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Representing Syrians across Mainstream and Social Media in Turkey: A Critical Review of Frames, Discourses, and Their Drivers since 2011

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Abstract

This article critically reviews the literature on representations of Syrians in Turkish mainstream and social media since 2011. Drawing on a qualitative thematic review of English- and Turkish-language studies, it identifies dominant representations, examines the factors driving their variation, and assesses major gaps and inconsistencies in the literature. The findings reveal a contested and evolving field in which Syrians are variously constructed as victims, economic burdens, security threats, cultural outsiders, exploited workers, and politically privileged groups. These representations vary significantly according to media outlets' political and ideological orientations, media type, and changing socio-political contexts. While early coverage more frequently emphasized humanitarianism and temporary protection, subsequent discourse became increasingly politicized, economic, demographic, and security-oriented, particularly on social media. The review highlights the persistent othering and silencing of Syrian voices and calls for more longitudinal, comparative, mixed-method, and refugee-centered research.

Keywords: *Syrians in Turkish media, media and social media representation of Syrians, Syrians in Turkey.*

1. Introduction

The arrival of millions of Syrians in Turkey since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 has constituted one of the most significant social, political, and demographic transformations in the country's recent history. What was initially approached as a temporary humanitarian movement gradually developed into a long-term and increasingly politicized question concerning social cohesion, economic competition, citizenship, security, and national identity. Throughout this process, the media has been one of the principal arenas in which the presence of Syrians has been interpreted, contested, and given public meaning. Mainstream news organizations, local newspapers, digital news outlets, and social media platforms have not simply reported developments concerning Syrians; they have participated in constructing the categories, narratives, and frames through which Syrians are understood within Turkish society.

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This role of the media is particularly important because representations of migrants and refugees are rarely politically or socially neutral. As the literature reviewed in this article demonstrates, media representations contribute to the construction of social reality by selecting certain aspects of refugee experiences and making them more salient than others. They can define refugees as victims deserving protection, economic competitors, security threats, cultural outsiders, exploited workers, or privileged beneficiaries of government policies. Such representations may contribute to empathy and social cohesion, but they may also reproduce boundaries between "us" and "them," legitimize exclusion, encourage scapegoating, and normalize discriminatory or xenophobic attitudes. The representation of Syrians in Turkish media therefore provides an important lens through which broader struggles over migration, belonging, citizenship, national identity, and political power can be examined.

Since 2011, a substantial academic literature has emerged on this subject. Researchers have examined national and local newspapers, state and alternative media, news photography, digital news outlets, Twitter/X, YouTube, online dictionaries, and other forms of digital communication. These studies have employed a variety of theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches, ranging from framing theory and Critical Discourse Analysis to content analysis, social representation theory, and computational sentiment analysis. Collectively, they provide a rich body of evidence on the representation of Syrians in Turkey. At the same time, the growing size and fragmentation of this literature make synthesis increasingly necessary. Individual studies frequently focus on particular newspapers, platforms, political events, geographical locations, or relatively short periods. Consequently, findings that appear contradictory when considered separately may reflect differences in political orientation, media type, historical context, research design, or the particular dimensions of Syrian presence being examined.

This article critically reviews this literature with the aim of identifying its major theoretical premises, substantive findings, patterns of variation, and remaining research gaps. Rather than treating media representations as a single or static phenomenon, the review asks several interconnected questions: Why has the representation of Syrians in Turkish media been regarded as an important subject of academic inquiry? What are the dominant representations identified across the literature? How and why do these representations vary according to the political and ideological orientation of media organizations, the distinction between traditional and digital media, and changing political, economic, and social contexts? Finally, what methodological, theoretical, conceptual, and empirical limitations characterize the existing body of research?

The review identifies several recurring representations across Turkish mainstream and social media. Syrians have variously been constructed as economic burdens and competitors for employment, security threats and sources of criminality, passive victims requiring humanitarian assistance, culturally and demographically incompatible "Others," exploited sources of cheap labor, and privileged groups or political instruments. Importantly, however, the prominence of

these representations varies considerably. Political and ideological orientation constitutes one important source of variation: pro-government media have tended, particularly during earlier periods, to emphasize humanitarian responsibility and religious solidarity, whereas opposition and nationalist discourses have more frequently foregrounded economic, demographic, political, and security concerns. Left-wing alternative media have offered a different interpretation by locating Syrian displacement within class relations, labor exploitation, and broader political-economic structures.

A second important distinction concerns media type. Traditional mainstream media operate through institutional ownership structures, professional journalistic conventions, editorial gatekeeping, and varying degrees of political and state influence. Social media, by contrast, provide a more decentralized environment characterized by user-generated content, anonymity, rapid circulation, and relatively weak editorial control. The literature suggests that these differences matter significantly: social media frequently provide a more permissive environment for personalized hostility, misinformation, hate speech, gendered stereotypes, and explicitly exclusionary discourse.

Finally, the review demonstrates the importance of historical context. Representations of Syrians have evolved considerably since 2011, moving from the predominantly temporary and humanitarian language of the early years toward increasingly politicized representations associated with citizenship debates, economic deterioration, military operations, elections, and demands for return. Yet this development has not been entirely linear. Major humanitarian crises, including the 2023 earthquakes, have temporarily disrupted established boundaries between hosts and refugees by producing moments of shared victimhood and solidarity, although such moments have often proved short-lived.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section describes the methodology of the review. Then, Section Three reviews the principal theoretical and conceptual arguments used in the literature to justify the study of media representation. Section Four synthesizes the dominant representations of Syrians identified across mainstream and social media. Next, Section Five examines variation in these representations according to political and ideological orientation, media type, and changing historical context. Section Six critically evaluates methodological limitations, theoretical and conceptual gaps, and empirical inconsistencies within the existing scholarship. Lastly, Section Seven brings these strands together to discuss the main findings and their broader implications.

2. Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, thematic approach to reviewing the literature. It synthesizes research on the representation of Syrians in Turkish mainstream and social media published between 2011, the year of the first arrivals of Syrians in Turkey, and 2026 inclusive. It should be noted, however, that the earliest studies identified were published in 2015, four years after the first arrivals. This likely reflects, at least in part, the initial perception of the Syrians' presence as

temporary, which meant that it took some time for their media representation to be recognized as a pertinent research question. The review aims to identify patterns across studies, rather than to statistically aggregate their findings. This approach is appropriate for a methodologically diverse literature, combining critical discourse analysis, framing analysis, content analysis and computational sentiment analysis, and whose findings cannot be meaningfully pooled.

Literature searches were conducted in academic search engines, principally Google Scholar, DergiPark, TR Dizin, and Web of Science. Searches were run in both English and Turkish, since a large share of the research on this topic is published in Turkish-language journals. Different combinations of terms related to the representation of Syrians (or Syrian refugees) in the media and social media were used ("Syrian refugees" AND representation AND media / social media AND Turkey; "Suriyeli" AND "temsil" AND "medya" / "sosyal medya"]. The searches covered publications from 2011 to September 2026.

The full texts of the selected studies were downloaded and first categorized thematically, to produce an overview of the main topics, media types, platforms, periods and methods covered. Each study was then reviewed individually against the themes that structure this article: the justifications for studying the representation of Syrians (Section 3), the dominant representations identified (Section 4), the factors explaining variation among them, namely ideological orientation, media type and context (Section 5), and the gaps, weaknesses and inconsistencies in the literature (Section 6). The themes were derived inductively from the literature. Findings were then compared across studies, with attention to points of convergence and to contradictory results, particularly between traditional and digital media.

Several limitations should be noted. First, the review is restricted to peer-reviewed articles published in English and Turkish, and so excludes other types of publications (e.g., books, book chapters, reports, etc.) and studies in Arabic or other languages, including potential research by or with Syrian communities. Second, no formal quality appraisal of the studies was undertaken, and the review relies on the findings as reported by their authors. Third, the thematic classification involves interpretation by a single coder, i.e., the author, and a different reading might have grouped some findings differently.

3. Why Study Representation of Syrians in Turkish Media?: A Review of Theoretical and Conceptual Justifications in the Literature

Across this literature, scholars justify investigating, describing, and critically assessing the media representation and discourse surrounding migrants and refugees through several core theoretical, conceptual, and empirical frameworks:

a. Social Construction of Reality and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Grounded in Stuart Hall's (1999) representation theory and framing perspectives (e.g., Goffman (1974), Entman (1993), Gamson and Modigliani (1989)), many studies emphasize that media outlets do not merely reflect social reality; they actively select, structure, and

construct meaning (Göker and Keskin, 2015; Ataç and Paksoy, 2026; Narlı et al. 2020). Media messages guide how audiences perceive, categorize, and evaluate complex social phenomena (Narlı et al. 2020; Torun and Demirtaş 2018; Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023).

There are also those studies drawing on Teun van Dijk's (1988) socio-cognitive approach and Norman Fairclough's (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis, where scholars argue that news discourse is deeply intertwined with dominant political ideologies and power structures (Gökgöz, 2022; Şen, 2017; Efe, 2015). Critical assessment is required to expose how media texts naturalize inequality and legitimize the interests of ruling elites (Şen, 2017; Efe, 2015; Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Gezik, 2022).

b. The Direct Link Between Media Representation and Public Behavior

Other studies start from the foundational premise of a causal link between media portrayals and real-world social behavior (Efe, 2015; Göker and Keskin, 2015; Pandır *et al*., 2015). Accordingly, how refugees are framed directly shapes host community attitudes, daily interactions, and social acceptance (Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023; Pandır *et al.*, 2015; Pandır, 2019).

One common starting point used in the justification of these studies has been a concern about the incitement of discrimination and hate speech. Studies highlight that negative, sensationalist, or myth-based media coverage fuels xenophobia, prejudice, and discriminatory practices (Efe, 2015; Pandır, 2019). When exclusionary or dehumanizing rhetoric is repeatedly circulated, it normalizes hate speech and can escalate into physical harassment, hate crimes, or social conflict (Efe, 2015; Pandır, 2019; Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Şen, 2017).

c. Construction of "Otherness" and Scapegoating ("Us vs. Them")

Another popular theme has been to study how media is essential in fortifying national and collective identities through migrants and refugees. Scholars examine refugee representations to reveal how media constructs an exclusionary binary between "Us" (the host nation/in-group) and "Them" (the refugee/out-group) (Şen, 2017; Koçak and Küçük, 2020; Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Göngen, 2022; Kökpınar-Kaya *et al.* 2022). The "Other" is frequently framed as a threat to national security, demographic balance, or cultural unity (Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Gökgöz, 2022; Pandır, 2019; Narlı *et al.*, 2020).

Also central in these studies is the theme of “scapegoating” through media. Accordingly, in times of economic, social, or political crisis, media outlets often position refugees as "scapegoats" or "burdens," holding them responsible for rising unemployment, public service strain, or social instability (Gökgöz, 2022; Efe, 2015; Şen, 2017; Göker and Keskin, 2015; Narlı *et al.*, 2020).

d. Social Cohesion vs. Social Conflict

The significance of studying refugee representations in media is also based in the view of media as both problem and solution regarding social cohesion and conflict. As such, literature

focusing on long-term displacement (such as Syrians under temporary protection in Turkey) argues that media can either provoke social conflict through "moral panics" or facilitate social cohesion (Pandır, 2019; Gökgöz, 2022). In fact, it is claimed that there is a need for academic studies that

could be used to promote rights-based and peace journalism. So, some researchers critically assess current media flaws to advocate for ethical, rights-based, and peace journalism (Pandır, 2019; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). Highlighting the ordinary human experiences of refugees—rather than depicting them as anonymous masses—builds empathy, mutual understanding, and peaceful co-existence (Pandır, 2019).

e. Influence on Policy-Making and Integration Frameworks

Another suggested source of significance of these studies arise from media's potential for informing the public and the state's decision-making processes. Accordingly, media representations strongly influence public debates, which in turn shape government policies, asylum legislation, and integration strategies (Efe, 2015; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Narlı *et al.*, 2020). Also, the studies themselves could be important inputs as investigating media coverage provides an empirical foundation for policymakers and civil society organizations to address structural barriers to integration (Efe, 2015; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Narlı *et al.*, 2020).

f. Challenging Depoliticization, Dehumanization, and "Compassion Fatigue"

Last but not the least, studies justify their critical focus by showing how media frequently depoliticizes refugees—reducing them either to passive, helpless victims needing charity or dangerous criminals needing containment (Şen, 2017; Pandır, 2019; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). Both frames strip refugees of their political agency and human rights (Pandır, 2019; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). Scholars also analyze how continuous exposure to tragic, sensationalized, or negative media representations leads to public habituation and "compassion fatigue," ultimately dampening empathy and social solidarity over time (Ergün *et al.*, 2025; Aldamen, 2023).

4. Dominant Representations of Syrians in Turkish Media

Across Turkish mainstream newspapers, local press, and social media platforms (such as Twitter/X, YouTube, and collaborative online dictionaries like *Ekşi Sözlük*), the academic literature identifies several prominent and recurrent thematic representations of Syrian refugees:

a. Syrians as an Economic Burden and Job Market Competitor

One common representation of Syrians in Turkish media is that of "drain on state resources". News coverage and social media commentary repeatedly position Syrians as an economic burden that depletes national wealth, tax revenues, and public services (Bolgün and Uçan, 2020; Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Çoban-Keneş, 2016). Reports

frequently highlight aggregate state spending on refugees to construct a narrative of financial strain (Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Çambay, 2019).

A corollary of this representation is one of Syrians suppressing wages and causing unemployment of Turks. Mainstream newspapers and online discourses often frame Syrian workers as "unregistered" or "illegal" labor that undercuts wages and displaces native Turkish workers in low-skilled sectors (Bolgün and Uçan, 2020; Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021; Çambay, 2019). These narratives often hold refugees accountable for local unemployment while ignoring employer exploitation (Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016). In a related manner, the influx of Syrian refugees was frequently blamed for skyrocketing housing rents, commodity price inflation, and local economic instability (Çambay, 2019; Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Gölcü and Dağlı, 2017; Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016).

b. Syrians as Security Threats, Criminals, and Disturbers of Order

Another quite negative representation of Syrians depict them as threats to public security and even potential terrorists. Studies found that media framing often associates refugees with illegal border crossings, terrorism, gang violence, and general lawlessness (Çambay, 2019; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Şen, 2017; Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023). Also, it has been found that news reports and digital posts frequently link Syrians to criminal activities—such as theft, robbery, murder, extortion, and human trafficking (Gezik, 2022; Çambay, 2019; Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023; Sert and Danış, 2021; Narlı *et al.*, 2020). Isolated criminal incidents involving Syrians are regularly generalized across the entire refugee community (Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023; Kurt, 2019). In addition, media narratives occasionally categorize refugees as vectors of infectious diseases, unhygienic populations, or polluters of public spaces (Gezik, 2022; Çambay, 2019; Aldemir, 2020; Şentürk-Kara and Yılmaz, 2015).

c. Syrians as Victims and Passive Objects of Charity (Earlier on)

Many pro-government outlets, state news agencies (e.g., Anadolu Agency), and humanitarian reporting portray Syrians primarily as war victims, orphans, or helpless individuals suffering in poverty and needing international aid (Sert and Danış, 2021; Göker and Keskin, 2015; Pandır, 2019; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Pandır *et al.*, 2015). Scholars note that while the "victim" frame elicits sympathy, it simultaneously depoliticizes refugees, stripping them of political agency and reducing them to passive objects of state benevolence or NGO statistics (Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Pandır, 2019; Pandır *et al.*, 2015). Pro-government and conservative press frequently frame refugees within the Islamic "*Ensar–Muhacir*" (hosts and migrants) tradition or as temporary "guests" (Sert and Danış, 2021; Narlı *et al.*, 2020). However, literature notes this frame eroded over time as the guest status became viewed as overstayed (Sert and Danış, 2021; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021).

d. Syrians as Cultural/Demographic "Others" and Social Threat

It is found in many studies that a strict division is created in media over perceived incompatibility and Syrians' "uncivilized" lifestyle. Accordingly, social media users and mainstream outlets construct a rigid binary between "Us" (the civilized host nation) and "Them" (the culturally backward refugee) (Çambay, 2019; Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021). For instance, on platforms like Twitter, Syrian men in public parks, beaches, or shisha (nargile) cafes are targeted as "cowardly" or "lavish" for engaging in leisure rather than fighting in Syria (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021). There is often a gendered component of such presentations, too. Syrian women are framed either as vulnerable victims or as "fake brides," "second wives," or moral threats to the domestic family unit (Narlı *et al.*, 2020). Syrian men are frequently stereotyped as predatory or disruptive to public safety (Narlı *et al.*, 2020; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2020; İşçi and Uludağ, 2019).

e. Syrians as Exploited Cheap Labor

Left-leaning and alternative media outlets, on the other hand, frequently reframe the refugee presence away from charity toward class relations, depicting Syrians as heavily exploited, underpaid, and unsafe workers in agriculture, textile workshops, and construction (Doğanay and Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Artar, 2019; Çoban-Keneş, 2016). These accounts emphasize how business owners leverage cheap, vulnerable refugee labor to suppress overall wage demands, bypass social security costs, and break local labor unions (Artar, 2019).

f. Syrians as Privileged Groups and Political Pawns

Oppositional news and anti-refugee social media hashtags foster resentment by portraying Syrians as receiving unfair state stipends, free medical care, and university privileges at the expense of Turkish citizens (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Çambay, 2019). Last but not the least, critical discourses allege that the political establishment uses Syrian refugees as demographic instruments or prospective voters through naturalization policies (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2020; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Atasü-Topcuoğlu, 2019; Narlı *et al.*, 2020).

5. What Drives the Variations in Dominant Representations of Syrians in Turkey?: Political/Ideological Orientation, Media Type, and the Context

After establishing the dominant ways in which Syrians are represented in Turkish media in the above section, this section investigates why they vary. The review of the literature appears to point at a dynamic interplay between three main drivers: (i) political and ideological orientations of the media outlets, (ii) type of media (i.e. traditional, mainstream media vs. new, digital and social media), and (iii) shifting political, economic, and social contexts.

a. Political and Ideological Orientations of Media Outlets

Discourse analysis across national newspapers demonstrates that refugee coverage is heavily weaponized within Turkey's broader political polarization (Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Sert and Danış, 2021; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019). Rather than presenting neutral reports, outlets frame refugees according to their political proximity to the state and their underlying ideological commitments (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Sert and Danış, 2021; Paksoy and Şentöregil, 2018). The literature identifies a few media groupings in this context:

Firstly, there is the *Pro-Government and Islamist Press (Yeni Akit, Yeni Şafak, Sabah, Anadolu Agency)*. These media outlets primarily adopt a humanitarian and religious solidarity frame in representing Syrians (Sert and Danış, 2021; Artar, 2019; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). Refugees are constructed as "victimized guests" or "religious brothers" (*muhacir*) being embraced by the host community (*Ensar*) (Sert and Danış, 2021; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Narlı *et al.*, 2020). The literature suggests that pro-government media favor this framing because it legitimizes the ruling party's open-door policy and state expenditure on refugees while avoiding 'crisis' or 'threat' narratives that could generate domestic backlash (Sert and Danış, 2021; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019).

Secondly, it is possible to identify a *Secular and Opposition Press (Cumhuriyet, Sözcü, Hürriyet)*. These outlets frequently utilize crisis, demographic threat, and economic burden frames (Sert and Danış, 2021; Paksoy and Şentöregil, 2018; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019). The suggested reason is that opposition outlets use the refugee issue as a lever to criticize government foreign policy, municipal spending, and naturalization plans (Sert and Danış, 2021; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019). Accordingly, for instance, in newspapers like *Cumhuriyet*, refugees are framed as an uneducated mass being instrumentalized by the ruling party to secure new voter bases and erode secular republican structures (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019).

Thirdly, there is a *Socialist and Leftist Alternative Press (Solportal, BirGün, Bianet, Sendika)*. These outlets reject both the religious charity and xenophobic framings, centering instead on a class-based analysis of labor exploitation (Artar, 2019; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019). Outlets like *Solportal* highlight how refugees function as "cheap labor" within informal, precarious capitalist markets (Artar, 2019; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Şen, 2017). Due to their ideological orientation, accordingly, they frame refugees as victims of imperialist proxy wars and call for class solidarity and rights-based protections under international conventions rather than temporary state benevolence (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019).

Fourth and lastly, there is a *Far-Right and Nationalist Press (Ortadoğu, Zafer Party Media)*. These outlets, in turn, operate around an existential threat and demographic invasion frame, representing refugees as a direct hazard to Turkish national security, cultural unity, and demographic survival, advocating for mass deportation (Efe, 2015; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019, Deniz and Aksu-Kargın, 2023).

b. Media Type: Traditional Mainstream Media vs. 'New', 'Digital' and Social Media

It is suggested that the structural and technological differences between traditional press and digital platforms create starkly different discursive environments (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021; İşçi and Uludağ, 2019).

The *Traditional Mainstream Media* (including print and broadcast outlets), on the one hand, are subject to state regulation, institutional ownership, and editorial gatekeeping (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Sert and Danış, 2021). Therefore, even when politically polarized, traditional outlets adhere to formal journalistic conventions (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Göker and Keskin, 2015). Mainstream coverage focuses heavily on macro-level policy debates, official state statistics, state-led humanitarian aid, or formal political party statements (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Sert and Danış, 2021; Şen, 2017; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018).

The *New, Digital, and Social Media* Outlets, and particularly the latter, on the other hand, are very different because they are often characterized by user-generated content, anonymity, lack of editorial censorship, and algorithmic viral engagement (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021; İşçi and Uludağ, 2019). It is suggested that digital platforms often act as echo chambers that unleash unfiltered "digital racism," hate speech, and moral panic (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). In fact, on platforms like Twitter/X, refugee representations shift from formal policy critiques to hyper-personalized, gendered, and place-based hostility (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). According to other examples, social media discourse emphasizes perceived refugee "privileges" (Kökpınar-Kaya *et al.*, 2022), circulates unverified rumors/fake news (Taş and Taş, 2018; Kökpınar-Kaya *et al.*, 2022), and constructs visual contrasts—such as framing young Syrian men relaxing in public parks or beaches as "cowards" while Turkish soldiers fight abroad (Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021).

c. Evolution Over Time: Shifts in Political, Economic, and Social Contexts

The literature shows that media representations of Syrians are not static over time. Instead, they evolve across distinct socio-political milestones and crisis moments (Ergün *et al.*, 2025; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Özerim and Tolay, 2020). There appear to be a few significant contextual milestones in the literature on representation of Syrians in Turkey that could be used in identifying some specific periods:

Firstly, there is the *Initial Phase (2011–2015)*. In these early years, coverage was dominated by temporary humanitarian language ("guests", "war victims") under the political assumption that the Syrian civil war would resolve quickly (Narlı *et al.*, 2020; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Pandır, 2019).

Then comes a brief period in 2015 to 2016 initiated by the *Aylan Kurdi incident* in September 2015 at the end of a summer of trans-Mediterranean irregular passages of Syrians to Europe. The death of toddler Aylan (Alan) Kurdi in September 2015 triggered a momentary global and national surge in visual sympathy and humanitarian concern (Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Ataç and

Paksoy, 2026). The moment of sympathy was short-lived, though, as mass transit across the Aegean and the March *2016 EU-Turkey Migration Statement* marked a transition in media focus (Çoban-Keneş, 2016; Paksoy and Şentoregil, 2018). Coverage shifted from viewing refugees merely as fleeing war victims to framing them as a permanent urban population and a complex geopolitical bargaining topic (Pandır, 2019; Sert and Danış, 2021).

The *Citizenship and Naturalization Debates (2016–2017)* could be seen as a significant milestone in the evolution of media representations. When state leadership publicly raised the possibility of granting citizenship to Syrians, media discourse shifted sharply toward politicization in this second period (Aldemir, 2020; Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Narlı *et al.*, 2020). Opposition press and digital platforms framed refugees as a political instrument designed to shift election outcomes (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Özdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016).

Another striking milestone was the *Economic Downturn (Post-2018)*. As inflation, housing costs, and unemployment rose in Turkey, both traditional news and social media increasingly framed refugees as an economic drain and burden, linking them directly to local market instability and wage suppression (Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2019; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Aldamen, 2023).

The *Cross-Border Military Operations in 2018 and 2019* could be pointed out as the next important milestones. During Turkish military interventions in Northern Syria, social media sentiment analyses reveal a surge in hostile and securitized discourse (rising to over 95% negative sentiment on Twitter) (Aldemir, 2020). Discourse shifted from cultural incompatibility to depicting refugees as security threats or invaders (Aldemir, 2020).

The February 2023 Earthquakes represent a tragic new milestone, especially because the effected regions host large Syrian populations. The Kahramanmaraş earthquakes created a brief "humanitarian interruption" in social media discourse, momentarily replacing threat frames with shared victimhood and rescue solidarity (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). However, this was short-lived; online discourse rapidly reverted to criminalization, looting allegations, and heightened hostility (Ergün *et al.*, 2025; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026).

Lastly, the literature points at *Electoral Mobilization during the 2023 General Elections* as a significant milestone for further politicization, where Syrian refugees became a hyper-visible, polarized political topic (Ataç and Paksoy, 2026; Ergün *et al.*, 2025). Coverage concentrated heavily on quantitative metrics (refugee numbers), border security, and compulsory return policies (Ataç and Paksoy, 2026).

6. Gaps, Weaknesses and Inconsistencies in the Literature

a. Methodological Limitations

There is a considerable dominance of cross-sectional "snapshots" over longitudinal tracking in the literature. Most studies examine short, event-driven timeframes—such as a 2-month crisis period (Şen, 2017), a specific election campaign (Ataç and Paksoy, 2026), or a single trending hashtag (Ergün *et al.*, 2025). There is a lack of multi-year longitudinal studies that systematically track how media frames and emotional trajectories evolve over extended timeframes.

Another issue is what could be termed methodological monoculture and fragmentation. This is because research in the field tends to split into two isolated camps: on the one hand there are studies using qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). These studies offer rich contextual interpretation but relies on small, purposefully selected samples that lack statistical generalizability (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026). On the other hand, there are studies that employ basic quantitative sentiment analysis methods. These scale across large text datasets but rely on binary -and often superficial- "positive vs. negative" polarity scoring, which fails to distinguish whether "negative" sentiment stems from fear, anger, or grief, and frequently misinterprets sarcasm and irony (Ergün *et al.*, 2025).

Lastly, there appears to be certain biases arising from platform and medium selection. For instance, studies that focus on social media disproportionately concentrate on Twitter/X, YouTube comments, or collaborative online dictionaries (Ekşi Sözlük) (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Haksöz and Tekdemir, 2016; Özdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016), while ignoring rapidly growing visual platforms like TikTok and Instagram or closed messaging networks (e.g., Telegram). On the other hand, studies focusing on traditional press frequently exclude print-only regional publications, local newspapers without digital archives (Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017), and broadcast television news (Şen, 2017).

b. Theoretical and Conceptual Gaps

Perhaps the most important issue here is silencing of refugee voices and subjectivity, either deliberately or otherwise. Across the vast majority of studies, refugees are treated strictly as passive, downstream objects of representation—either framed as helpless victims needing charity or as ominous security and economic threats. They are spoken about, but rarely spoken with (Jauhiainen *et al.*, 2021; Aldamen, 2023; Şen, 2017; Efe, 2015). In other words, Syrians are routinely spoken about by state officials, journalists, and experts, but are rarely given the platform to speak for themselves (Paksoy and Şentöregil, 2018; Pandır, 2019). In a related way, research rarely investigates how Syrian refugees themselves consume, interpret, and navigate Turkish mainstream press and social media (Pandır, 2019; Yıldırım-Başoğlu, 2023). While some studies explore smartphone connectivity and digital communication (Jauhiainen *et al.*, 2021; Yıldırım-Başoğlu, 2023), the broader literature overlooks how refugees construct their own digital counter-publics.

On the other end, there appears to be a problem of over-generalization and homogenization of the "host community". Studies frequently analyze "Turkish public opinion" or "social media reactions" as uniform entities (Pandır, 2019; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). This approach obscures critical socio-economic, political, generational, and educational splits within host society attitudes. In addition, the literature often draws broad national conclusions without accounting for geographic context (Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Sert and Danış, 2021). Research on local press reveals significant regional variations: high-density border provinces (such as Gaziantep, Hatay, and Kilis) initially reflected localized contact, cross-border ties, and daily social friction (Gökgöz, 2022; Narlı *et al.*, 2020), whereas non-border Anatolian local press (e.g., Eskişehir or Trabzon) frequently reproduced highly hostile, macro-level national political tropes and scapegoating (Göktuna-Yaylacı, 2017; Sert and Danış, 2021). Same point can be raised regarding socio-economic and sectoral variables. Host community sentiment is rarely disaggregated by social class or economic role (Göker and Keskin, 2015; Artar, 2019).

A third major issue is a similar homogenization of Syrians in the literature. Most studies frequently use generic labels such as "Syrians" or "refugees," eroding distinct individual identities, socio-economic backgrounds, and political statuses. Most studies fail to differentiate representations based on internal class status (wealthy investors vs. informal urban laborers) or ethno-religious identity (Arab, Turkmen, Kurdish, or Christian Syrians) (Pandır, 2019; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). Notably, content analyses show that specific ethnic sub-groups, such as Syrian Turkmens, receive noticeably more tolerant and sympathetic press coverage compared to Syrians in general (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). Lastly in this regard, there is a consistent issue of superficial gender categorization in the literature. While individual studies highlight gendered stereotypes—such as framing Syrian women as "second wives/kuma" or "helpless victims" and Syrian men as "draft dodgers" or "threats" (Narlı *et al.*, 2020; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Özdüzen *et al.*, 2021)—they rarely examine how gender intersects simultaneously with age, class, family structure, and legal precarity (Narlı *et al.*, 2020).

c. Empirical Inconsistencies

The empirical literature on the representation of Syrian refugees in Turkey contains several key inconsistencies, contradictory findings, and empirical divergences. These inconsistencies reveal that media discourse is not a monolithic, static phenomenon, but varies significantly based on methodological design, spatial location, gendered framing, and the nature of external shock events.

The first such inconsistency concerns the impact of external crises on anti-refugee discourse and representation in the media. While some studies suggest that such crises present a "humanitarian interruption" to the anti-refugee discourses where common suffering and humanity is emphasized; others find that such crises further emboldened anti-refugee sentiments by making them into scapegoats or opportunists. A very good example is the impact of the 2023 earthquakes. Immediately after the disaster, studies document a brief "humanitarian

interruption" characterized by shared victimhood, rescue solidarity, and the discursive inclusion of Syrians as "one of us". However, this inclusive frame was short-lived; social media platforms quickly reverted to intense digital anti-refugee discourse, where unverified looting rumors and accusations of resource monopolization fueled demands for immediate exclusion and removal (Ergün *et al.*, 2025; Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026).

A second example in this regard is the COVID-19 Pandemic. Empirical findings on the pandemic present conflicting outcomes regarding public hostility. On one hand, computational sentiment analysis using mobility data argues for an "out of sight, out of mind" effect—finding that reduced physical intergroup contact during COVID-19 lockdowns led to a temporary decline in negative sentiment towards refugees on social media (Ergün *et al.*, 2025). On the other hand, qualitative discourse studies show that during the pandemic, political and media rhetoric weaponized disease metaphors ("weeds", "contagion"), which heightened public anxiety and deepened the social exclusion of refugees as perceived health and economic hazards (Kökpınar-Kaya and Çobaner, 2026; Çambay, 2019).

A structural inconsistency exists between state-sanctioned media framing (mainstream and state media) and digital public discourse. Research analyzing official government statements and state-aligned news agencies (such as Anadolu Agency) demonstrates a deliberate avoidance of the term "crisis" when reporting for domestic Turkish audiences (Sunata and Yıldız, 2018; Sert and Danış, 2021). The state-controlled narrative focuses on administrative competence, border management, and temporary guest stewardship to signal order and state capacity (Sert and Danış, 2021; Sunata and Yıldız, 2018). In contrast, empirical analyses of user-generated content on Twitter/X, collaborative online dictionaries (Ekşi Sözlük), and public surveys show that public discourse is completely dominated by an acute crisis and threat framework (Aldamen, 2023; Haksöz and Tekdemir, 2016; Bolgün and Uçan, 2020; Özdemir and Öner-Özkan, 2016). Users consistently frame the refugee presence as an unmanaged "demographic invasion," an administrative failure, and an economic catastrophe, directly contradicting the official "managed protection" narrative (Çambay, 2019; Haksöz and Tekdemir, 2016).

7. Main Findings and Discussion

The literature reviewed in this article produces a number of broader findings that become particularly visible when individual studies are considered together rather than in isolation. Most importantly, the representation of Syrians in Turkish media cannot adequately be characterized simply as either “positive” or “negative.” Although negative and exclusionary representations have become increasingly prominent, the literature reveals a more complex field of competing representations whose prevalence depends upon political ideology, media structure, historical context, and the methodological choices of researchers. The central finding of this review is therefore not merely that Syrians have been negatively represented, but that their representation constitutes a dynamic and highly politicized process through which different actors interpret the meaning of Syrian presence in Turkey.

A first major finding concerns the remarkable persistence of "othering" across otherwise different representations. Syrians are repeatedly constructed in relation to a Turkish "us," whether they appear as threatening outsiders, dependent guests, economic competitors, culturally incompatible communities, or recipients of humanitarian protection. Even apparently sympathetic representations may reproduce this distinction. The victim or "guest" frame, for example, differs fundamentally in normative orientation from representations of Syrians as criminals or demographic threats, yet both can position Syrians as objects rather than autonomous social and political subjects. In the former, Syrians become recipients of Turkish hospitality, charity, and protection; in the latter, they become objects of control, exclusion, or removal. The literature therefore suggests that humanitarian and hostile representations should not necessarily be understood as simple opposites. Both may reproduce unequal relations between an active host society and a comparatively passive refugee population.

This observation is reinforced by one of the clearest gaps identified in the literature: the relative absence of Syrian voices. Much of the scholarship examines how Turkish newspapers, political actors, journalists, or social media users talk about Syrians, while considerably less attention is devoted to how Syrians represent themselves, interpret Turkish media narratives, respond to stigmatization, or construct alternative discursive spaces. Syrians consequently remain objects of representation not only within much of the media content being studied but, to some extent, within the research literature itself. This represents an important direction for future research, particularly given the increasing significance of digital media as spaces in which refugees can potentially become producers rather than merely subjects of representation.

A second major finding is that media representations of Syrians are deeply embedded in Turkey's broader political polarization. The literature consistently demonstrates that the same refugee population can acquire radically different meanings depending upon the ideological position of the media outlet. Pro-government and mainstream media have frequently employed humanitarian, religious, and guest-oriented frames compatible with government migration policies, while secular opposition media have more readily connected Syrian presence to government failure, economic costs, demographic transformation, and citizenship controversies. Socialist and leftist alternative outlets have foregrounded labor exploitation and class relations, whereas far-right and nationalist actors have increasingly framed Syrians through existential, demographic, cultural, and security threats.

This suggests that media discourse concerning Syrians frequently functions as a proxy for broader domestic political conflict. Syrians are not represented solely in relation to migration itself; they are also incorporated into competing narratives concerning the government, secularism, nationalism, foreign policy, economic management, citizenship, and the future character of Turkish society. Refugee representation should therefore be understood not simply as a media response to migration but as part of the broader struggle over political meaning in Turkey. In this respect, the increasing politicization of Syrians over time is particularly significant. The transition from temporary "guests" to prospective citizens, voters,

competitors for resources, and subjects of return policies transformed refugee representation from a predominantly humanitarian issue into a central arena of domestic political contestation.

Third, the review identifies a significant structural distinction between mainstream and social media. Traditional media remain politically polarized, but their representations are mediated through institutional ownership, editorial routines, professional conventions, and, in some cases, state influence. Social media substantially weaken these forms of gatekeeping. The literature consequently identifies digital platforms as particularly important sites for the circulation of explicit hostility, rumors, misinformation, hate speech, gendered stereotypes, and highly personalized forms of exclusion. Rather than discussing Syrian presence primarily through formal policy questions, social media users frequently interpret refugees through everyday spaces and practices: employment, housing, parks, beaches, marriage, consumption, military service, and perceived access to public benefits.

This distinction also helps explain one of the major empirical inconsistencies identified in the literature. State-aligned and mainstream media may present Syrian displacement through narratives of administrative management, humanitarian responsibility, and temporary protection while digital public discourse simultaneously describes the same situation as an uncontrolled "crisis," demographic threat, or economic catastrophe. These are not necessarily contradictory empirical findings. Rather, they demonstrate that different media environments contain distinct discursive logics and different relationships to political authority. Future research should therefore avoid treating "the media" as a homogeneous analytical category and should instead investigate interactions between platforms, institutions, political actors, and audiences.

Fourth, the literature demonstrates that representations are highly sensitive to changing political, economic, and social contexts. The evolution from the humanitarian "guest" discourse of the early years toward increasingly economic, demographic, and security-oriented frames reflects the transformation of Syrian displacement itself from an anticipated temporary emergency into a long-term social reality. Citizenship debates, economic deterioration after 2018, cross-border military operations, the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2023 earthquakes, and electoral competition all altered the salience and meaning of particular frames. This contextual sensitivity indicates that anti-refugee discourse should not be treated as a fixed attitudinal condition. It intensifies, changes form, and occasionally recedes according to wider developments.

The evidence concerning moments of crisis is especially revealing. The 2023 earthquakes demonstrate that established boundaries between "us" and "them" can temporarily become more permeable when refugees and host communities experience a shared catastrophe. Yet the rapid re-emergence of accusations concerning looting and resource competition indicates the resilience of previously established negative frames. Similarly, conflicting findings concerning

COVID-19 suggest that reduced physical contact may decrease some forms of hostility while crisis rhetoric simultaneously produces new forms of health-related exclusion. External shocks therefore do not have uniform effects on refugee representation; their consequences depend upon the discursive resources through which events are interpreted.

Fifth, the review highlights an important methodological problem within the existing scholarship. Much of what is known about Syrian representation comes from relatively short, event-specific studies. Research frequently analyzes particular elections, crises, newspapers, hashtags, or limited periods rather than tracing representations systematically across the entire period since 2011. This makes it difficult to distinguish temporary discursive fluctuations from durable transformations. The division between small-scale qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis and large-scale but comparatively simplified computational sentiment analysis further limits cumulative knowledge. The former offers interpretive depth but often limited generalizability, while the latter provides scale but may reduce complex emotional and political discourse to binary categories such as "positive" and "negative."

These methodological differences may themselves account for some apparent contradictions across the literature. A study of state-aligned newspaper coverage, a sentiment analysis of millions of tweets, and a qualitative examination of a local newspaper are not necessarily measuring the same phenomenon. Divergent findings should therefore not automatically be regarded as empirical inconsistencies requiring resolution. They may instead reveal different layers of refugee representation. One implication is that future research would benefit from genuinely mixed-method and longitudinal designs capable of combining large-scale identification of changing patterns with close qualitative analysis of how particular frames acquire meaning.

Finally, the review demonstrates that both Syrians and the Turkish host population are frequently treated as excessively homogeneous categories. The term "Syrians" can obscure differences of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, legal status, occupation, age, and geographical location. Similarly, references to "Turkish society" or "public opinion" can conceal substantial differences associated with political ideology, socio-economic position, generation, education, and local experience with refugee populations. Existing research already provides indications that such differences matter: Syrian Turkmens, for example, may receive more sympathetic coverage than Syrians as a general category, while representations in high-density border provinces may differ from those found in regions with substantially less direct contact.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the representation of Syrians in Turkish media is best conceptualized not as a stable collection of stereotypes but as a contested and evolving representational field. Within this field, humanitarianism, nationalism, political polarization, class conflict, economic insecurity, security concerns, and everyday intergroup relations compete to define what Syrian presence means. The balance between these frames changes

across outlets, platforms, locations, and historical moments, but the capacity of Syrians themselves to participate in defining that meaning remains comparatively limited.

The most important broader conclusion of the review is therefore twofold. On the one hand, there has been a discernible long-term movement away from the predominantly humanitarian and temporary frames of the early Syrian displacement toward more politicized, economic, demographic, and security-oriented representations. On the other hand, this transformation should not be understood as a simple linear progression from positive to negative representation. Rather, the literature reveals overlapping and competing discourses whose prominence depends on who is speaking, through which medium, in what political context, and at what historical moment. Understanding these interactions—and incorporating the voices, agency, and internal diversity of Syrians themselves—represents the most promising direction for the next generation of research on media and Syrian displacement in Turkey.

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