



HATE SPEECH AND HATE CRIMES AGAINST SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY



About the Stockholm Center for Freedom

The Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF) is a non-profit advocacy organization that promotes the rule of law, democracy and human rights with a special focus on Turkey.

SCF was set up by a group of journalists who were forced to live in self-exile in Sweden against the backdrop of a massive crackdown on press freedom in Turkey.

SCF is committed to serving as a reference source by providing a broader picture of rights violations in Turkey, monitoring daily developments, documenting individual cases of the infringement of fundamental rights and publishing comprehensive reports on human rights issues.

SCF is a member of the Alliance Against Genocide, an international coalition dedicated to creating the international institutions and the political will to prevent genocide.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factor.”¹ To date there is no universal definition of hate speech under international human rights law, although there have been debates on the limits of hate speech, in particular justification for its use under freedom of opinion and expression.

Philippe Schmidt, chairman of the International Network Against Cyber Hate, says those people guilty of hate speech justify their actions using freedom of expression as an excuse. “There is a limit to freedom of speech,” he argued in an interview with the Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF). “The limit to freedom of speech is the dignity of the other person. Of course, we cannot always clearly define what dignity is, as it changes from one country to another, but that is just the application. It is important as a principle to set the line at the dignity of another person. There is no group in the world to which this does not apply.”²

This report discusses hate speech and discriminatory and xenophobic rhetoric in Turkey directed against Syrian refugees, coming at a time when anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment are becoming increasingly normalized in Turkey. The country’s growing social and economic problems and the May 14 elections have placed migrants and refugees in the middle of a political feud, with their position becoming concerningly precarious.

A report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) said there are more than 5.2 million foreign nationals present in Turkey, 3.9 million of whom are seeking international protection. These numbers were cited from the Turkish Presidency of Migration Management (PMM)³.

¹ United Nations, *Understanding hate speech – What is hate speech*, at <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>

² Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *[Interview] Economic downturns have a great impact on the rise of hate speech, INACH Chairman Schmidt says*, December 24, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/interview-economic-downturns-have-a-great-impact-on-the-rise-of-hate-speech-inach-chairman-schmidt-says/>

³ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Türkiye — Migrant presence monitoring - Annual migrant presence monitoring (Jan-Dec 2022)*, March 7, 2023, at

Turkey, under its temporary protection regime, has granted 3,535,898 Syrian nationals the right to legally stay in the country. The vast majority, 3,488,373, live outside camps, while 47,525 Syrians reside in seven camps, the IOM said.

Speaking to SCF, Member of the European Parliament Tineke Strik said Turkey cannot be considered a safe country for migrants and asylum seekers because it is not bound by the refugee convention when it comes to non-European refugees⁴.

This report focuses on the hate speech and hate crimes faced by Syrian refugees who fled the civil war in their country to take shelter in Turkey.

1.1. History of xenophobic and discriminatory speech in Turkey

Discriminatory discourse and hate speech have a long history in Turkey. Since the foundation of the modern Turkish Republic, hate speech has been central in political campaigns. Such discourse has especially been used to target such minorities as Kurds, Armenians, Christians (Greeks and Armenians), Jews, Alevis and Roma⁵. Moreover, the targeting of minorities and political rivals in Turkey with political hate speech have sparked massive purges and persecution.

Despite the long history of violence in the context of hate crimes, only recently have such crimes been recognized by the legal system. Hate crime as a legal term did not appear on the public agenda until the murder of Armenian journalist and activist Hrant Dink in 2007. The Armenian journalist was targeted by Turkish media in the weeks leading up to his murder, with several news outlets calling him names, making fun of his Armenian identity and demanding that he be sent out of the country.

<https://dtm.iom.int/reports/turkiye-migrant-presence-monitoring-annual-migrant-presence-monitoring-jan-dec-2022?close=true>

⁴ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *[Interview] Turkey cannot be considered a safe country for migrants and asylum seekers, says MEP Tineke Strik*, October 19, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/interview-turkey-cannot-be-considered-a-safe-country-for-migrants-and-asylum-seekers-says-mep-tineke-strik/>

⁵ Akça, D., Karakus, F., Baştuğ, M.F. and Perry, B., 2020. Planting hate speech to harvest hatred: How does political hate speech fuel hate crimes in Turkey?. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 9(4), pp.195-211.

Human rights advocates said Dink’s murder was directly linked to the media’s coverage. Since this tragic incident, hate crime has been used and discussed more frequently in the Turkish media and by the general public.

Akça et al. explain that “[...] hate crimes were not defined as a separate type of crime in the Turkish Criminal Code (TCC or TCK in Turkish) until 2014. Changes made to Article 122 of the TCC saw hatred and discrimination now described as occurring if one’s actions prevented people from economic activities, being hired for a job, or enjoying public services due to their ethnic, religious, or political differences, made punishable with one to three years’ imprisonment. Despite this change, Article 122 has been criticized for being far from enforceable in practice due to its language usage and narrow definition of hate crimes. Notably, the most common types of hate crime—that being both physical and verbal attacks—were not included in the TCC. Besides, there has been no conviction based on Article 122 since the crime was legally defined.”⁶

In its latest study, the Istanbul-based Hrant Dink Foundation reported that Jews, Greeks and Armenians were still at the center of hate speech and xenophobia in the Turkish media.⁷ While these groups have historically been “othered” in Turkish public discourse, in recent years Syrians have been included in this group. According to the foundation Syrians have been framed as a threat to society, and an impression that Syrian refugees had “taken over” the country was created.

1.2. Hate speech directed at Syrian refugees

In recent years refugees and minorities have become the groups most targeted by negative political rhetoric and hate speech. In Turkey Syrians have been at the center of anti-refugee sentiment, expressed especially on social media and often by political parties. With inflation reaching 85 percent last year, they have been blamed for many of Turkey’s social and economic ills. Such accusations have increased as the country’s economy has deteriorated considerably in the last few years.

⁶ Akça et al. pp. 197.

⁷ Hrant Dink Foundation, *Basında nefret söylemi: Mart ayından seçtiklerimiz*, March, 2023, <https://hrantdink.org/tr/asulis/faaliyetler/projeler/medyada-nefret-soylemi/3960-basinda-nefret-soylemi-mart-ayindan-sectiklerimiz>

The Turkish media has been instrumental in demonizing migrants and refugee groups, in particular Syrian refugees, by circulating hateful political rhetoric and discriminatory remarks. According to the “Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in Media 2019 Report,”⁸ published by the Hrant Dink Foundation, Syrian refugees in Turkey were the second most targeted group in the Turkish media, with 760 hate speech items.

The report states that they were systematically coded as criminals, murderers and thieves who posed imminent security problems including terrorism. The report once again documented that Syrians were represented in the media as the reason for the current adverse economic situation in Turkey and rising unemployment numbers.⁹

Hate speech soared during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some journalists went so far as to blame Syrians for the rapid spread of the coronavirus in Turkey.¹⁰

According to child psychologists, Syrian children are affected the most by anti-

refugee sentiment in Turkey since they are subjected to discrimination and bullying in school.¹¹

Such sentiment among the Turkish public reached a tipping point following massive earthquakes in southern Turkey in February 2023. Refugees in the quake

zone – most of them Syrian – have been subjected to “multi-layered discrimination,”



⁸ Hrant Dink Foundation, *Hate speech and discriminatory discourse in media 2019 report*, October, 2020, at <https://hrantdink.org/attachments/article/2727/Hate-Speech-and-Discriminatory-Discourse-in-Media-2019.pdf>

⁹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Large majority of Turks against accepting more refugees, poll suggests*, August 18, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/large-majority-of-turks-against-accepting-more-refugees-poll-suggests/>

¹⁰ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Journalist faces investigation for hate speech targeting Syrian refugees*, December 17, 2020, at <https://stockholmcf.org/journalist-faces-investigation-for-hate-speech-targeting-syrian-refugees/>

¹¹ Deutsche Welle Turkish, *Mülteci karşıtı söylem çocukları vuruyor*, June 20, 2022, at <https://www.dw.com/tr/danismanlar-uyardi-multeci-karsiti-soylem-çocukları-vuruyor/a-62191633>

including hate speech, ill-treatment and physical violence. Syrian refugees have sought to return to their war-torn country after swaths of their adopted home were destroyed by the earthquakes, with some 60,000 Syrian refugees returning home since February.¹²

While the pressure on Syrians has accelerated in the country, Turkish security forces have employed additional measures, blocked fleeing Syrians, deported them illegally and mistreated asylum seekers attempting to enter Turkish territory.¹³

In addition, the citizenship applications of thousands of Syrian refugees who have been in Turkey for more than five years have been suspended without reason.¹⁴ They are also subjected to neglect, mistreatment and inhumane living conditions in Turkish repatriation centers.¹⁵

According to recent reports by human rights watchdogs, most Syrian refugees do not see a future in Turkey, with the number of people leaving the country increasing every year. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told the Turkish parliament in October 2022 that some 526,000 refugees have voluntarily returned to Syria since the start of Turkish military operations there in 2016.¹⁶

An annual monitoring report released by the IOM¹⁷ revealed that a total of 201,471 Syrians who had been granted temporary protection status in Turkey left the country

¹² Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *60,000 Syrians return home in aftermath of February earthquakes*, March 28, 2023, at <https://stockholmcf.org/60000-syrians-return-home-in-aftermath-of-february-earthquakes/>

¹³ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Turkey/Syria: Border guards shoot, block fleeing Syrians*, February 3, 2018, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/03/turkey/syria-border-guards-shoot-block-fleeing-syrians>

¹⁴ Deutsche Welle Turkish,, "Üç çocuğum vatansız ve geleceksiz," January 10, 2021, at <https://www.dw.com/tr/suriyelilerin-vatanda%C5%9Fl%C4%B1k-sorunu-%C3%BC%C3%A7-%C3%A7ocu%C4%9Fum-vatans%C4%B1z-ve-geleceksiz/a-56175556>

¹⁵ Gazete Duvar, *Avukat Kaymak: Geri gönderme merkezlerinde kapasitenin çok üzerinde yabancı tutuluyor*, August 19, 2022, at <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/geri-gonderme-merkezlerinde-neler-oluyor-haber-1577992>

¹⁶ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *More than 500,000 Syrian refugees in Turkey have gone home: Erdoğan*, October 3, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/more-than-500000-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-have-gone-home-erdogan/>

¹⁷ International Organization for Migration (IOM), *Türkiye — Migrant presence monitoring - Annual migrant presence monitoring (Jan-Dec 2022)*, March 7, 2023, at <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/turkiye-migrant-presence-monitoring-annual-migrant-presence-monitoring-jan-dec-2022?close=true>

in 2022. In such an environment, negative narratives about migrants and refugees across Turkish society have intensified, and public support for them has declined.

Following a visit to Turkey in April 2023, Birgir Thórarinsson, rapporteur from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE) Committee for Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, called on political parties, especially during their campaigning for the elections, to avoid encouraging shortsighted and negative stances against refugees and migrants.¹⁸

¹⁸ Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe's (PACE), *Ending Türkiye visit, Rapporteur urges all member States to respond to the 'forgotten Afghan refugee crisis'*, April 17, 2023, at <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/9045/ending-turkiye-visit-rapporteur-urges-all-member-states-to-respond-to-the-forgotten-afghan-refugee-crisis->

2. SPREAD OF HATE SPEECH AND HATE CRIMES

2.1. Social media as a tool for spreading hate speech

Although anti-migrant and anti-refugee sentiment and xenophobic discourse have long been around, social media has “unleashed and bolstered” everyday racism, “creating an unregulated space where anonymity and ubiquity enable the dissemination of racist message.”¹⁹

According to a recent academic study, social media has been used extensively to spread hate speech. Social media platforms have been employed to amplify abuse, hate and discrimination, thanks to users being able to post content anonymously and use images, memes and GIFs in addition to texts.²⁰

In the Turkish context, studies have shown that Twitter in particular has been instrumental in creating and spreading hateful discourse about Syrian refugees.²¹ However, anti-Syrian sentiment has also been circulating on other social media platforms such as YouTube and the popular Ekşi Sözlük debate forum.

In social media discussions and posts, Syrians are stripped of their individuality. Research has revealed that when an event occurs concerning a Syrian refugee, social media users target Syrians as a group. For instance, if a person encounters a problem with a Syrian, they take the issue to social media and present it as a problem concerning all Syrians.²²

In a detailed academic paper Özdüzen et al. identify some of the most common tropes that circulate on social media. These are generalizations and stereotypes spread to justify anti-refugee sentiment and the reasons why Syrians should leave

¹⁹ Özdüzen, O., Korkut, U., & Özdüzen, C. (2021). ‘Refugees are not welcome’: Digital racism, online place-making and the evolving categorization of Syrians in Turkey. *New Media & Society*, 23(11), pp. 3349–3369.

²⁰ Matamoros-Fernández, A. and Farkas, J., 2021. Racism, hate speech, and social media: A systematic review and critique. *Television & New Media*, 22(2), pp. 205-224.

²¹ Toprak, M. (2018). Sosyal medyada Suriyeli Sığınmacılara yönelik nefret söylemi: Twitter örneği, *Master’s Thesis, İnönü Üniversitesi*.
<http://abakus.inonu.edu.tr/xmlui/bitstream/handle/11616/11332/514132.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

²² Yasa, H. & Öksüz, O. (2020). Nefret söyleminin inşasında sosyal medyanın rolü: Ekşi sözlük örneği. *Journal of Erciyes Communication*, 7(2), 1383-1408.
<https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/1205120>

the country. Some of the tropes are that Syrians are lazy – sitting at cafes or swimming in the sea while their country is at war -- and do not contribute to the country; that they are dangerous invaders and the source of crime; and that they are a demographic threat and will soon outnumber the local population.²³

Many political figures have used their social media platforms to spread fear and anxiety that refugees are “taking over” the country.

2.2. Inadequate integration policies and anti-refugee political rhetoric

The Turkish government has been criticized for failing to develop effective policies for the better integration of refugees. There seems to be consensus that these refugees were allowed entry to the country as “guests” but have long overstayed their welcome. The difference between a guest and a long-term resident is that the latter needs some sort of stability. They need jobs, proper accommodation and social security. Their children need proper education and healthcare. Hatice Ödemis from the Migrant Solidarity Association said the image of the refugee as a guest already suggests inequality.

“Turkey does not have proper integration policies, and the base of anti-refugee sentiment rests on this fact. In 2011 there was a flow of refugees from Syria to Turkey, but at the time Turkey was a passage through which refugees went to Europe. However, in the present situation they are settling in Turkey. They can no longer be seen as guests, and as the host country, Turkey cannot have full authority and power in dictating the future of Syrians. Refugees need to be equal to any other Turkish citizen, and they need to live and work as equals,” she said.²⁴

In a similar argument Professor Murat Erdoğan of the Turkish-German University Center for Migration and Integration said although Turkey was accepting a large

²³ Özdüzen, O., Korkut, U., & Özdüzen, C. (2021). ‘Refugees are not welcome’: Digital racism, online place-making and the evolving categorization of Syrians in Turkey. *New Media & Society*, 23(11), pp. 3349–3369.

²⁴ Independent Turkish Service, “Geldikleri gibi gidecekler” mi? Ödemis: Sığınmacılara yönelik nefret söylemi yükseliyor, yabancı düşmanlığı artıyor, August 5, 2021, at <https://www.indyturk.com/node/395681/haber/geldikleri-gibi-gidecekler-mi-ödemis-sığınmacılara-yönelik-nefret-söylemi>

number of refugees, the country lacked a comprehensive policy for establishing integration and social cohesion.²⁵

Speaking before the Turkish parliament's Migration and Integration Committee, Professor Erdoğan said the lack of proper policies was pushing refugees into ghettoization and causing social division. Moreover, this division has led locals to become irritated with refugees. Erdoğan reiterated that Syrians could not be regarded as guests and that they were a sociological fact in the country.

“We need to use the potential these people have to offer. Most Turks are ‘othering’ Syrians, and this is causing irreversible damage,” he said. Professor Erdoğan added that without integration policies, Syrians appeared to be a “burden” on the country.

There is also a presumption that the Turkish government is financially aiding Syrian refugees, fueling the discourse that they are a burden. This is based on an agreement that was signed between the European Union and Turkey in 2016. According to the agreement the EU granted Turkey a total of €6 billion in humanitarian assistance, meant to cover the basic needs of Syrians.



Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu

²⁵ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Refugees in Turkey are pushed into ghettoization in absence of integration policies*, November 27, 2020, at <https://stockholmcf.org/refugees-in-turkey-are-pushed-into-ghettoization-in-absence-of-integration-policies/>

More alarmingly, such rhetoric has been picked up by politicians. Turkish President Erdoğan long pursued an open-door policy toward refugees. Opposition politicians have resorted to racist and xenophobic speech, thinking they are criticizing the government. One of the worst examples came from Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, leader of Turkey's main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), who promised to send Syrians back home if his party comes to power.

As part of his election campaign, Kılıçdaroğlu gave interviews to national and international media about his plans to repatriate Syrians. Only one week before the May elections he spoke to German television station ARD, where he detailed plans of working with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his government to ensure the return of Syrian refugees in Turkey.²⁶

Ümit Özdağ, leader of the newly established far-right Victory Party (ZP), has repeatedly incited fear among the Turkish public regarding Syrian refugees. On many occasions he has referred to the "Syrian threat" and urged Syrians to return to their country. Özdağ not only created fear of Syrians but has also spread false information, saying Syrians can acquire Turkish citizenship easily and are able to possess guns.²⁷

2.3. Rising hate crimes against Syrians

Prominent public figures such as academics, journalists and liberal politicians have repeatedly warned that anti-refugee sentiment had come to the point where pogroms could be carried out. Their concerns were not an exaggeration, however, since three Syrian men were set on fire while they were asleep on November 16, 2021.²⁸ The perpetrator admitted in his testimony to a prosecutor to have committed a hate crime.

²⁶ Deutsche Welle Turkish Service, *Kılıçdaroğlu ARD'ye konuştu: Sığınmacıları yollayacağız*, May 8, 2023, at <https://www.dw.com/tr/kılıçdaroğlu-ardye-konuşt-u-suriyeli-sığınmacıları-geri-yollayacağız/a-65555572>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/umitozdog/status/1475520878402314240>

²⁸ Euronews, *İzmir'de 3 Suriyeli göçmenin yakılarak öldürülmesi | İHD: Tasarlanarak ırkçı saikle yapıldı*, December 22, 2021, at <https://tr.euronews.com/2021/12/22/izmir-de-3-suriyeli-gocmenin-yak-larak-oldurulmesi-ihd-tasarlanarak-rkc-saikle-yap-ld>

The hideous event was barely covered by the Turkish media, and some people pointed out that hate crimes had become so normalized in the country that nobody was even talking about the incident.

Schmidt pointed out that hate speech can easily escalate into violence. “There is a pyramid of hate that starts with prejudice, leads to hate and ends in violence,” he said, giving examples from the genocide in Rwanda and shootings that have taken place in synagogues because of antisemitic rhetoric.²⁹

Local politicians have fueled and normalized hate crimes by implementing discriminatory policies. The most notorious example came from Tanju Özcan, mayor of Bolu and a member of the main opposition CHP. Özcan imposed exorbitant fees on foreigners to access public services in the city.

Syrians in the city said they had been confronted with more hate crimes since the municipal council approved the discriminatory proposal, with some adding that they barely left their homes for fear of being confronted with hostile actions.³⁰ Others said the governor’s office advised them not to cook food that had strong aromas, not to invite too many guests to their homes and not to leave their homes after 9 p.m.

3. REPORTED CASES OF HATE SPEECH AND HATE CRIMES AGAINST SYRIANS

3.1. Online hate speech

Political party leaders, mayors, lawmakers, famous journalists and emerging opinion leaders with large online followings have played major roles in anti-Syrian social media campaigns.

In a tweet in June 2019 Sinan Oğan, a former deputy from the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) and a far-right presidential candidate representing a bloc of four parties,

²⁹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *[Interview] Economic downturns have a great impact on the rise of hate speech, INACH Chairman Schmidt says*, December 24, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/interview-economic-downturns-have-a-great-impact-on-the-rise-of-hate-speech-inach-chairman-schmidt-says/>

³⁰ Deutsche Welle Turkish Service, *Bolu'da mülteci olmak: Ayrımcılık artıyor*, December 1, 2021, at <https://www.dw.com/tr/boluda-m%C3%BClteciler-belediye-kararlar%C4%B1ndan-sonra-ayr%C4%B1mc%C4%B1l%C4%B1k-art%C4%B1yor/a-59981003>

claimed that Syrian and Afghan refugees rape women and boys and that chopping off heads was a part of Syrian culture.³¹

During a program on Habertürk TV on December 14, 2020, journalist Fatih Altaylı, the host of the program, made controversial remarks about Syrian refugees in the country while discussing the coronavirus pandemic and the efficacy of the coronavirus vaccine with his guests.

When one of the guests, Professor Necmettin Ünal, claimed that refugees played a role in the spread of COVID-19 in the country, Altaylı said: “They are the owners of Turkey, we are like guests. They will soon drive us out. This is because they do what they want and have no responsibility for anything. The [coronavirus] bans are not binding on them, only on us.”³²

In January 2023 Ümit Özdağ, leader of the far-right ZP, launched a new campaign dubbed “Bus to Damascus” aimed at deporting Syrian refugees from Turkey. In a propaganda video posted on Twitter by Özdağ, who has been at the forefront of anti-refugee propaganda in Turkey, party supporters were asked to share the names of refugees and to donate to the ZP so that refugees could be put on “Victory Buses” and deported to Syria.

“The sale of one-way tickets for the ‘Victory Buses’ to Damascus has started. Share the names of refugees you want to send in the description, and we then will make the reservation for you,” Özdağ said.³³

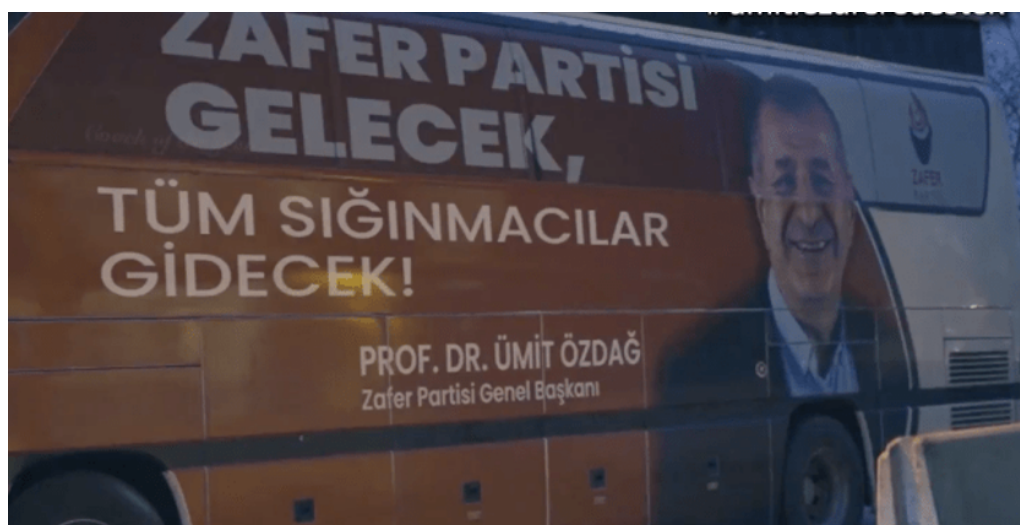
Özdağ also warned Turkish citizens of a “Syrian threat” in a video shared on Twitter in December 2021. In the video he said there were 900,000 shops in Turkey owned by Syrians, constituting a threat to the country. “This man came seven years ago and can barely speak Turkish,” he said. “He has acquired Turkish citizenship and even a

³¹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Syrian refugee shot dead in apparent hate crime*, August 18, 2020, at <https://stockholmcf.org/syrian-refugee-shot-dead-in-apparent-hate-crime/>

³² Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Journalist faces investigation for hate speech targeting Syrian refugees*, December 17, 2020, at <https://stockholmcf.org/journalist-faces-investigation-for-hate-speech-targeting-syrian-refugees/>

³³ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Leader of far-right party launches campaign to deport Syrian refugees from Turkey*, January 18, 2023, at <https://stockholmcf.org/leader-of-far-right-party-launches-campaign-to-deport-syrian-refugees-from-turkey/>

license to carry a handgun. He was able to open a shop, and there are thousands of Syrians like him.”³⁴



Scene from a propaganda video posted on Twitter by Özdağ showing a “Victory Bus.”

In November 2021, 45 Syrian refugees were detained after sharing videos on social media showing them eating bananas in an attempt to condemn racism and discrimination and were sent to deportation centers to be repatriated. The videos were posted in protest following a street interview in which a Turk says Syrians in Turkey “buy kilos of bananas” while he can’t even afford to eat a single one.³⁵

3.2. Political hate speech ahead of elections

CHP leader Kılıçdaroğlu has repeatedly promised to send Syrians back home if his party comes to power. In March 2022 he called for a referendum on whether the country should grant citizenship to people who have taken refuge in Turkey. His suggestion came in relation to a statement by President Erdoğan, who said his government would not send Syrian refugees back to Syria. Kılıçdaroğlu, speaking to

³⁴ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Leader of right-wing party warns Turkish citizens of ‘Syrian threat’ in anti-migrant social media post*, December 28, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/leader-of-right-wing-party-warns-turkish-citizens-of-syrian-threat-in-anti-migrant-social-media-post/>

³⁵ France 24, *Syrian refugees in Turkey face deportation over viral banana videos*, November 11, 2021, at <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20211105-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-face-deportation-over-viral-banana-videos>

journalist Murat Yetkin, said he had doubts about Erdoğan's intentions in not wanting to send Syrian refugees back home when the Syrian civil war was over.³⁶

Kılıçdaroğlu announced his candidacy in March for the presidential election in May. Turkey was forced to hold a runoff vote since neither Kılıçdaroğlu nor his main rival, President Erdoğan, managed to exceed the 50 percent threshold in the presidential election held on May 14. In an apparent bid to woo nationalist voters, he stepped up his rhetoric ahead of the runoff and called for the urgent expulsion of "10 million refugees" in the country, despite the fact that he was accused of grossly exaggerating the number of refugees in Turkey. "I am appealing to everyone. We didn't just find our homeland on the street. We will not leave it to someone who has allowed 10 million refugees uncontrolled entry," Kılıçdaroğlu said, adding that they needed to immediately be expelled from the country.³⁷

In response to Kılıçdaroğlu, President Erdoğan said 1 million Syrian refugees would return home voluntarily and accused Kılıçdaroğlu of using hate speech against refugees in Turkey. "More than 450,000 Syrians have voluntarily returned to Syria, and we have plans to construct new buildings in northern Syria for the return of 1 million more Syrians," President Erdoğan said.³⁸

In May 2022 billboards telling Syrian refugees in Arabic to return to their homeland since they're no longer wanted in Turkey were put up in the northwestern city of Bolu upon the order of Mayor Tanju Özcan from the main opposition CHP, notorious for his anti-refugee policies. Özcan on May 18, 2022 shared a photo of the billboards with anti-refugee statements on his social media account, saying: "We have written and spoken [about this] in Turkish many times. They didn't understand it. We've [now] written it in a language that both the government and the invaders

³⁶ Yetkin Report, "Erdoğan sığınmacıları vatandaş yapıp oy mu kullandıracak?" March 22, 2022, at <https://yetkinreport.com/2022/03/17/erdogan-siginmacilari-vatandas-yapip-oy-mu-kullandiracak/>

³⁷ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Kılıçdaroğlu harshens rhetoric, says 10 million refugees need to be urgently expelled from Turkey*, May 17, 2023, at <https://stockholmcf.org/kilicdaroglu-harshens-rhetoric-says-10-million-refugees-need-to-be-urgently-expelled-from-turkey/>

³⁸ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Erdoğan vows voluntary return of 1 mln Syrians, accuses Kılıçdaroğlu of hate speech against refugees*, May 23, 2023, at <https://stockholmcf.org/erdogan-vows-voluntary-return-of-1-mln-syrians-accuses-kilicdaroglu-of-hate-speech-against-refugees/>

understand,” referring to the government’s Islamist roots and the Syrians, adding, “Enough is enough!!!”



A billboard in Bolu

The mayor’s message on the billboards, which was written in both Arabic and Turkish, reads: “I’m calling on temporary asylum seekers: 11 years ago, you came to our country as guests. The Turkish nation has been protecting you for years with its scarce resources. You’ve overstayed your welcome. You see the economic depression in our country. Our youths are unemployed, families live below the poverty line. Under these conditions, we have no more bread and water to share with you. It’s time for you to go just like you came. You are no longer wanted, return to your country.”³⁹

Özcan’s move was the latest in a series of controversial measures he has introduced as part of anti-refugee policies in Bolu to convince refugees to leave the city. When he was elected mayor of Bolu in 2019, Özcan’s first act was to cut municipal aid to Syrian refugees in the city as he had promised during his election campaign.

In November 2021 the Bolu City Council approved a proposal imposing exorbitant fees on foreigners to access public services and obtain marriage licenses in an

³⁹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Anti-refugee mayor erects billboards telling Syrians in Arabic to leave Turkey*, May 19, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/anti-refugee-mayor-erects-billboards-telling-syrians-in-arabic-to-leave-turkey/>

attempt to deter them from settling there, although an administrative court in Bolu province imposed a temporary injunction on the implementation of the measures.⁴⁰

The same week, ZP leader Özdağ started a signature campaign to throw Syrian and Afghan refugees out of Turkey. Sharing a link to the campaign on social media, Özdağ urged people to participate to curb the “migrant invasion.”⁴¹

Speaking to Deutsche Welle (DW) Turkish service, refugees living in the province said they had to withdraw their children from school due to bullying and were forced to leave their jobs because of workplace mobbing. Many refugees said they were unable to find homes because nobody wanted to rent to “Arabs.” “They say foreigners will make bad use of their houses and refuse to rent to us. Such sentiments have been expressed more frequently since the council’s decision and the mayor’s anti-migrant statements,” a refugee student was quoted as saying. The two children of a refugee family were severely beaten. One of the children suffered internal bleeding as a result, but the family was too afraid to file a complaint against the perpetrators.⁴²

Lütfü Savaş, the mayor of Hatay from the main opposition CHP, said in March 2022 that three out of every four babies born in Hatay were Syrians and that the province might have a Syrian mayor in 12 years. The interior ministry filed a criminal complaint against Savaş for his anti-Syrian remarks.⁴³

In June 2022 ZP leader Özdağ announced on Twitter that he would travel to the Reyhanlı district of Hatay, bordering Syria, and would “plant the first mine on the Syrian border.” Özdağ tweeted that the ZP would also make Turkey withdraw from the Ottawa Treaty, which Turkey signed in 2004, agreeing to phase out anti-

⁴⁰ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Bolu City Council approves exorbitant fees on foreigners to access public services and obtain marriage licenses*, November 23, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/bolu-city-council-approves-exorbitant-fees-on-foreigners-to-access-public-services-and-obtain-marriage-licenses/>

⁴¹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Opposition deputy starts signature campaign to oust migrants*, November 22, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/opposition-deputy-starts-signature-campaign-to-oust-migrants/>

⁴² Deutsche Welle Turkish service (DW), *Bolu'da mülteci olmak: Ayrımcılık artıyor*, December 1, 2021, at <https://www.dw.com/tr/boluda-mülteciler-belediye-kararlarından-sonra-ayrımcılık-artıyor/a-5998100>

⁴³ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Turkish Interior Ministry to file complaint against opposition mayor over anti-Syrian remarks*, March 18, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-interior-ministry-to-file-complaint-against-opposition-mayor-over-anti-syrian-remarks/>

personnel landmines and establish a humanitarian surveillance system on its borders. A bus carrying Özdağ and his party members was stopped by the police and gendarmerie before their arrival in Hatay and was prevented from entering the city upon an order from the Hatay Governor's Office.⁴⁴

3.3. Reflections on the ground: hate crimes against Syrians

Hate crimes against refugees and migrants, who are blamed for many of Turkey's social and economic ills, have escalated in recent years.

Ali El Hamdani, 17, was killed by police officer F.K. in southern Adana province in April 2020 after he fled a security checkpoint. Hamdani was trying to avoid a possible fine because of a nationwide curfew imposed on people below the age of 20 in a measure intended to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The young Syrian had continued to work during the outbreak, according to the Turkish media.⁴⁵

Syrian refugee Abdulkadir Davud (21) was shot dead in August 2020 in what appears to have been a hate crime in the Zeytinburnu district of İstanbul.⁴⁶

A month later 16-year-old Syrian Eymen Hammami was stabbed to death, on September 14, 2020, in an alleged hate crime in the northern city of Samsun. Hammami's brother, İbrahim Hammami, witnessed the incident and said: "Four people stopped us with their car and started shouting racist insults. They told us to get out of this country and go back to where we came from. They left and returned with 20 people. We want the suspects to be found and for justice to prevail." İbrahim Hammami said two people had knives, so he went to hail police officers who were passing nearby. "When I returned, I found my brother lying in blood."⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Anti-refugee party leader prevented from entering border city to plant a 'mine'*, June 27, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/anti-refugee-party-leader-prevented-from-entering-border-city-to-plant-a-mine/>

⁴⁵ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Police officer who shot young Syrian refugee to death given 25 years in prison*, December 21, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/police-officer-who-shot-young-syrian-refugee-to-death-given-25-years-in-prison/>

⁴⁶ Evrensel Daily, *Zeytinburnu'nda mültecilere kurşun: Suriyeli işçi Abdulkadir Davud hayatını kaybetti*, August 17, 2020, at <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/411847/zeytinburnunda-multecilere-kursun-suriyeli-isci-abdulkadir-davud-hayatini-kaybetti>

⁴⁷ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Syrian teenager stabbed to death in alleged hate crime*, September 15, 2020, at <https://stockholmcf.org/syrian-teenager-stabbed-to-death-in-alleged-hate-crime/>

Fourteen-year-old Syrian Vail El Mansur was killed on his way to work on October 20, 2020 in Turkey's central province of Konya. He was with his brother Abdurrahim, whose workplace was in the vicinity. The boys were getting off a tram when they were confronted by a group of youngsters, who allegedly insulted the two brothers. The verbal confrontation quickly turned into a heated argument and then into a fight. The brothers tried to get away by running into an alley; however, they were unable to outrun the group, and Vail El Mansur was stabbed in the chest. He died of his injuries in the hospital.⁴⁸

The same month, four refugees from Al-Hasakah in Syria who were trying to get to the Turkish town of Kızıltepe were killed in a landmine blast on October 5 while fleeing gendarmes who had opened fire on them.⁴⁹

In March 2021 a Syrian family living in Turkey's southeastern Gaziantep province was attacked in their home in an apparent hate crime. In a video posted on Twitter, the mother is heard saying they feared for their lives. "They threw rocks at our house! Why are we constantly subjected to racism?" she said. The woman added that although they had been living in Turkey for six years, they did not feel safe.⁵⁰

A group of locals attacked houses, workplaces and cars owned by Syrian refugees in Ankara's Altındağ district in August 2021. The incident took place following reports that a Syrian refugee had stabbed two Turkish men in a fight. A large crowd then headed to a neighborhood populated by Syrian refugees. The Interior Ministry ordered the demolition of buildings lived in by Syrians in the same district after the attacks, saying the buildings were built without permits. The ministry gave residents one week to vacate their houses before they were demolished.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Kronos, *Konya'da ırkçı saldırı: 14 yaşındaki Suriyeli çocuk işçi öldürüldü*, October 21, 2020, at <https://kronos36.news/tr/konyada-irkci-saldiri-14-yasindaki-suriyeli-cocuk-isci-olduruldu/>

⁴⁹ Mezopotamya News Agency, *Mayınlı alana 'sürülen' 4 mülteci hayatını kaybetti*, October 11, at <https://mezopotamyaajansi.com/tum-haberler/content/view/112175>

⁵⁰ Evrensel daily, *Antep'te yaşayan mülteci ailenin evine taşlı saldırı: Neden ırkçılığa maruz kalıyoruz?*, March 29, 2021, at <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/429214/antepte-yasayan-multeci-ailenin-evine-tasli-saldiri-neden-irkciliga-maruz-kaliyoruz>

⁵¹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Turkish Interior Ministry orders demolition of buildings lived in by Syrian refugees in Ankara*, September 20, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-interior-ministry-orders-demolition-of-buildings-lived-in-by-syrian-refugees-in-ankara/>



A couple of weeks later, a large number of Syrian residents in İzmir's Cumhuriyet neighborhood left their homes after tensions increased following the alleged murder of 17-year-old Batuhan Barlak by a 20-year-old Syrian refugee on September 29, 2021. According to reports the Syrians had to move out since a mob attacked their homes and shops the day after the murder and set one house on fire. Atatekin Doğan, the neighborhood representative, said 120 Syrian families were registered in the neighborhood before the attacks but that more than 600 were living there.⁵²

In October 2021 a Syrian woman who had been living in İstanbul with her children for four months was beaten up and threatened by neighbors and insulted at the police station. Speaking at a press conference held by the Human Rights Association (İHD), the woman said she faced physical and verbal violence in their neighborhood in September and added that her neighbors threatened to kill her and her children.⁵³

⁵² Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Syrians move out of their neighborhood in Izmir after hate attacks*, October 5, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/syrians-move-out-of-their-neighborhood-in-izmir-after-hate-attacks/>

⁵³ Bianet, *Refugee woman says she was attacked by neighbors, insulted by police*, October 14, 2021, at <https://bianet.org/english/migration/251822-refugee-woman-says-she-was-attacked-by-neighbors-insulted-by-police>



A victim of brutal attacks on Syrian refugees in Ankara.

Three Syrian men were killed in an alleged hate crime in İzmir in November 2021. The Turkish man poured gasoline over the Syrians, identified as Mamoun al-Nabhan, 23; Ahmed al-Ali, 21; and Muhammed el-Bish, 17, while they were asleep and set them on fire. The perpetrator told the prosecutor that he had five liters of gasoline in his car on the night of the attack and that he used it to set fire to the three Syrians.⁵⁴

A group of unidentified assailants wearing police uniforms raided an İstanbul apartment where several young Syrian refugee men were living and killed 19-year-old refugee Naif Elnaif, in the first days of 2022. Elnaif was stabbed to death while asleep by the attackers, who entered the apartment in the Bayrampaşa district of İstanbul with clubs and knives. His flat mates told the Turkish media that they didn't know any of the assailants, were shocked over the death of their friend and had decided to return to Syria.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Perpetrator of 3 Syrian men's murder admits to committing hate crime*, December 24, 2021, at <https://stockholmcf.org/perpetrator-of-3-syrian-mens-murder-admits-to-committing-a-hate-crime/>

⁵⁵ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Assailants dressed as police kill young Syrian refugee in 'house raid' in İstanbul*, January 11, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/assailants-dressed-as-police-kill-young-syrian-refugee-in-house-raid-in-istanbul/>

Nearly 40 people attacked the properties of Syrians in January 2022 in İstanbul's Esenyurt neighborhood following a dispute between two men. Seven people, including four minors, were detained, while the police sought the rest of the perpetrators. The incident occurred after a Turkish man asked for a cigarette from a Syrian who said he didn't smoke. Enraged, the Turk chased the Syrian into a store. The Turk then rallied a group of friends, who started attacking stores in the vicinity.⁵⁶

This is not the first time a "cigarette dispute" has broken out in Esenyurt. Two Syrians were stopped in the street by a Turk for cigarettes on June 28, 2019. When they said they didn't have any, the Turkish man shot at them three times and fled the scene. The two Syrians were injured as a result and hospitalized.⁵⁷



Faris Muhammed Al-Ali

Faris Muhammed Al-Ali, 17, was stabbed to death in September 2022 in an apparent hate crime in the southern Turkish province of Hatay. He was attacked by five people while walking with a friend after his shift at work.

⁵⁶ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Turkish social media users express outrage over mob attack on Syrians in Istanbul*, January 10, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/turkish-social-media-users-express-outrage-over-mob-attack-on-syrians-in-istanbul/>

⁵⁷ Habertürk, *Esenyurt'ta 5 kişinin yaralandığı silahlı kavga kamerada*, October 30, 2019, at <https://www.haberturk.com/esenyurt-ta-5-kisinin-yaralandigi-silahli-kavga-kamerada-2535595>

The two were taken to a secluded spot where Al-Ali was stabbed and his friend was hit on the head. Al-Ali's friend said he screamed for help but that no one came. Al-Ali had lost his father during the Syrian civil war and lived with his mother and brother in Hatay. He was going to start studying at Balikesir University's faculty of medicine and had worked at a factory to cover his school expenses.⁵⁸

3.4. Hate crime in the aftermath of devastating earthquakes

According to a report by the Association for Migration Research (GAR), the official figures show that 1,738,035 of the Syrians who were granted temporary protection status in Turkey, corresponding to 49.64 percent of the total, were directly affected by devastating earthquakes in February. People who were already displaced due to the civil war in Syria were once again displaced by the earthquakes. This situation has turned into a recurring and untreated trauma for Syrians.

The two most serious problems refugees in Turkey faced after the quakes were hate speech and a lack of housing. The report said the Syrian population has become "invisible" and was subjected to discrimination in the delivery of post-quake emergency aid, during which time the principles of "non-discrimination" and "impartiality" were not respected. Syrians were repeatedly removed from tent cities, temporary shelters and even places allocated to them by the government after the earthquakes.⁵⁹

State-linked organizations providing the bulk of relief have denied aid to Syrians in some cases. Some Syrians displaced by the earthquakes have also faced discrimination when trying to rent apartments. Journalist Zaina Erhaim said bookings she made for members of her family through Airbnb

⁵⁸ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *Syrian teenager stabbed to death in southern Turkey's Hatay province*, September 5, 2022, at <https://stockholmcf.org/syrian-teenager-stabbed-to-death-in-southern-turkeys-hatay-province/>

⁵⁹ Association for Migration Research (GAR), *Migration and Earthquake – Due Diligence Report*, March 13, 2023, at <https://gocarastirmalaridernegi.org/attachments/article/311/Göç%20ve%20Deprem%20-%20Durum%20Tespit%20Raporu.pdf>

were canceled twice when the hosts realized they were Syrian. In the aftermath of the earthquakes, far-right figures also portrayed Syrians as looters and thieves in several social media posts and media interviews.

Moreover, they have faced limitations on their freedom of movement. By law, Syrians cannot travel beyond the provinces where they are registered as residents without authorization. In the aftermath of the disaster, authorities lifted this restriction only for 60 days.⁶⁰

A month after the earthquakes, three Turkish gendarmes were detained for the death of two Syrian refugees who were allegedly killed at the Turkey-Syria border in March 2023. Eight Syrians, including 16-year-old Youssef Muhammad Al-Harj, were detained by Turkish soldiers following their crossing into southern Hatay province from Syria on March 11 and severely beaten and forced to drink diesel.



While two Syrians died, the rest of the group sustained serious injuries. “The Turkish gendarmerie forced us to drink diesel fuel, and I was severely

⁶⁰ Syria Direct, *Anti-Syrian discrimination mars Turkey's earthquake response*, March 1, 2023, at <https://syriadirect.org/anti-syrian-discrimination-mars-turkeys-earthquake-response/>

beaten with electrical cables, bats and iron skewers,” Al-Harj told the Middle East Eye. He said the gendarmes forced them to take off their clothes, took their phones and broke them, then filmed them before they started beating and torturing them.⁶¹

4. CONCLUSION

This report has documented that attitudes about refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria have gradually hardened in Turkey, where they used to be welcomed with open arms, sympathy and compassion, as the number of newcomers has swelled over the past decade.

With unemployment high and the price of food and housing skyrocketing, many Turks have turned their frustration toward Syrian refugees over the years. Tensions between Turks and Syrians have continued to flare up on occasion, and refugees have been blamed for many of the country’s social and economic troubles.

Media is the most important source of information about topics related to refugees in Turkey. Hate speech and hate crimes against refugees have accelerated as the Turkish media, including both pro-government and opposition outlets, have fueled and exploited the flames of hatred against people who fled their countries and sought refuge in Turkey. First and foremost, a change in the rhetoric of media outlets could have a positive impact on the approach towards Syrian and other refugee groups in Turkey.

Further, social media has been used extensively to spread hate speech. In the Turkish context, studies have shown that Twitter in particular has been instrumental for the creation and dissemination of hateful discourse about Syrians. International, regional and local NGOs and rights groups could consider conducting social media campaigns against such discourse and involving social media giants in their fight against anti-migrant and anti-refugee groups in the country.

A prime responsibility lies with international and regional institutions to repeatedly call on Turkish authorities to develop effective policies for the better integration of

⁶¹ Stockholm Center for Freedom (SCF), *3 Turkish gendarmes detained over alleged killing of 2 Syrian refugees at border*, March 20, 2023, at <https://stockholmcf.org/3-turkish-gendarmes-detained-over-alleged-killing-of-2-syrian-refugees-at-border/>

migrants and refugees. The lack of proper migration and integration policies are pushing migrant and refugee groups into ghettoization and causing social division.

Further, the European Union and the Council of Europe should place importance on carrying out more visits to Turkey to meet with not only government authorities but also all political party and opposition group representatives to end racist and xenophobic speech.