting up the categories and values in this way, coding tables were prepared for the analysis of news texts. The frequencies of the appearance of categories and values in news texts were showed with the codes on coding tables. During the coding process, while some categories are evaluated with objective criteria (i.e. the types of texts), evaluating of some other categories (i.e. perspectives) can be based on subjective interpretation even if some criteria are used. Some procedures were followed during the coding in order to reduce potential inconsistencies and to ensure reliability. Firstly, the criteria used for defining each category and values were clearly specified in the description tables. Thus, the possibility of being inconsistent within four different coders both with themselves and with each others were reduced. It was aimed to make codings systematic by means of controlling the codings firstly through the other coders', then by researchers' reviews.

In this research, 388 texts gathered from the five newspapers (Hürriyet, Sabah, Zaman, Posta, Sözcü) with the highest circulation figures in Turkey in 2014 were coded. Two different coding tables were prepared for the news texts and the criteria to select them were determined. The content of these newspapers which were selected for the sample was searched over a database of a media monitoring center. In this search, two keywords were used which are “Syrian refugees” and “Syrian asylum seekers”. 410 news reports and columns were found. After eliminating of irrelevant and repeated texts, in total, 388 news reports and columns were obtained.

## FINDINGS

The news corpus gathered from 5 national newspapers for the content analysis consists of 388 news reports and commentaries. In the sampling of this study, we see that Zaman newspaper holds the most number of news reports and commentaries about Syrian asylum seekers. With 121 frequency in total, the newspaper holds the 31% of entire news sampling and comes first in providing the news to the sampling. Secondly, Hürriyet newspaper contributes 80 news texts which is 21% of the whole sample. Differing with only 1 item (79 texts), Sabah newspaper is the third grantor to this study. In the last two seats, we have Sözcü newspaper that publishes 62 news texts (16%) and Posta newspaper having 46 news items (12%). The distribution of news items according to newspapers is indicated below (Table I).

Table I: The distribution of news items according to newspapers

<i>Newspapers</i>	<i>Frequencies</i>
<i>Hürriyet</i>	80
<i>Posta</i>	56
<i>Sabah</i>	79
<i>Sözcü</i>	62
<i>Zaman</i>	121
<i>Total</i>	388

The main findings concluded over the detailed reviews show that the perspective of Syrian asylum seekers in the Turkish press is usually balanced or positive. The distribution of news items that have positive or negative implications ac-

According to newspapers is related with the political outlook of newspapers and the position of this outlook regarding the policy makers about Syrian asylum seekers.

The content analysis of the study demonstrates that the Syrian asylum seekers are mostly covered within the frame of daily experiences of harsh living conditions. This portrays them around the topics of the theme “the problems of asylum seekers”. Eventually, the role of this theme is significant in the following theme of the representation of asylum seekers which is “aid” and depiction of them by signifying their victimhood regarding the need of assistance. The most recurrent topics belong to the themes of “the problems of asylum seekers” and “aid” and this point is a positive finding in terms of the information of audiences about the difficult life conditions of asylum seekers.

The analysis of the texts shows that the most repeated theme following the themes of poverty and aid is “threat”. There are various topics that asylum seekers are represented as social dangers. In various ways, ranging from the numerical expressions of their negative impacts upon economy and labor force to the display of lynching based on societal indignation, this theme is reinforced in news reports and commentaries. The news associating asylum seekers with excess as the sources of problems related with economy and labor force mainly concentrates on the rising trend in asylum seeking people, hence economic burden as registration, settlement and the loss of available jobs in the market etc. While this kind of news reports can be found in every newspaper, mostly Zaman addresses to such issues with political criticism. In the news about the criminal offenses of Syrian asylum seekers, border security and disharmony with local community, we see that they are represented as the primary source of threat. Considering cumulatively, the news representing asylum seekers as the elements of danger, directly or indirectly reinforces the negative thoughts about asylum seekers in the long run and contributes the paradoxical situation of unsolvable problems.

Mannik (2012) argues that the representations that are independent of typical features do not give rise to empathy among public towards refugees. The publicly recognized and normative “real refugee” image is the depiction of misery, suffering and poverty. Therefore, the justification of being a refugee is interpreted with the visible features as torn clothes worn by refugees and their living conditions etc. In this respect, there is an essential asylum seeker identity

reproduced in each representation. According to this point, poverty, needing assistance and being dangerous or threat for society are the stable parts of asylum seeker identity. In another words, asylum seekers are reduced to a mute body in the representations as if there are no other ways of identification for them.

The reproduction of these representational preferences and taking the possibility of differences for granted, prevent to discuss the alternatives to change the perception of the distinction between asylum seeker/society and us/them. If the asylum seeker is distinct and different from “us” and has to survive in difficult conditions, solely in this case he or she is seen as worth for our help. Therefore, while the traits of asylum seekers are defined in representations, the distinction from “us” is defined and hence the societal segregation happens at the same time.

Another finding of the content analysis is about the volume of the news covering the asylum seekers issue among the further discussion on the agenda. Syrian asylum seekers are mostly framed with the topics around secondary news (30%). This situation indicates that the asylum seekers issue cannot be passed without attention for the frameworks of many commentaries and news reports about other issues on the agenda.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the general picture of the content produced by all newspapers, it can be argued that there is a positive and balanced news coverage regarding Syrian asylum seekers in the Turkish press. However, the ambivalence is asserted and discussed above. Arguing the fact that the representation of asylum seekers in the Turkish press is highly influenced by universal refugee representations in the media. It should also be noted that the positive and balanced perspectives on media representations should have a connection with the government’s positive attitude towards Syrian asylum seekers. This situation can be explained not only in terms of the political positioning of newspapers that are close to the government but also in terms of the agenda setting power of the Turkish ruling politicians. As stated at the beginning of the paper, this study is a micro version of a wider research project. The findings in this paper were prepared according to preliminary data. More publications on the same issue will be coming up and they will be including bigger data sets and more reliable results.

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